

**Anita Desai and the Search for a Separate Space:  
A Study of the Women Characters from *Cry the Peacock* and  
*Where shall we go this summer***

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**Abstract**

Anita Desai occupies a unique position as a writer in the Indian literary imagination. In her novels it is her prime concern to project the psychological conflicts besetting women and to highlight their inner lives, thus bringing to the fore the contrast between the outer life on the surface and the inner life with all the conflicts, contradictions and traumas. Anita Desai emerged on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, with the publication of her first novel *Cry the Peacock*. In my paper I intend to discuss her two representative novels *Cry the Peacock* and *Where shall we go this summer* to bring out the troubled lives of the women characters like Maya and Sita who in a way voice the anxieties, worries and concerns of a larger segment of Indian women of our time tied to tradition and yet trying to liberate themselves from its restrictions and rigidities.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, *Where shall we go this summer*, Indian women, psychological conflicts besetting women, Sigmund Freud, conflict between tradition and modernity.

Anita Desai occupies a unique position as a writer in the Indian literary imagination. In her novels it is her prime concern to project the psychological conflicts besetting women and to highlight their inner lives, thus bringing to the fore the contrast between the outer life on the surface and the inner life with all the conflicts, contradictions and traumas. Anita Desai emerged on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, with the publication of her first novel *Cry the Peacock*. In my paper I intend to discuss her two representative novels *Cry the Peacock* and *Where shall we go this summer* to bring out the troubled lives of the women characters like Maya and Sita who in a way voice the anxieties, worries and concerns of a larger segment of Indian women of our time tied to tradition and yet trying to liberate themselves from its restrictions and rigidities.

Anita Desai as a novelist delves deep into women's psyche to bring the inner subterranean conflicts, dissatisfactions, and trauma, besetting women, and we see a sharp contrast between the surface calmness and the inner turmoil, between the outer manifestations of living and the inner traumas, and this dichotomy often lead them to a state of psychic imbalance which drive them to insanity, death and devastation, thus tragically ending their lives.

Once Anita Desai commented in an interview with James Vinson in 1972 that her aims of writing are to reveal truth and to enlighten about the problems of women which their husbands and

relatives cannot understand due to some socio-cultural hurdles. The problems of women are only due to the psychological taboos imposed by society, religion and patriarchy. She says, “writing is to me process of discovering the truth –the truth that is 9-10<sup>th</sup> of the ice-berg that lies sub-merged beneath the 1-10<sup>th</sup> visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this under lining truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.” (Contemporary Novelists, 348). It implies that all the 24 novels of Anita Desai contain the universal truth that women suffer ceaselessly, being physically and psychologically harassed by her husband.

Maya, the heroine in *Cry the Peacock* suffers being neglected by her husband. So, she only longs for her past, that is, for the life of childhood. From the romantic flavour of marriage, she escapes to her bygone days of childhood because her marital life has been topsy-turvied. Binod Bhusan Gulati, a noted critic of Anita Desai says, “the present and the past are just juxtaposed to highlight the temperamental incompatibility between the husband and wife” (Structures in the Novels of Anita Desai 1984 -1984-p-105).

Maya feels very excited in her bed as she looks back on the past experiences of her childhood. Some critics like Richard J. Morris analysed the character of Anita Desai from the perspective of the theories of Freud who was a famous Western psychologist. Freud says “sex is not only an intensely and intrinsically pleasurable experience, but it can act as a revitalising force in an otherwise sterile force. Sex is the prototype of all pleasurable experiences of life”. When Morrison analyses Maya’s problems, he finds her suffering only for physical dissatisfaction and superstition. She harbours a fear in her mind when the albino astrologer foretells her death or that of her husband within four years of her marriage. Such fearsome thought is converted into an obsession when it continued for a long time. Her husband Goutam is a rational young man, and is always busy with his own business, always focusing on his profession as an advocate, and he has little time for Maya to give her the physical and emotional sustenance she needs so much.

When Maya ventilates her obsession of the Albion astrologer’s prophecy, Gautam lends a deep ear to her. He does not attach any what Maya says. Maya’s problems are the universal problems of women who suffer silently being neglected by their husbands. Most of the women like Maya go through such type of sexual depression due to superstitious and dissatisfactions. Freud says if a woman is physically satisfied, her mind remains stable and concentrated. In case she is neglected she suffers from mental disorder. Goutam is a religious person and takes sex as sin. So, he wants to have occasional relationship with Maya and always cites the example of passion which brings disaster for human being. On her bed Goutam recites Gita which mocks at the beauty of Maya. Maya thinks her beautiful lips and cheeks have no importance for her husband Goutam.

