

Child Psychology in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to study the childhood of Anita Desai's characters so as to analyse the reasons that contribute towards the disintegration of their personality. The world of these personages- replete with lonely strivings, desperations and near-neurotic urges- is an ossified and petrified domain that is destructive to their healthy growth. Detrimental home conditions, mainly during impressionable age, have paralysing effect on them and at times even cause near psychic death. This paper will primarily focus on the depiction of children in *Where Shall we go This Summer?*

Anita Desai does not describe the childhood of her characters at length, except for Rekha in *Fire on the Mountain* (Desai). In other novels, scattered references to the childhood impressions of her characters point towards the overall development of their personalities and as a result also shape the narrative. Commenting on her lonely and introspective character's childhood, she observes in an interview with Jasbir Jain, "I agree that the experience of childhood are the most vivid and lasting ones" (Jasbir Jain 1979). The importance of childhood experiences in the growth of an individual's personality has been accepted by the various schools of psychology. Some psychologists believe that the entire personality is formed, in a latent form, during the early childhood and the adult personality is only a magnified manifestation of the same. Psychologists have also suggested that adulthood personality may have origins in childhood experiences associated with exposure to specific parenting styles (Eisenberg et al., 2014 on conscientiousness) and health problems (Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Caspi et al., 2005). Childhood experiences bear great impact upon the development of overall personality. The types of home-life, of which parents and their attitudes are the main constituents, influence the psyche of a child. It is a common experience that homes characterised by friction and discord, lack of parental interest and affection often lead towards emotional instability and poor adjustment in children and affect their personality at later stages of life. As a result, the individual may struggle to conform to the accepted social norms and therefore be relegated as a deviant personality.

Abraham Maslow, a psychologist, in his book *Motivation and Personality* emphasizes the fundamental need to "belong". Psychological survival-needs, which include the need for safety, love, belonging, self-esteem and finally self-actualization, are common human traits. All these needs are basic in the sense that they are integral to human nature. Denial of these needs may result in neurotic conditions. As a result, normal psychological growth may be arrested and lead to alienation. It is the central force, common to all human beings and unique in each individual.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita feels completely neglected by her father. He had no time for his

children. A public figure, admired and revered by the masses, he is too far-off and formidable a person for Sita to approach with filial affections. There is always an "impossibility of talk between her and her father" (Desai, 79). He is immersed in self-glorification and seems to regard, his son and daughter, Jiban and Sita like his sycophant chelas and devotees. But he certainly is more attached to Rekha, his eldest daughter.

The atmosphere in which Sita lives and grows is that of neglect, hypocrisy and perceived partiality. Her Conscious as well as subconscious behaviour reveals that she is constantly uneasy. She questions herself: "why and how is it that there is no resemblance between the two sisters?" The disclosure that Rekha is not her real sister drops on her "skin like acid and she felt them burn whenever she caught an exchange of that heavy-lidded look between father and daughter, or his arm in its fine white sleeve lie fondly across her round shoulders" (Desai, 79). Sita feels discarded and unwanted when she notices her father's tenderness towards Rekha. This experience breeds feelings of worthlessness, and its consequent strategy is rebelliousness. Sita cannot corroborate her father's dubious ways. It trickles down her psyche as an annoying human experience. Still, the only sane and innocent voice in the novel is that of Sita. She has the courage to make a wry face and declare that the well-water is not sweet. Her environment is damaging. It shatters her faith in life and in the goodness of the world. It is "a strange life, an unusual life". It does not offer her the freedom to acquire her unique individuality" but forces her to withdraw into the protective chrysalis of childhood for longer than is usual for most" (Desai, 63).

The family disintegrates immediately after the father's death. It testifies the bitter truth that there was nothing substantial to bind them as a family. Rekha does not even stop to shed tears for him and leaves "as though she had waited and planned for this moment of release from the old man's love" (Desai, 99). Jiban too disappears a couple of days before the demise, as though he had had a foreknowledge of the calamity. Only Sita stays on. She marries Raman, the first man in her life. The family would not have broken so abruptly had there been a sense of belonging. In the absence of family bonding the demise of the patriarch has a domino effect. The

family falls apart like a house of cards. Sita struggles to adapt to the damaging situation largely due to her childhood insecurities and complete lack of parental and familial matrix. Family is the most important internal group that conditions a person's relationship to others and the self. R.D. Laing, an existential psychologist, considers family to be internalized in each one of us. It is like a flower, with parents as the centre and children as the petals around it.

