

A FEMINIST STUDY OF THE VOICE OF DISSENT IN - *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?*

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ABSTRACT

*Women have long been silenced in history and literature. The female voice, for centuries, has largely gone unheard, unattended, or grossly misinterpreted across the world, so how could it be any different in literature, which in itself is the mirror of society? **Feminism**, a collection of movements and ideologies, that emerged in the 19th century sought to redefine this attitude. These movements aimed at establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women.*

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According to **Simone de Beauvoir**:

Feminism is to a great extent concerned with the recognition of such age-old tendencies of the society in which women are “*exhorted to be women, remain women, become women*”.

Feminism is one among many movements which has no exact definition. It is an outcome of an essential realization that women have been suppressed in the past till the present and changes need to be made for women’s better future. This realization itself is an achievement for women's community as it reveals their hidden feelings and powers their long voiceless selves. Feminism can be defined as a movement that

calls for equal rights and aims to attain empowerment for women. It is a revolt against patriarchy, victimization and oppression of women. It also highlights the indifferent treatment of women in a society.

The history of **Feminism** in India can be looked at as '*a practical effort*'. A major effort has gone into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which has perpetuated sexual inequality.

The representation of women in literature began to be seen as a standard, since it provided the role models, which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists point out, for example, that in most of the pre-21st century fiction, very few women work for a living; and if they do, they are either looked down upon, as *Clara Dawes* in ***Sons and Lovers*** or made an object of pity as *Jane Fairfax* of ***Emma***. Instead, the focus is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, her adherence to social norms, her ultimate social position determined by her conformity to the man's idea of a perfect woman—the all-giving angel, the eternal loving and compassionate heart, the self-sacrificing creature!

Through a Feminist study of the novel, we see the woman constantly struggling to either keep with the social expectations or to break away from it—sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful. In spite of the fact that numerically women constitute half the human race, the patriarchal system has forced them into occupying a non-enviable position—that of the ruled, with no scope of ever becoming the ruler. In the words of **Simone de Beauvoir**, women are forced to be the '*second sex*'; "*Man is accustomed to asserting himself*", whereas, "*Woman is afraid that in attempting to go further she will break her back*".

Women in a male dominated society are not allowed to speak up their thoughts and are forced to learn from their early age to suppress their own feelings. While men are considered to be the head of the family, the decision maker and the provider, women in such surroundings are seen as inferior, the silent listener and the acceptor. Devoid of the freedom that men enjoy, women often live their lives within themselves. In a society, obsessed with seeing women as mothers, **Anita Desai's** central character *Sita* in the novel ***Where Shall We Go This Summer?*** comes as a shock. In tracing the paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt of the pregnant *Sita*, who abhors the very idea of bringing her fifth child into this world of bloodbath, **Desai** challenges the gender-defined role of motherhood allocated to women.

The idea of pregnancy seemed to her as a means of deforming a woman's body and making it look ugly. Her thinking evidenced in her words:

...children only mean anxiety, concern pessimism. Not happiness. What other women call happiness is just – just sentimentality.

Once she mocked at a woman of island, who was barren and came to her father for some miracle to happen. Surprisingly, she bore a son and became deformed:

“Phoolmaya was pregnant. She had a son. She lost her beauty and her poignancy, she began to look coarse and the wear and tear to show, but she had her son.”

Through the character of her heroine Sita, Anita Desai criticizes patriarchal cruelty to women. Sita bore four children submissively, but could not restrain her emotions when she got pregnant for the fifth time. The way she broke this news to her husband illustrates it clearly:

...when the fifth time she told him she was pregnant, she did so with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt...control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold, without his noticing it, over the years, till now she had no more than an infant has before he has begun the process of acquiring it, and so she wept and flung herself about, over- forty, grey and aging.

