



Article : The Private Fantasies of Alienated-Married Women in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer And Journey To Ithaca*

Author : Mrs. J. Santhosh Priyaa [P.S.G.R. Krishnammal College For Women, Peelamedu, Coimbatore]

The deep-rooted agonised psyche of womanhood was brought to the lime-light by Anita Desai, in her literary blooms. Especially in married women, the transplantation takes place on three levels viz: physical, mental and spiritual. They are torn between the memories of the past and the realities of the present. With the boom of an unpleasant and an unacceptable situation, nostalgic feelings get stirred up. There is a pattern, which frames her novel with the conflict between man-woman relationships that inevitably leads to alienation. Indu Bhadran says,

“Her main concern is with the psychic reverberations of the characters who are caught in an existential anguish, obsessed with the past memories and nostalgic feelings, shunning reality, struggling to cope with a society in transition and terribly alienated” (Sinha 106).

This pattern has been traced out in the heroines of Desai's *Where Shall We Go this summer?* and *Journey to Ithaca*. A pattern is evident not only in Desai's heroines but also especially in such married women, who are mostly transplanted from their native parental bondage to an unknown surroundings, of a new extended bondage of relationship. Until they get re-rooted to establish with a strong man-woman relationship whole heartedly, there exerts fear conflict, and frustration, which in an extreme case leads to conflict and even separation of the family. The conflict arises as a result of an imbalance between dreams or private fantasies and the bare realities. Such recurrent patterns of action, symbols, character types, dreams, myths or themes are “held to be the result of elemental and universal forms of patterns in the human psyche, whose effective literary embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the attentive readers, because he or she shares the archetypes expressed by the author” (Abrams 112). Crow is a recurrent symbol of Desai, exclusively in these two works.

Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This summer?* was bewildered by the unstable modern world of Bombay, in which, she was unable to withstand. As there were horror and destruction everywhere, her each step further began to sway, without stability on the ground, which broke excessively in to pieces including her confidence. She was unaccustomed to the increasing brutality and folly of people, her thoughts pondered over the mythological island, in which once she lived with

her father. "She had not realized than that living there would teach her only that life... once more" (Desai, Where 52). Hence to escape to Manori became her dream.

In *Journey to Ithaca*, Sophie enters India with a dream of enjoyment and merrymaking. For Sophie it is a dream-land of mythological enchantment, but for her husband Matteo, it is a dream-land of sacredness and a holistic life that ensures him peace. When Sophie confronts the real life of an ashramite, she bitterly feels alienated. "I can't – I can't here, in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be by ourselves". Initially Sophie dreamt India is full of Maharajas, elephants and sanyasis and she can live in ecstasy. The reality she faces, does not match with her most-enchanted fantasies. As a corollary, the reluctant mind enduring troubles, unconsciously endeavours to run-away from it, creating its own private fantasies, in which the mind lures a temporary satisfaction. Joseph Dorairaj opines that "myths are fundamentally symbolic" (29). They symbolize the recurrent patterns in human psyche which stimulates and "shares the archetypes expressed by the author" (Abrams 12). "Ithaca" is a mythical island, to which the mythical hero, Ulysses prepares to visit in order to enjoy the fruit of knowledge. This is the theme of Tennyson's *Ulysses*. Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is based on this mythical island, "Ithaca", which symbolizes the dwelling place of peace or the Divine in man. The characters, which have the quest for knowledge, - Mother, Matteo and Sophie are based on the quest-myth of Ulysses.

Both Sita and Sophie wanted to go back to their own places, from where they had come before marriage. This boredom shows disinterestedness in their activities and in their lives. When they are tensed and agitated, to vile them away and to hide it from others, they smoked. Sita says "with a white passion of satisfaction, 'when I am on my death bed, hold one of Miriam's cigars under my nose. If I don't leap up to snatch it from you, you can coolly go ahead and burn me'" (Desai, Where 100). Smoking gives them diversion to ease their mind. They try to achieve peace by a forced sensual way. This also shows that they assert their freedom through smoking.