Sita's problem is much more intricate. Sita's mother had deserted her husband and children. She had gone to Benaras. It cannot be ascertained when exactly did she leave, but since Sita had no "recollection of that dim relation," (Desai, 79) it must have been fairly early in Sita's childhood. Her physically unavailable and emotionally absent mother made her feel like an abandoned child. When Sita herself became a mother, she probably carried this void and hence always remained a bewildered mother. Sita's inability to rear and nurture her own children satisfactorily points towards the hiatus of inheritance that must have been created due to her motherless childhood. Psychologically, the role of the mother becomes essential not only for the gratification of daily needs but also for granting emotional lease of life. This relationship plays a significant role in a child's life- be it a boy or a girl. Absence of the mother presupposes incoherence in the inner images of a reassuring world. It shatters the foundation of a true self. Sita obviously misses this vital link and starves for the intensity and candour of awakening and existence.

Sita did not appear to be consciously aware of this deprivation, in her early life. Childhood innocence must have woven a fantasy around her motherless existence, convincing her that she came into this world without a mother- that she can live and grow without the motherly care. In her scheme of life there was no place for this relationship, until she saw the pearls and jewels which Jiban said, belonged to their mother. Her disaster multiplies on hearing that their mother was not dead but had run away to Benaras. She is shocked. This resentment is symbolic. It aggravates childhood rage and confusion on finding the image of mother broken. A mother dead and lost is far easier to accept than a so called callous and deserter mother. Sita is an adolescent when this disclosure is bluntly made by Jiban. She becomes paranoid and anxiety stricken- "ill-at-ease with herself since the day she learnt the bitter truth about her mother." Her restlessness can be spotted in her mental quest for the mother. Isolation grips her and she feels

. . . separated from them, the chosen one, chosen by the ghost for a flashing vision of its jewels although it remained invisible and fleshless itself. She found herself turning into a wanderer, always in search of the ghost. Who? What was she? (Desai, 85)

For Sita it is a fevered and haunted time. Owing to this dishevelled image of mother, Sita fails to internalize womanhood. She gropes for her sense of identity and her real self. She is left to grow alone and face the baffling physical as well as emotional changes without any maternal aid.

Psychologists believe that mother is indispensable for girls, particularly during puberty and adolescence. Similarly, friendship with girls of the same age-group is also essential to give a sense of shared identity.

Friendship between girls is of the greatest importance. Identification with a similar being can strengthen the young girl's consciousness that she is an independent ego (Helen Deutsch, 22).

Unfortunately, Sita lacks both: mother and girl-friends. There is no reference, throughout the narrative, to any of Sita's friends. She spends her childhood amid crowds surrounding her father. During her teens, her only companion is Jiban, her brother. This is probably the reason why instead of growing out of her adolescence she actually struggles through it. In the absence of a mother, a true elder sister or even girl companions "...she struggled along with infirmity as a cripple without crutches" (Desai, 93). During this traumatic transition period, she gets no reassuring exchange of confidence from peers. Her temper-tantrums in later life are a direct outcome of her lost self. Left with a feeling of isolation in a hostile world, Sita begins her search for herself.

The foregoing discussion amply establishes that the psychological portrayals of Anita Desai's characters stem from the familial soil and have their roots in the established psychological theories of human personality and development. The analysis of the character of Sita, in the light of her childhood, unravels the mystery of her unpredictable and psychologically unhealthy behaviour. The narrative does not seem to focus much on the childhood of Sita, yet the flashbacks and reminiscences are sufficient to reveal the effects of the adverse conditions under which she grew. Anita Desai's psychological perceptions include more such worlds populated by weary and disturbed victims of pernicious homes. Sita's character, portrayed with the accuracy of a psychologist's understanding, becomes much credible and convincing when studied in the light of her disturbed childhood.

Childhood is a formative and autonomous period when a person has intrinsic desires for health and life. Uncorrupted by the adult world, an unsuspecting child recognizes only the one reality that is lived in the present, where the past and the future have no existence. Childhood consciousness is not split between them but is rather free to discover them through love.

Emotional bonding at an early age has a deep and lasting influence on an individual's life. At the same time, its absence or excess can work havoc, even affect mental equilibrium. It may trigger shattering effects of repressed longings. Similarly, distorted emotions of love and trust, during childhood, can develop a schizoid personality. To conclude it can be said that in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita's repressed childhood had adversely affected her inner reality- the core of her inmost being- her personality. Her experiences, depicted in the novel, aptly correlate her peculiar contexts. Anita Desai has aptly infused the psychological truth with her creative genius.

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