

QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY: AN INNER JOURNEY IN ANITA DESAI'S *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER ?* AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

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Abstract- Literature employs language as a medium of communication. One of the important aspects to be noted is that every literary work spring to life in society and every writer's responsibility is to awaken the sensibility, instils emotions and feelings so as to correlate with what is projected as reality in society. This paper tries to show case and projects the quest of an individual as perceived in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Margaret Atwood *Surfacing*. Both the novelist who are prominent writers with distinguished credit for their works who hail from different cultural background try to probe into the inner journey of their characters and who in turn struggle for a quest of identifying their self at times alienated and delusional, the balance maintained between relationships in society, temperamental and emotional aspects are been analysed by the novelists. The identifying of self in the process creates a new pattern in society. Their protagonist attempts to rediscover possible aspects within the inner self with the outer world. The approaches adopted by both the novelists are striking in terms of similarities and belief in concentrating the insightful depiction and correlates the inner world of an individual in their works. We do see a touch of concern in a feminist manner in terms of relationship maintained by the characters in the novels. They probe into their feminist sensibility, emotionally and psychologically to understand the human nature, the circumstances they face and the environment which leads them in the society. This present work leads us to ponder upon an individual perspective to be looked upon and extend an insightful onlook in the near future.

Key Words: Alienated, Feminist, Temperamental, Sensibility, Self- Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Literature employs language as a medium of communication. One of the important aspects to be noted is that every literary work spring to life in society and every writer's responsibility is to awaken the sensibility, instils emotions and feelings so as to correlate with what is projected as reality in the society.

This paper tries to show case and projects the quest of an individual as perceived in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Margaret Atwood *Surfacing*. Both the novelist who are prominent writers with distinguished credit for their works who hail from different cultural background try to probe

into the inner journey of their characters and who in turn struggle for a quest of identifying their self at times alienated and delusional, the balance maintained between relationships in society, temperamental and emotional aspects are been analysed by the novelists.

Anita Desai is a prominent Indian women novelist who throws light of the inner life and projects female sensibility in her characters. She had brought a new dimension through her works and brings out the real concerns in terms of bringing out the psyche life of her characters. She is a Sahitya Academy Awardee for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. This present research work *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* (1975) received the Author's Guild Award for Excellence in Writing. Anita Desai is more concerned about the internal and external aspects of character i.e. concentration of the sensibility of an individual rather than emphasis laid on moral, social, economic, political issues.

The protagonist of this present work Sita is viewed as an emotional, middle-aged women who is very sensitive and lives with her husband Raman along with her four children. The conflict between Sita and Raman is projected with difference viewpoints of life; which leads Sita to be alienated and undergoes mental agony where she is explosive in terms of outburst emotionally. She feels lonely at times inexpressive because of her sensitivity which leads her inwardly as an introvert person.

The very angst of her inward soul which is seen through the title of the novel *Where Shall we Go This Summer?* At one point of time, she senses loneliness and alienation in the presence of her family or at times away from her home or amidst her husband. She feels a sense of void and the fear gripped for her fifth pregnancy. Her desperation makes her run away from Bombay and lands up in Manori, her hometown along with her children Karan and Menaka in a hope that the miracle of not giving birth to her fifth child. We can see that Sita broke into violent eruptions at different situations and was emotionally disturbed as seen in the novel. It's a paranoiac representation of a sense of fear and disturbance which she was undergoing.

Meanwhile her husband was a different kind of person which is expressed as follows "His face usually as stolid as soundly locked gate". "People were to him friends, visitors...He regarded them with little humour and with restraint...Not an introvert nor an extrovert- a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way". Both are like poles apart in terms of temperamentally. One could find that Sita's alienation from Raman can be seen inherent in her relationship. In the novel Sita alienates herself from the society. She finds people in majority living like animals. Through the lines from the novel, she says, "They are nothing – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals "My pet animals- or wild animals in the forest, yes. But these are neither-they are like pariahs you see in the street, hanging.... waiting to pounce and kill and eat". To her the ayahs, cooks and other multitudes appear to her to be animals".

Sita felt lonely and alienated, a threat to her existence because of boredom. We see Raman who was busy in his business could not cater sufficient time while her children who were growing into an individual with views of life in an independent manner, she finds herself unable and incapable because of boredom, we see that she caters to her daily routine as a mother and a wife in her life. Her sense of identity is lost

through the process.