Sita "spent almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea" (Desai, Where 45). In the island, she "felt surrounded by presences – the presence of the island itself, of the sea around it, and of the palm trees that spoke to each other and sometimes, even to her. They were so alive" (Desai, Where 116). The imagery of the sea, island and palm trees are the symbolic representation of nature, through which the Divine communicates to her. She names the very freedom of their existence to be a real life. Sophie often takes an escapade to the zoo, near by the ashram. She visited the small brown monkeys, Himalayan mynahs, hyena and the most attractive one for her was a young black leopard. "Still young, perhaps

new to the zoo, it was not broken in, and paced in its small cage without ceasing up and down, up and down, on restless silent paws, and only by the faintest twitch of its whiskers or a glint in its glassy green eyes betraying what churned in its unquiet heart”(Desai, *Journey* 78). She finds that the caged animals are alienated and denied freedom. Dejection was not only in the animals but also in her caged existence of Bihar ashram life.

Crow is a prominent symbol in Anita Desai's novels, especially in *Where Shall We Go* this summer and *The Journey to Ithaca*. Desai picturizes the mental agony of Sita and Sophie through the depiction of violence and murder. The crows shadowed the culture of human behaviour that was witnessed by Sita at Bombay. The attitude of the crow was well studied by her. "There was always much black drama in this crow theatre – murder, infanticide, incest, theft and robbery, all were much practiced by these rough, raucous, rasping tatterdemalions" (Desai, *Where* 34). They also represent parasites among men. Sita noticed that crows whistled with glee while attacking a wounded eaglet which is unable to fly. They rapturously enjoyed the defeat of the eagle. Despite her attempt to save the eaglet by shooting them with a toy gun, it died. Crow symbolizes bestiality, cunningness and the domination of the powerful over the oppressed. Raven is said to live on the carcass of other animals. The mental turbulence is indicated by the restless cawing of crows. Sophie hates the very caw, which disturbs the calmness of mind. Sita's bitter experience in which, the crows fed on a wounded eaglet destabilized her mental strength, as all her effort to save the young bird was in vein.

A similar situation is observed in "*Journey of Ithaca*. When Matteo was hospitalized after his plunge in the sea, the doctor advised him not to believe the words of the swamijis who pretend to have realized god. Meanwhile, the calmness was disturbed suddenly by the arrival of a flock of crows, which focused on something in the ditch. "They cawed in excitement. What was struggling along in the ditch, he saw, was a dog, either maimed or sick and the crows were bent upon its extinction. He [doctor] flung his cigarette out of the door at them" (Desai, *Journey* 71-72). The crows don't even wait until, the sick animal to die on its own but, they peck on it and the prey suffer a tortuous death. The crow looks only for its satisfaction. This invariably represents the instinct or the desire.

The crow belongs to corvid family. They are mischievous, intelligent, omnivorous and shy. At times they steal glittering objects. According to the Celts, the crow represented bad omen, conflict and death. They are clever, bold and cunning. In the Middle Age, the symbol of crow's foot was used to cast death spell. To watch a single crow is considered to be a bad omen almost all over the world. The English considers it as a provocation of anger. The people in Northampton shire believed it to be an ill fortune. The people of Ireland considered

it as souls. The transformation of witches into crows is a widely spread beliefs in Russia. The Alaskan Athapaskan tribe had a faith that crow is a “maya”, an illusion that belonged to the phenomenal world, which had spun the web-trap of desire in mankind (Yogananda 155).

Emerson in his poem “Maya” says,
“Illusion works impenetrable,
Weaving webs innumerable;
Her gay pictures never fail,
Crowed each other, veil on veil;
Charmer who will be believed
By man who thirsts to be deceived” (Yogananda 41).

In the philosophy of Hinduism, crow is the vehicle of Lord Shanishwar. When we are under the influence of Saturn, the life becomes topsy-turvy and there is confusion, loss of wealth, and infinitude of suffering. Crow also symbolizes, our ancestors visiting us, on their death anniversary. “An important antecedent of the literary theory of the archetype was the treatment of myth by a group of comparative anthropologist at Cambridge University, especially James G. Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) identified the elemental patterns of myth and ritual that, he claimed, recur in the legends and ceremonials of diverse and far-flung cultures and religions” says M.H. Abrams (12). Hence through the analysis of various beliefs, it is revealed that the crow fore tells the suffering and the conflict of the mind, which is obsessed with confusion.

