

Where Shall We Go This Summer? : A Study of Marital Dissonance

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 April 2019

Keywords

Marital Discord, Alienation,
Restlessness and Mal-Adjustment

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai like other Indo-Anglican writers is constantly concerned with the problem of interaction between man and woman, between the individuals and the society. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some vital stage of their lives. In most of her novels, she deals with the threats and intricacies of man woman relationships.

Anita Desai is one of the foremost Indian authors writing in English. She is known for her lucid, finely crafted novels and stories about life in contemporary India.

Anita Desai in this novel chooses marital dissonance as the theme of novel. There is a focus on the incapability of a wife to express spontaneously her dread and agony. It results in the breaking of communication between husband and wife. The distance between the husband Raman and the wife Sita swells because of difference of outlooks, fears and individual multiplexes. It results in their marital disharmony. Raman and Sita have incompatible natures and attitudes towards life. The incongruous couple of Raman and Sita are encountered with the problem of husband- wife discord. Sita embodies a world of passion and female responsiveness while Raman is a man with practical view of life. Sita is anxious, delicate middle-aged woman with quick-temper and emotional reactions to many trifle things that happen to her. She always desires to escape reality and does not want to grow up and face the responsibilities of married life. On the contrary, Raman embodies rationality, prudence and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is not able to recognize Sita's violent reaction against every incident. His response to Sita's recurrent upsurges is a blend of bewilderment, exhaustion and dread. He cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration.

Along with marital discord, there is the theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life - the theme of her first novel. But, here, the treatment is more controlled. Here, the wife's loneliness is the loneliness of the woman, wife and a mother. It is conditioned by the society and family. The childless Maya's anxiety is existential and temporal; Sita's ache is domestic and temporal. Sita is tired of the ordinary routine of worthless survival. She feels smothered in her refined, grand flat in Bombay. Therefore, she fights to release herself away from it. The calmest way is open to her is to go to Manori island, her first home. She wishes to recapture some of her past. She escapes to the island in order not to give birth to her fifth child. Sita is also preoccupied and despondent with her unhappy marriage with Raman. She is bored with her married life. Sita fails to understand that even after so many years of their marriage Raman is not able to recognize the reality of Sita's mind. In fact, he should have understood the restlessness of Sita's mind and her expectations from him. As

Raman fails to understand this, she becomes upset. It makes her to grasp the hollowness of their married life. There is mal-adjustment between husband and wife. It is grounded on the clash of ethics, beliefs and even trust. It is perhaps grounded on dual societal morals. Therefore, the famous researcher, Uma Bannerjee precisely says that:

"This is not simply a case of an emancipated woman, revolting against the slavish bonds of marriage. It is much more than that."¹

Sita's psychosis springs from the dismal, boring everyday routine life, which repudiates her any wisdom of energetic participation. Nothing of interest and miraculous is happening in their life. Therefore, she is bored with it. The same things and acts are being repeated in their life. She feels that their life has become static one. She wants to have dynamic life. Hence, she regretfully says: "Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere."²

She becomes actually conscious of what she was missing in life after witnessing the tender scene in the magical island where she had spent her childhood with her father. When she saw a young woman being tenderly caressed by a man, she suddenly becomes aware of what she was missing in life. The maladjustment of the marriage had changed her completely. She becomes aware that she has misplaced her feminine self, her confidence in giving birth.

Later on, it became improbable for her to make any compromise. Hence, she escaped to the idealistic land where she had spent a pleasant childhood with her father. She has lost her mental balance and resultantly it has endangered her rationality. She doesn't want to deliver the fifth baby and hopes that the magic land of her childhood i. e. Manori will give her the power to prevent the child birth. But when she comes to the island she finds that the island has lost its power. She discovers that her infancy imaginings have been vanished from that island. Therefore, she finds that time has made its negative impact there also – on the place and its people.

Raman is a business minded, practical headed and bent with the responsibilities of life that he takes so seriously.

His expectations are ordinary and sensible. He is puzzled at the irrational behavior of Sita. He is considerate and tries his best to make her happy. Raman's is a conventional Hindu family. In his family even men do not smoke amenably, however, Sita, just to malice the in-laws smokes amenably. Things become really unscrupulous, so Raman moves to a flat to avoid daily tensions. But, even here, Sita is not happy. Raman is at a loss to understand the reason of her boredom. He thinks himself a devoted benefactor of the family. He does not take subtle difference between physical union and union of souls as significant part of his life. He fails to comprehend the vibrant necessities of Sita. This leads to making them as strangers. They are living under the same roof but find it difficult to share the essential communion of hearts.