But fortunately, even Raman could not comprehend why she gets bored and whom could not cater but fails to understand Sita. Anita Desai has depicted Sita were her boredom, her monotonous life and experience which led her to suffer hypersensitive and the emotional outburst at different situations. We see Sita expressed in the following lines “She never got used to anyone”. So pitiable was the state of Sita who was undergoing trauma- emotionally and mentally etc. The predicament and torment which led her into agony, unhappiness, instable made her move on with general situations in society. She felt people tried to intrude upon her life and also upon her privacy too.

As we told in the novel which shows her search and longing which keeps her waiting through the following lines, “Are you waiting for someone? “she was occasionally asked by one of the children dashing past or by her husband, as she sat out on the balcony...sometimes she answered with a nod for it was true, she was always waiting. Physically so resigned she could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and then past her, leaving her always in this grey, dull lit, empty shell. I am waiting, she agreed—although for what, she could not tell: for the two halves of this grey egg world to fall apart burst”. “But till she came to it, she would live on, smothered by this endlessly, damp, soft grey sand, and it seemed that these years of her life were dyed, coloured through and through, with colour of waiting”.

The only way Sita feels is to escape to Manori along with her two children— “Manori the island of miracles” so as to deal with disillusionment. She was unable to bear the agony, alienation and anguish with her fifth pregnancy. “She had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn”. We see her frustration, bored life in Bombay led her to aspire and provide her unborn infant a world which is congenial to live and which is incorrupt too. Her escape to the island especially her house which was deserted for twenty years can be seen symbolizing her condition too. It also symbolizes her isolation from the outer world into her inner world. She wants to retreat and rewind her own childhood experience spent in innocence amidst nature and wants the same to be experienced by her children too. Sita had a simple upbringing and finds a huge difference between culture and values between the village life and the modern-day world. She finds that children are distracted because of luxuries provided to them and the lifestyle led in the cities. Sita wishes and wants that her unborn child be born peacefully than toxic as in the city life. She wanted to provide a natural world especially.

At one point of time Sita doubted her own existence, “Life seems complete, full, without her, there was no reason for her to exist”. We see her psychologically tired, confused and who makes an attempt to live in a world which is of make believe. “If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternate. She saw the island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn by magic”. The complaints by Sita expressed thus, “It was the face of a women unloved, a woman rejected”. “He had come because Maneka had called him. He had betrayed her too”. We see her daughter asks her father to take them back from Manori to city life. They had all betrayed her. We see such plightful state which moves us emotionally. Sita should be accepted, satisfied, loved and understood by her husband and

children which fails in the case of Sita. Through the following lines we see how Sita longed for affection and to be accepted by her husband, “Either he was tantalizing her, deliberately or he had nothing more to give her, or he was just unaware of her needs and demands. He raised his hand and stroked Karan’s hair with a gentleness she herself ached to attract and she with her eyes, wanting and not being given what she wanted”.

In the novel Sita tells her daughter Maneka, “I wish I had your talent I would nurse it so carefully –like a plant – make it grow, grow. I used to think -after I left this island and had to think what I would do next-that if only I could paint, or sing or play that sitar well, really well, I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of have being what I am, she said with stinging bitterness”. Later Sita expresses, “I should have known how to channel my thoughts and feelings, how to put them to use. I should then, some meaning. At least, it would have had some for me- even if no one else had cared”. Sita had expressed openly while Maneka displays her lack of interest towards what her mother expressed, rather escapes from that place.

Sita as seen at the end of the novel is “tired, disheveled and vacant as she was- like a player at the end of the costumes, in equal parts saddened and relieved. Her time on the island had been very much of an episode on a stage the storm ended, the play over the stage had now to be cleared—then the players could go home”. The ambiguity of life as seen by Sita – “All was bright, all was blurred, all was in a whirl. Life had no periods, no stretches”. She realises that moving to Manori and escape from her duties as a wife, mother was not the answer to what she was dealing with in terms of issues and problems which is seen in the following lines, “She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unlivable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative- a life unlived, a life bewitched”. She realises and convinced that life is a continuously process and must flow on we should move along the process of life, “Life must be continued and all its business- Menaka’s admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, now child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to a salary earned, a salary spent”. Sita never took a wrong step nor did she hurt anyone but simply accepts the fact about her destiny and compromises not that she can go back but realises that life must move on.