In *Journey of Ithaca*, Sophie in the ashram is not allowed to dine with a table and a chair but on the floor, she has to take food from the ground level without a spoon or fork. Even though she is new for this custom of eating food, she tried hard by bending down to eat. When the food shipped from the fingers and scattered on the floor, people around her sniggered and tittered. A small boy shouted “see, she is eating like-a-crow” (Desai, *Journey* 45). Sophie blushed with shame, as people criticized on her culture and behaviour. Certainly, she often gets irritated, with the cause of the crow. Sita also hates crows and their caws. Where as in the mother’s Ashram, crows caw became to a stand- still. It did not caw but rested quietly.

In the Mother’s Ashram, the Mother was addressing her novitiates under the shade of a tree. “This is no church, my friends, this is no temple or mosque or vihara. We have no religion. Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree, caw-caw-caw, scolding, scolding! But do they crow at us now? No, they are silent! We have silenced them! They know we do not listen to the black scolding voices of religion here” (Desai, *gournly*, 98). Matteo watched this and did not get irritated with the crows. This shows that his mental turbulence had come to a standstill.

Here mother reveals that it is possible to control the thoughts through probing inside the Sanctum-sanctorum of the inner-self. Hence crow represents the darker side of human nature that provokes anger, restlessness, fear, guilt, shame and so on, which finally leads to mental suffering.

In *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, Sita, a middle-aged woman of forty, wants to preserve her fifth child, yet to be born, in her womb through out her life. She had a fantasy to go to Manori, the island, which seemed to have magical effects, in order to materialize her wish, where she lived with her father, until her marriage. It seemed to be a crazy idea. She behaves like a neurotic.

The people affected with neurosis suffer from unfulfilled needs of physical, emotional and “a nagging sense of non-belongingness” (Solanki 9). Neurosis originates from the accumulation of ‘libido’ (Baral 35). As there is no mental sublimation for neurotic, the gathered libido is repressed, which ends up in unconscious fantasies, which go in to the consciousness, where they are resisted by the ego. If the ego is weak, complete repression occurs. Hence neurosis is the conflict between the ego and id. The basic instinct that arises in man is called id. The ego brings the decisions with rationality. It depends up on the circumstances that prevail. Hence “ego’ is a mediator between the id and the phenomenal world. Jung “believed that the deepest levels of the ‘collective unconscious’ are common, to all humanity, and it can even be extended to man’s primate and animal ancestry. The archaic heritage, Jung believed, plays a dynamic role in the psyche. The ‘collective unconscious’ helps to interpret man’s experience in relation to his ancestral past” (Baral 107).

Sita “saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror-it was so bright, so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of her childhood” (Desai, *Where* 59). She took it not only to be her own private fantasy, but the whole of Manori’s. Sita was a motherless child, who had craved for the unconditional love and affection, petting and pampering. She managed to grow up with her sister Rekha and brother Jeevan. In the island she felt a strange feeling that her father’s love and affection was not equal.

Observing that it was always across the older sister’s stolid shoulders that he placed his arm when they descended from the terrace to the casuarina grove and strolled out across the beach to watch the sun melt into the sea and the chelas pelt each other with sand – pies, observing how it was always her guarded eyes he met during a moving passage in the morning’s devotional songs, observing how he stretched out his hand and squeezed her fingers when they sat on the veranda and watched some young chela’s pranks and charades – perhaps it was no unusual prick of jealousy that chilled Sita” (Desai, *Where* 70).

It also shadows the pangs of the middle child. The first child and the lost child

would be petted and pampered too much generally. The middle child is expected to assume a matured way of behaviour at an early stage. Moreover she was revealed that her mother did not die but ran away to Banaras and Rekha was mothered by another woman. On hearing this, she wished that her mother would have better died than to runaway and the Charisma of her father became dull and faint and a strong nausea was developed against him. Sita became the victim of the situation. To add fuel to the fire, the villagers praised Rekha for her beautiful voice and nobody cared for Sita. After her father's death, she wants to escape from the island, so he accepted the proposal of Raman, the son of Dharuwala and sailed to Bombay. She had an aristocratic life style with him. She was unable to cope up with the bare practical realities in Bombay.

So whenever she was tensed and bored with the modern life, she smoked and singled out from everyone and secluded herself in the balcony. When her stress increased with the thoughts of her labour during the delivery, her unconscious projected Manori as an escapade. Hence she relished at the myth of the once lived Manori.