Sita finds herself estranged from her husband and children. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. She is the product of broken family. She craves for the consideration and affection from others. When she was in her father's house she could not get it because her father remained busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband also is busy. He fails to fulfill her expectation. As a result, there is marital discord, tension, disharmony and communication gap between husband and wife.

This is a common feeling experienced by many female protagonists of Anita Desai. Women are psychologically manipulated by the male-controlled society. They are made to feel unwanted and uncared for by the gender roles dictated to them by society and men. Raman values Sita only as the mum of his children and nothing more than that. There is no emotive or rational congruity between them at all. In a maladjusted marriage, she feels that she: "lost all feminine, all maternal belief in child birth, all faith in it and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world." **3**

Raman and Sita hold contradictory outlooks, standards, ethics and ideals. They even vary in their tempers. Raman takes Sita to be an insolent, supercilious and temperamental woman. On the contrary, she is very truthful and straight forward. She is not an opportunist. Her insanity is a clash between the uprightness and pretense seen around her. Sita is an intellectually advanced woman. Desai emblematically describes the conflict in Sita's mind through the image of a crowd of crows attacking an eagle. Sita compares herself to a Jelly fish: "Perhaps I am only like the jelly fish." **4**

The above-mentioned comparison validates her thrown away self. Sita is not happy at all in her in-law's house. Therefore, she calls it as "age – rotted flat".³⁸ She finds the truth that everything around her is extremely disgusting and, therefore, she decides to go to Manori her birth place. She aims to freeze her womb and neither to terminate it, nor give birth to it. Sita in her childhood has led a happy-go-lucky life in Manori. Hence, she supposes that all her difficulties would succumb once she goes to Manori, the utopian island for her. She goes to Manori along with her two children, Maenaka and

Karan. Her children don't like the life in Manori. They desire to go back to Bombay. Maenaka writes a letter to her father and requests him to come and to take her back to Bombay. She deliberately does not tell her mother because she has the fear that her mother would not allow her to write a letter. Raman comes to Manori, not for Sita but to take his child and this breaks her down completely. Sita tries to explore the old magic of her paternal home, but does not find it there. She slowly realizes that her father's house in Manori no longer carried the same magic it used to. She finally goes home. Noteworthy critic T. S. Anand has rightly pointed out that: "Her desire to bear the child and retire with Raman to the land signifies her return to life, community and society in spite of the debased dullness of life."⁵ In the end Sita realizes the futility of seeking freedom and reconciles with circumstances, and goes back to her husband. She is presumably a liberated woman, free from patriarchal oppression. Yet patriarchal attitudes run as an undercurrent. However, she comprehends and yields to the world.

It is the tale of Sita. Sita like Anita Desai's other female protagonists try to poise existence and death, extraction and connection, involvement and suppression. She is a woman in quest of identity. Her struggle is continuous one in which she fights to attain concord between the internal and the external world. She has four kids, a husband and a house and in spite of that she is in search of her individuality. She gets married to Raman and in the course of time becomes the mother of four children. She goes to Mumbai, an unfamiliar city and suffers from a desperate sense of estrangement.

Sita's fifth pregnancy brings bodily alterations as well as profound mental pains. She wants to go back to Manori, her father's wonder island. She finds it monotonous to live in the city as it hints at „solidity“ of streets and „security“ of houses. There is only dreariness and desperate disillusionment. She does not want to deliver her baby. She has fear that the born baby will lose its purity in this monotonous world. She comes back to the magic island with a strong conviction that she will be able to withhold the baby and keep it away from the harsh world:

"She had come here in order not to give birth... she was on the island in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth." **6**

Sita has never responded in this manner during her previous four pregnancies. She has enjoyed them. She could find self-righteousness through her children. They have assisted her to discharge her impatient vitalities. However, this time she recognizes a frightening sensation of forfeiture with the birth. She feels that this world is insensitive. It does not give that much importance to human existence. Therefore, she doesn't want to lose the priceless, uncontaminated self, so well protected in the womb by delivering it into this insensitive world. She finds too much of violence in the uncaring society. But her husband, Raman fails to understand her feelings. He tries to soothe her but it is ineffective.

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