We see Sita who realises the desires and the requirements based on life’s needs and decides to return back to Bombay with an identity to take responsibility as a wife, mother in existence in society irrespective of dullness of life has to offer. She feels that there is no escape to escape the responsibility but she must accept and flow on as life leads. We see Sita’s exile to Manori to envision herself, quest for self-identity and search for independence from her routine boredom, withdrawing from daily chaos and duties in Bombay. It was a transitional stage from routine work but later realises self-actualization. Sita in the process for the quest of self-identity seize to live and coexist with society and shoulder responsibility of not only as a wife, but as a mother but also an individual woman. Anita Desai portrays feminine sensibility in the novel through the character of Sita. The challenges taken up by Sita is one of the major concerns to Anita Desai as a novelist in this work. The intensity and feelings of the characters to probe

the inner world is projected by Anita Desai in an exemplary manner. The end of the novel shows us a positive sign to face life and overcome -thus leading a life with self-identity and realisation too, in order to lead a life in a harmoniously manner.

On the other hand, we see Margaret Atwood as a prolific Canadian writer who is famously known as a feminist. Like Anita Desai, Margaret Atwood represents women characters in her novels who try to reinforce and establish a relationship with inner self with the outer world; the problems and struggles they face to reclaim their background, root's identity through the process.

Surfacing (1972) is one of her famous novels which expresses how women suffer and endure in the process - search for their identity in the society. Atwood deals about conservation, the emergency of the then Canadian nationalism, her journey to discover her inner identity, the trauma she faced in terms emotionally forced her to led her life; we also see the protagonist journey to find and gain access to the outer world through her own experience. We can sense a world which dominates femininity and nature too. *Surfacing*, Atwood's second published novel in 1972 is all about self-discovery and a quest for identity. We see a young female narrator describes and gives in a point of view and her journey where she comes across various men and how relationship had led her to be determine an individual choice and the inner search with potentiality.

We view the experience of a young Canadian divorcee who returns to her homeland in search for her father where she believes that he is still alive. As she passes by her place, she recollects and ponder upon her childhood days. She is accompanied by her lover Joe and her friend Anna along with her husband David. The nameless narrator is in search of her lost father and later investigates how he had been lost from an isolated island in one of the large lakes of Northern Quebec. As she leads the search which in turn leads an exploration of herself as a woman, amidst nature also probes into her inner self most importantly. She under the mystic vision, rediscovers her memories, innocence which she has lost, realisation of the power of nature and the world she encounters and more over her isolation, delusion, alienation which later in the novel led her to accept herself.

Like Sita, the nameless narrator feels her environment to be oppressive which does not lead her to introspect her true self and potential as an individual. Here she rejects the vulgarity and materialism which is fake in terms of the American society. She feels that love as a form of possessiveness over her and thus distrusts. Even with Sita where she does not want domination by male over love she receives. The sense of guilt is perceived and a sudden memory of the dead body of the child under water reminds that she had an abortion as a sense of agony she had undergone. It is not only the mental but also emotional trauma she faced as a woman. As she travels back to the island with only false hope as if floating on the surface life. Similarly, Sita gets irritated who is fed up with ugly life of Bombay escapes to Manori were as the nameless narrator has a desire to balance of her inner disturbance on the island.

Margaret Atwood attempts to throw light on the unnatural act of her abortion and struggles, the pain along with the sense of guilt. We see how she was oppressed and emptied through the process. "The unborn child was my husband; he imposed it on me all the time it was growing in me I felt like an

incubator. He measured everything he wanted a replica of himself”. We see how women were exploited by men and cater towards their needs. The pregnancy of the narrator ended not in childbirth but in abortion; she was plunged, emptied, betrayed and amputated too. It reflects the condition of women as they stand powerless. It is nature that women take it to be a consoler at the end. The abortion brings out a traumatic memory when she sees and finds an image that she assumes to be her father’s body but later sees the body of the aborted child and indeed her guilt is made to introspect. The narrator thinks her womb to be an incubator. Living in a society where she thinks that she is made to believe that she is a childbearing machine. We see they use women to bear children and deny their rights and identity in society as a mother, their respects and their freedom as a person too. She is traumatized when she thinks of the culture in the city. The trauma of losing a child leads her to be more empathetic with nature too. It makes her realise that the power of creation and letting to destroy are interconnected. She wants her unborn child to be born again in a natural way and transform her whole by the end of the novel.