She had been depressed for a long period of time and it took her twenty years to unleash her emotions and break out into a rebel. She did not want to present her mother image as a passive transmitter of the Father's seed. She feels that her life has no meaning for herself. She feels herself *“tossed and driven, the plaything of obscure forces.”*

Motherhood is the key feature of an ideal woman. But Desai reverses this definition and presents the protagonist as a rebel who discards the idea of becoming mother for the fifth time due to her pessimistic view point towards life. **Kohli** and **Just** are of the view that:

It is this reified image of maternity that Desai's texts seek to challenge in a variety of ways. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Sita's attempt to defer the moment of child birth expresses a desire for control over her own body and, by implication, her destiny...The critique of societal norms implicit in her representations of the mother is offset by a rejection of versions of freedom that are either escapist or solipsistic.”

Sita's aspiration to upset the normal biological cycle depicts her desire to challenge the reproductive role of a mother. After willing to postpone her child's birth indefinitely, she tries to bring forth her individuality which had once been suppressed under motherhood.

During her childhood she had witnessed endless speeches on 'swaraj' i.e. 'freedom', and thus, it went deep into her sub-conscious, and came up as one of her desires after she found herself getting chained in the bond of relationships, either with her in-laws or her own husband and children. *"Only connect they say. So she had spent twenty years connecting, link by link, this chain. And what is one to do with a chain? It can only throttle, choke and enslave."*

Sita had always felt suffocated within the knot of relationships as she had never experienced the love and care one gets from one's dear ones. For her, relationships always meant enslavement. Her repetitive admiration for the foreigner who goes on and on without knowing his way, and the glimpse of a young lady and an old man looking passionately towards each other without caring about the onlookers, symbolize her desire to be free.

Anita Desai, in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), explores the desire of Sita, a sensitive wife and mother, to abandon the hypocrisy and boredom of her existence and her unsuccessful attempts at redefining her life.

Desai, a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, is known for her writings about women's sensitive and emotional feelings. Her writings reflect the suppression of the typical Indian woman by her husband as well as by her in-laws. She is widely acclaimed for her portrayal of Indian women who are sensitive, emotional, culturally bound and unable to break through the system easily. Yet her female characters search for freedom in their own unique ways. Behnaz Alipour Kaskari expresses thus:

The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai talks of women who question the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth.

As seen in most of her writings, Desai is able to voice her feelings against the treatment of women in the patriarchal society. She is fully aware of the fact that women are taught to be submissive in nature from the very childhood and this submissiveness leads them to their own destruction.

As a woman writer, **Desai** strongly dismisses any claims of her works being under the **Feminist** banner, she does not profess to be a Feminist and yet she voices the fears and concerns, the hopes and aspirations of her female characters in her own artistic way. She tries to explore the social structure through the central characters in her novels. The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is about a middle aged woman, Sita, a mother of four children, pregnant with the fifth child and wife to a practical husband, Raman. She is sensitive and emotional, quite frustrated with the kind of routine life she is living; it was just not the life she had wanted for herself.

Giving birth to children and looking after them is considered the most important responsibility of every Indian woman. Every woman is happy to become a mother but she is not a child bearing machine. She has to go through that state of nausea, weakness and severe pain every time she gets pregnant. A woman's responsibility is not over just after giving birth. Most men wash their hands off about taking care of babies. But a mother cannot do so. When the child is unwell, she has to wake up at midnights, restless and tired. Sita has undergone these situations and has faced it "with pride, with pleasure – sensual, emotional". But when she is pregnant for the fifth time, she decides that she cannot start it all over again. Therefore, she leaves her husband's home for Manori, "the island of miracles" where she lived with her father during her childhood days.

Sita's childhood was not a normal one. She grew up without a mother to care for and a father who is unaware of her being, and is forced to isolate herself and create a world of her own. Her father was a freedom fighter and a social activist who had an incestuous relationship with her elder sister. Deprived of the love of her father, she could also not get the love of her mother as her mother had left the family long ago.

Moreover, she was also not satisfied with her married life. Thus due to all this pessimism, there developed a negative attribute in her personality. "The text presents her over wrought mental condition as the cumulative outcome of a difficult childhood followed by a stressful marriage."

Her life was not infected by the problems of dowry and poverty, but still there was a void and a vacuum, there was something missing, that she kept looking for. She was actually facing the problem of identity crisis and boredom.