Though Maya and Goutam are close to each other, and are on the same bed, they inhabit different worlds, and they think differently and do differently. In them we see a conflict between past and present, tradition and modernity and between ancient taboos and modern living. Gautama does not feel excited and attracted towards his wife because his age does not allow, but Maya is a young

girl burning with passion and she is unable to satisfy her physical needs she suffers generally till become a neurotic patient.

The same problem of Maya is seen in case of Sita in *Where shall we go the summer (1975)*. Sita suffers more or less like Maya because her husband Raman neglects his wife. Husband wife relationship is accurately portrayed by Anita Desai than that of other novelists. The novelist could portray how a couple as united by the bond of marriage having a lot of socio-psychological and cultural differences with each other suffers because of an incompatible marriage where only the gratification of sex matters. The man is completely indifferent to his wife though the wife still clings to him with the same passion and as before. It is the husband who is interested in satisfying his physical hunger, thus looking and treating her not as a living, breathing human being, but as an object of desire.

Sita leaves her husband not due to his physical assault but because she has been emotionally tortured since her marriage. She derived pleasure from her childhood which she spent in the Manori Island. Again, and again, she reminisces the natural beauty of the island which filled her in joy. She thinks she would be able to leave under a magic spell leaving her husband permanently: “She saw the Island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn by magic. Then there would be the sea- it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children, too into smoother, softer beings. The grove of the trees would shade them and protect them” (101). After leaving her husband in Bombay, she escaped from the difficulties because she was not in a position to face it. After that she realises that her maladjustment with her husband is the main reason of her tension as she is fed up with her husband, a businessman whose absolute lack of feeling and emotion brings her to the brink of insanity. And a deep change takes place in Sita from a proud and complete mother of four children, “sensual, emotional, Freudian” (31) to a woman of “rage, fear and revolt” for “control---had slipped out of her hold” (32).

A minute examination of the whole situation will reveal that Sita’s is more a psychological problem than being one resulting from unfulfilled wishes. Tragically, her dreams of getting love and affection from her husband ignore her instincts and what she likes him to treat her in a gentle and tender way is what he cannot do. As a result, in the long run the husband-wife relationship is dragged. Raman and Sita stand for binary opposition. Raman is a creature of society, more or less an extrovert, more accommodative, apathetic whereas Sita is hypersensitive, an introverted personality and a pessimist. She not only hates Raman for his lack of feeling but also the routine manner of her husband family.

As a reaction against these, when she speaks, she speaks with rage and anguish and with “sudden rushes of emotion” (P-48). In order to seek a means of escape she takes to smoking, abuses her children for trifles, and flies into a rage when the servants talk in the kitchen because she thinks they are quarrelling. Finally, she, like Stephen Daedalus in *A portrait of the Artist as a young man*, chooses three things exile, silence and winning. All this is the ultimate rejection of the values her husband represents, and she has resolved to go to Manori island as a kind of self-exile in her search

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for identity in silence and in her revival of the past away from home and civilization and thus reminding one of Billy Biswas in Arun Joshi's *The strange case of Billy Biswas*. She has her vision to fulfil on the island as one sees it in the early part of the novel," she had come here in order to give birth---was not this Manori the island of Miracles? Her Father had made in an island of magic once, worked miracle of a kind. His legend was still here in this house and he might work another miracle posthumously. She had come on a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn" (P-31).

The clash of identities between Sita and Raman that takes an unhappy dimension has other interesting points of focus. At the root of the husband-wife conflict, there is the theme of tradition versus modernism. By temperament and upbringing Sita's roots are in tradition represented by her father and Manori Island. Her sudden encounter with Bombay following a hasty marriage to Raman threatens her very root of existence for Raman and Bombay stand for modernisation.

*Where shall we go this summer?* is a faithful record of the post war state of reality, characterized by a sense of modern confusion, meaninglessness, pervasive horror and fear. The only thing that represents tradition is Sita's memory of the past and her conviction that the past still continues to exist in its full form, and that is countered by the debris of the past itself. The present, however, speaks about her isolation, loss of identity and breakdown of her relationship with her husband and others in the family.

In this way all the major characters of Anita Desai go through the same physical, mental, and psychological problems manifest in her novels like *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of the Day*, *Zigzag Way*, and *The Village by the sea*. This suggests how Anita Desai as a novelist portrays women characters very minutely by highlighting their problems both socially and psychologically, keeping in mind the subservient position of women in a male-dominated hegemonic set-up. Anita Desai is not just concerned with the position of women in general, she is also very much interested to pin point the issues and problems which face Indian women in particular as they are in the process of coming out of the cocoon of a dark world of dominance, oppression, and traumas.

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