In *Surfacing* the narrator’s friend Anna is subjected and conditioned in terms of physical appearance are considered and to mention the standard of beauty as an exposure by the male power in the novel. We see the male dominance in *Surfacing* when Anna accepts all the abuses, the insult she receives, a person who was not given due respect as a wife. The only identity she receives is that she is known as David’s wife, we see that she is insisted to apply makeup than be seen in her natural face. We see the hypocrisy and how women were victimized and oppressed at the same time.

Here the narrator is agonized and dies a symbolic death when she assumes the body of her father later led a nightmare of her child. One which is visible to the world, another which is buried within her truth corpse leads onto the renewal of life. She was able to realize her true inner self. “My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head”. We see the re-living of herself through the memories of her past life and which leads her into psychic quest.

The nameless narrator is seen in the novel was able to capture the moments in tune with nature in spiritual aspects. The cure she received through nature from her past exploitation is seen in the novel. We see a transformation as a woman and who cures mentally. “When I am clean, I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges, gently against the dock”. We find herself amalgamated with nature. She projects her strength as a journey. Finally, her decision to give birth to the unborn child and acceptance of Joe in her life is indeed a quest for fulfilment. She portrays a path to many others to lead a life of hope and move beyond the stage of victimization by the person in the struggle of power structure in the society. She reduces and rebels against the society who view woman as mere objects. She accepts life’s and moves on in her life; and through the process quest for identity as an individual.

We see the nameless narrator sheds whatever she had acquired from the society and returns to her conscious state. Her rational mind transforms her completely and as a renewed person which is seen as life enhancing. Her insightfulness amidst nature and concern later enables her to take directions and

freedom to give in new dimension in her life.

We see the treatment of Identity which is enacted in the wilderness where she sets on her novel *Surfacing* were as Anita Desai *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* reflects concerns issues of alienation and identity crisis. In both the novels – an escape from life from the city especially the protagonist offers nature as a place to interact and retreat through the process of the quest for identification of self. We see childhood memories which acts as a narrative in both the novels. The sense of dislocation relates the absence of father and a process of a meaning in life and to embark on their journey.

Identity of an individual as rooted in cultural identity; we see Sita retreats to Manori as an escape from the city meanwhile the narrator in *Surfacing* finds retreat amidst nature to search her lost father away from the city. We see that the nature played an important role in terms of finding identity of self in terms of reconciliation and quest for inner journey in connection with the outer world. It represents freedom in a transition stage. We see a sense of displacement as seen in *Surfacing* when the protagonist i.e. narrator felt alienated and has memories in connection of her childhood and which we can see in the same way in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Both the novels recover a voice from women i.e., from a women's perspective, traces femininity and gives us a view as to how women are socially defined with specific roles rather than looking at the potential as an individual. The inner most urge of women who strive to overcome all the barriers to establish an identity of one's own self.

In both the novels we see that woman need to be accepted not just as a wife and mother to their children but also as an individual who needs to cater their needs emotionally, mental support etc. We also see identity crisis which leads them to be alienated, delusional too. They coexist and correlated with nature. And determined to protect the unborn child which itself is fulfilment of a major quest of identity as a woman and as a mother. Both feels rejuvenating when they escape to their mother land from the city culture. They try to reinvent by identifying their true self, accepting reality and to move on in life, understanding the transformation and their place in the society. We also see the layers of self – inner and outer self and how they deal with the inner journey to be identified with the true self with the outer world, the challenges they experience etc.

CONCLUSION

The identifying of self in the process creates a new pattern in society. Their protagonist attempts to rediscover possible aspects within the inner self with the outer world. The approaches adopted by both the novelists are striking in terms of similarities and belief in concentrating the insightful depiction and correlates the inner world of an individual in their works. We do see a touch of concern in a feminist manner in terms of relationship maintained by the characters in the novels. They probe into their feminist sensibility, emotionally and psychologically to understand the human nature, the circumstances they face and the environment which leads them in the society. This present work leads us to ponder upon an individual perspective to be looked upon and extend an insightful onlook in the near future. In order to

survive and deal with people in the society, women issues need to be catered and dealt alongside address the inequalities so that women are given freedom and power so as to reconstruct themselves, live in harmony and also in social building in the society.

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