Coming from a small island where everything was quite magical and holy, city life seemed to her unattractive and evil. Her over- reactions towards small happenings such as the playful fights of her sons, her daughter's destruction of her paintings, fights of maids on the street, attacks of blood thirsty crows on the eagle, made her

unprepared to give birth to her fifth child. Survival seemed to her hopeless in this world of bloodbath and madness.

Men consider themselves to be superior to women. Raman, her husband had no idea where he had gone wrong. A thoroughly practical man, he felt he was doing all well because he was providing his wife with social status and financial needs. He failed to understand that apart from supporting their family financially, men also have other responsibilities. This leads to misunderstandings and lack of love. Sita, unable to receive love and care she desired, finally revolted, as Anita Desai writes:

Perhaps there had been incidents, thoughts during the day he had not known about, would have left undisturbed had he known. It was as though for seven months she had collected inside her all her resentments, her fears, her rages, and now she flung them outward, flung them from her.

Sita's outburst is natural as she has been controlling herself for a long time since her insensitive husband could not understand her inner feelings.

As a wife to somebody, a woman tries to keep up that somebody's image in the society whether he respects her effort or not. Like an obedient wife, Sita tries to keep up her husband's image by receiving his guests with whom he does business though she considers them "*nothing but appetite and sex*". Even though she doesn't like them she veils her true self for his sake. On the other hand, when Sita expresses her interest to travel alone like a hitchhiker, Raman sees it as "*an act of infidelity*". This shows that to a wife, the husband's likes and dislikes matter; but to a husband, he is concerned only about himself as he believes himself to be the master.

A woman expects not only financial and material security but also love and care from her male partner. But in the case of Sita, the two male characters – her father and her husband, could not give her the love she deserved. She was the victim of her father's treatment of partiality between his children during her childhood. After his death, she was totally alienated and a fear of insecurity and the quietness of the island put her into complete loneliness.

For a while, Sita was happy to leave the island behind and shift to the mainland in the hope of security and better life. On the contrary, she found life in the mainland totally different and enclosed with dullness and disappointment. Having no one to share her emotions and a shoulder to lay her head upon, Sita feels isolated and bored with life. Even her surroundings disturb her mentally – the congested flat in Bombay, the confrontations with her husband, her sons' violent ways of playing, the ayahs' fighting

wildly on streets and her daughter's destruction of things unconsciously, all seem to contribute to her frustrations. To her, "*it is like living in the wilds*". And so, she tries to break away. Alas! Unsuccessfully.

This novel traces those psycho-social bonds that chain a woman to her demeaned status in family and society, providing her with just two options—either to conform to it and live a fake life or to run away and have no life at all. Even though Sita feels suffocated in the city life given to her in her marriage, she, for long, tries to enact the role expected of her. But finally she raises her voice -- Her dissent against conformity to the life she had been thrown into. It is pitiable that this voice finds no backing and she is forced to return with her husband and children to her dreary mundane life.

Since the dawn of male-centric civilization, women have been regarded as subordinates and Sita lives up to this identity inspite of every core of her being willing to break away. In childhood, it's her Father and brother Jivan who control her; in youth she lives under her husband's will and later, it is her children who dictate her life. She rarely gets to be herself. And no, her husband, Raman, is not at all an evil man—he's not a wife-beater like Pappachi of *The God of Small Things* nor does he cheat on her. The problem is their incompatibility. He is totally prosaic in his approach to life – practical to the core. On the other hand, Sita is deliriously romantic. The problem here is that Sita and Raman are more like strangers living under the same roof. And the society ordains that in a marriage, the individuality of the husband reigns supreme.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the protagonist Sita who in the beginning is a victim of loneliness and alienation and lacks identity, changes and recognizes her true- self with the course of time. Sita is an over-sensitive middle- aged woman who feels alienated from her family due to her emotional attitude towards day today happenings. She is inflexible and incapable of adjusting to her family and also to society.

Sita feels ignored. Her strange attitude is also not welcomed by her husband and children. At one point she is even considered mad by her husband. She is mentally weak and is not able to cope with the situation. "*It is like living in the wilds*", she said to her husband at night. "*One may be attacked_ one's children may be attacked in the streets.*" Her habit of smoking, sitting on balcony and looking at the sea for long hours is reflective of her inner insecurities and pains.