“Mythical themes as the essence of primordial experience provide the basis for artistic vision. These themes clothed in the modern dress as part of the “collective unconscious” are the essence of artistic creation” (Baral 115).

When Sita was a small girl in Manori, her father, a freedom fighter settled there and shared his experience. He initiated people to dig a well. When he fetched the first bucket of water, “‘Sweet!’ they cried ecstatic, as they cupped their hands beneath the ladle and drew in mouthfuls of water, ‘Sweets!’” (Desai Where 63). The miracle of the well started with the fisherwoman Champa, whose boils were cured after drinking the water. “Yet he [father] had not himself initiated what his chelas later called, some in awe and some in puzzlement, his ‘miracle cures’” (Desai, Where 63). Phoolmaya, a beautiful fisherwoman was childless for ten years, when Sita's father prayed for her; soon she delivered a baby boy. Her father also saved a scorpion – bitten child, by strewing some medicinal powder on the place, where it was bitten. It was Kanti – amma, who “first used the word ‘magic’”, and hence it continued (Desai, Where 65).

It was when Sita really tasted the well water which was believed to have magical cure, she understood it tasted as salty as the sea water, which the people considered sweet. When she stayed in Manori with her son and daughter, she understood that Manori is bereft of the basic facilities of a city life to which she was well accustomed. She feels to be an alien in the island. None of the people in the island wanted her. Their charms are only with Babaji, her father. It seems to be a make-believe world of islanders, which she later understands but unable to acknowledge.

She restricts her sons' sport of imitating a fight scene from a movie. She feels that violence and cruelty have sprouted out even among the little one's mind in the city life. As Sita herself did not receive the real love of a mother, she could have diverted her attention towards her children by showering her immense unconditional love on her children. But she did not strive to understand their feelings. Only an Aayaa took them for an evening walk. Her children depended on their father rather than the mother, who is always the best choice of any child in the world. She also failed in her venture to be a good caring mother too. Her husband was a good caring man, who should be praised for not breaking their marriage and for convincing her at every time. He understands her and tries to help her out of neurosis.

In *Journey to Ithaca* the major characters are from different countries: Matteo an Italian, Sophie a German and Mother an Egyptian. The newly married couple, Sophie and Mathew came in search of the Divine Wisdom in India. The very Indian culture became a barrier to them, especially for Sophie. But Matteo tried to get accustomed with the new environment. Sophie's dream gets abandoned, as she neglects to accept the reality of India. She is uprooted from the West and gets re-rooted in the East. Her rebellious nature to be fixed on the new land progressively gets integrated with the strong firm roots in the new soil. This is revealed when Sophie's mother, wanted to baptize her grand-children, Sophie was rebellious. "No. I did not leave India ... but no one need think that by coming back to Europe I have come back to church I haven't" (Desai, *Journey* 152).

Sophie's journey to her mythical-island succeeded with her efforts toward the end of the novel. She finds peace at the spiritual level through universality in her venture to excavate the early life of the Mother. When she herself has tasted the meditative fruit of Bliss, the polarities that existed so far, have vanished. As the mythological Ulysses had a quest for the Indestructible Knowledge, Sophie too had the same Ulyssesian zeal. Initially her private fantasies depended on her physical and emotional needs. Later, alienation craved for the necessity of soul-satisfaction, which was on the higher altitude that in turn led her to develop spiritual wisdom. Both Sita and Sophie had understandable life – partners, who were highly practical. "Sita, the protagonist has had a strange, unusual childhood spent amidst crowds, without having any sense of identity or belonging" (Indira 69). Sophie was culturally alienated. "There is no happiness for him who does not travel... This is the leitmotif of "*Journey to Ithaca*" (1995), a novel about the soul's journey to the enlightenment and awakening" (Jana 75). Therefore the quest for identity is the root-cause of all their troubles. The women were sensitive and, they created their own make-believe world, so as to get rid of the torments of mind filled with fears, sufferings, dangers and guilt. Hence the interior-projector of mind cures its alien

disease through an escape into a mythological island. “Anita Desai is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in social and political realities. In her fiction there is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the significant ones” (Shashipal 123).

Thus Anita Desai has well-wrought the private fantasies of alienated married women as an escapade from the ordeal of discontentment until they realize and get unified with the reality.

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