There had developed a feeling of insecurity within her of which 'escape' was the only cure. Each time she is maladjusted, she runs away. First she got married to Raman in order to get away from the enigma of her father who lived on in Manori even after his death:

She had to struggle to free herself from the chain or she might have spent her life in the cold meshes, regarding the enigma of her father, a slave to his undefined magic. She succeeded, ultimately, in discarding him and leaving him, what was left of him on the island, but he could not be forgotten.

After her marriage she was incapable of adjusting with her in-laws in Bombay and thus, shifted to a separate apartment along with her husband. And again when it was the turn of her family, she decided to escape to the island of Manori. Towards the end of the novel she realizes that she could, maybe, break away from her role playing as a wife but not as a mother. And her dissent gets muffled as the dull drone of reality hits her.

She tries her best to find traces of her own individuality—she goes back to Manori, to find in that rain-washed island, the happiness she desired but soon she realizes, with great regret, that the ties that bind her to her mundane life cannot be broken. She has no proper education to sustain herself, nor the money to live life on her own terms. Remember **Jane Austen's** Emma Woodhouse, stating so assuredly that she never needs to marry as she is well provided for through her inheritance ; well, Sita wasn't born so lucky.

Failing to experience the miracle in the island which she had hoped for, Sita doubted her escape to be a failure. This feeling was confirmed when Raman arrived there. The thought of her passionless and practical husband Raman coming to the island upset Sita because she realized that her escape was over and things would now be the same as before – "*melancholy and boredom*".

With his arrival, Sita was confirmed that her escape was a failure but she was also happy to think that he had come to take her and the children because he loved and missed her. But when she came to know that the real purpose of his visit was her daughter Menaka who had secretly written to him to take her back, Sita felt dejected like, "*a woman unloved, a woman rejected*". To her it was now clear that neither her husband nor her children understood her. She felt isolated while her husband and children were united, "*to fight her, to reject her, to run away and hide from her*".

Then, what options were left with Sita? To run away like her mother and lead a life of obscurity? Or to give up to the social conventions and be the 'perfect' wife and mother. Oh yes...she plays it safe.

Sita reconciles with her family and returns to the life from which she wanted to escape. She had been in confusion, in doubt and fear – what if Manori Island disgraced her by not showing its charm. Feeling lost as her fear became true, Sita had no other way but to accept whatever was offered to her.

She finally learns to accept that life has to go on. Her final acceptance of life towards the end of the novel, as having “*no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere*” is a far cry from the opening of the novel where she kept waiting, sitting on the balcony, smoking and looking out towards the sea:

“I am waiting, she agreed – although for what, she could not tell”

Her waiting symbolized the hope for some optimistic change that would transform her ennui and make things easier. For Sita, during her stay in the city of Bombay, the only escape was through ‘*Waiting*’. Even though she herself didn’t know what she was waiting for, she kept waiting. Anita Desai hints to the readers that the waiting of her protagonist was for a change – a change that would suddenly “*burst into festival fireworks*”, and save her from the “*dull- lit, empty shell*”. Unfortunately, the fireworks are doused before they can flare up in the sky.

Sadly, it is proved once again that what is possible for women in theory is seldom within their reach in fact. Sita’s decision not to give birth to her fifth child and keep it safe in her womb was always a practical impossibility, and she realizes it. Sita had visualized the island of Manori as an enchanting place where once her father used to perform miracles. And she hoped to perform one too. Her idea of not delivering the child and keeping it safe in her womb after reaching the island was an illusion. And it is quite ironical that Sita came to realize her real self and was disillusioned about the charm and spell of the island (that did not exist any longer) at the very place where she was living in her fancy.

Sita’s submission to her age-defined role of a wife and mother and resettling in Bombay is basically the brutal crushing of her voice of dissent. Her resignation to the inanimate and insipid life in Bombay is symbolic of her death in life. Though her conflict is resolved, it is not a happy enlightenment that we witness, but an enveloping of doubts and fears. She is unable to establish an individual identity and

goes back to live her life, maybe with no hope of an escape now. Her idyllic state of dreams had after all been just a rain-washed island, nothing more. Yes, life for her was now to be only in the mainland. No mystery. No magic.