

## The Role of Nature in Identity Formation in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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**Abstract:** *The present paper entitled “The Role of Nature in Identity Formation in Anita Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer” analyzes the role of nature in resolving the enigma of identity-crisis in the life of the main protagonist, Sita. It traces how the protagonist suffers from the feelings of alienation and loneliness all through her life and how she wavers in her desire to be one with nature to overcome her dilemma of her life in a ‘violent’ city. It tries to bring out the circumstances that existed in the life of the main protagonist before her marriage and also that which exist in her present situation. It also attempts to explore important distinctions between the nature and culture as well as the life of the island and that of the city or the mainland. It also compares the two “Sitas” – the mythological Indian goddess Sita of the epic Ramayana and the protagonist Sita.*

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Nature, Loneliness, Culture, Escape.*

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Nature is the part and parcel of the entire human existence. It has not only provided man with the basic requirements of the day-to-day life which are necessary for his sustenance on this earth but has also been a major life-force for all the living organisms of the earth. All forms of life that exist on this earth can only sustain if there exists among them a fruitful, balanced and harmonious relationship. However, it is not really the case in the present circumstances. Man has always tamed, domesticated and exploited Nature for his own purposes and which he considers to be his inferior in all respects. This view of man has led to his excessive exploitation and destruction of Nature leading to losing of all harmony and ecological balance among the natural objects and creatures.

Besides all this, Nature that has created man is considered to be man’s best companion and a friend forever. She not only nourishes man but also guides him, strengthens him, helps him, blesses him and also takes care of him. Healthy human life can not be imagined in the absence of Nature and natural objects. The modern man has distanced himself from Nature that has made him an alien not only to others but to his own self also. In such a case, his existence and even his identity fall in danger. Same is the case with Sita, the protagonist of Anita Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* who also faces the identity crisis in her life in the city of Bombay. The present paper is an attempt to study the relationship of Sita with her natural surroundings and the role that Nature plays in the quest of her identity.

Nature that forms the part of the cultural lives of the humans has always affected their lives and activities and is also in turn been affected by them. The novel exhibits a beautiful description of the Manori island, the place where Sita spent her girlhood days which is presented in a quite contrast with the description of the Bombay city life where she lives with her husband, Raman, her four children and with a fifth one in her womb. The life at the island seems to be at ease and in harmony with its wild natural surroundings whereas that of the mainland or the city has no contact with the world of Nature – it exists in a vivid aloofness from the natural things or objects. As a girl, Sita in the lap of the island's beautiful natural environment was much closer to nature and with her brother Jeevan, has always revered and reveled in the waters of the sea around that island and has played with crabs, frogs or other such sea creatures that her brother collected from the sea-shore. We can find three types of characters in the novel – those who are close to nature (i.e. the islanders such as Moses and Miriam); those who are not (i.e. the city people like Raman and all of his four children); and the ones like Sita who meddle between these two types.

The main protagonist of the novel is Sita around whom the whole novel is made up and who is shown to be affected by the two contrasting worlds that of 'savage' Nature and of 'civilized' humans. Sita is the child of Nature in a true sense, though she is not born in the natural surroundings of the Manori Island. Rather, she has come here with her family as a young girl. Gradually, she grows used to the natural environment of the island. The natural magic of the island helped her "withdrew into the protective chrysalis of childhood for longer than is usual for most" (Desai 59). Sita is alienated since her childhood. Her father always remains busy with his experiments and prayers that he also uses for the treatment of various diseases and pains of the islanders. Though he is close to his eldest daughter Rekha, he has no time for his younger ones, Sita and Jeevan. Sita's mother ran away to Haridwar when she was a small child. Their elder sister Rekha always accompanies her father and remains lost in her love for music. Sita notices these things but can't do anything to receive her father's and sister's attention. So in a sense both Sita and Jeevan are left with no one to take care of them neither parents nor any elder sibling. For Sita, only Jeevan is the all time companion but he and his talks always remain a puzzle to Sita. Despite all these circumstances, she has never felt loneliness in her girlhood days. The natural world of the island has been with her all through these lonely feelings. The peace and calmness of the island provides her completeness. As:

She belonged, to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history – like a lamb does to its flock – and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone. As she was not sent to school, she only came into contact with other families like her own and life seemed normal. She could not remember wanting or waiting for her mother. (Desai 77)

Things change in the life of Sita with her departure from the island. She comes to Bombay with her husband Raman. She fails to adjust with her in-laws. Again, alone in the new

house with Raman, Sita finds no fulfillment. There always remains a gap between husband and wife. Raman always remains busy with his materialistic pursuits and Sita in her craving for something else. One after the other, she has four children. She has been taken for granted by her very husband and children so in a way she becomes a victim of their indifferent attitude towards her. She is different from them in her sensitiveness towards nature as well as others. She can feel the cruelty and violent attitude of human beings not only towards nature but also towards their fellow beings. Even her family members fail to sympathize with Nature and have no love for it because they are all 'culture'. Sita is also bound to culture but it appears poisonous to her and every moment she wants an escape from it. In a way she appears to be wavering in her desire to go back to nature leaving the cultural world of her husband and children. Her condition seems to be like as we notice in Arnold's poem "Stanzas from Grand Chartreuse":

*Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head.*

Today's urban cultural life is disintegrating as the city-dwellers are moving away from nature, losing all of their associations and connections with the natural world. Sita is much concerned about the natural objects and creatures living in such a hostile environment where there is no love for nature and where people indulge in violent acts and which is considered to be a 'civilized' world. The husband and the children of Sita are products of civilization, never understanding her world or her feelings. The incident where she tries to save the wounded eagle from the attacks of the crows of this 'civilized' world, no one sees her feelings behind this act rather, she is taken as insane by her husband and her daughter who feel ashamed of her acts. In the words of Kusumika Sarkar:

The anthropocentric ideology might describe Sita's escape to Manori, her obsession with nature and ecology as insanity, paranoia or mental persuasiveness but she has the visionary foresight to guess the horrible prospect of our world which is gradually going far from being what we call humane and dismantling itself from nature. (95-96)

Her family members neither have time for her nor any respect for her emotions. They are just like her father and her elder sister, Rekha who do not entertain any feelings for her and who are so immersed in the urban cultural values that they are no longer attached to natural things. All this made her personality crumble down and made her lose her sense of 'self'. These conditions of her life has led her to feel that this world of the cultured city of Bombay no longer belong to her neither she to this world. Regarding it Sueellen Campbell says "because our culture does not teach us that we are plain citizens of the earth, because we live apart from the natural world and deny our intimacy with it, we have lost the sense of unity that is still possible in other cultures" (135). Sita has a family to be taken care of and responsibilities to be fulfilled but even then her life seems to be meaningless to her. Why is she living in such an alien world? What

would become of her and her family in the midst of this violence and quarrel. Who is she and where does she belong to? – are the questions that strike her again and again. A similar distance between her and her family members existed before her marriage when she was living with her father on the Manori Island. But then there was “something” that hold her on and she never felt any isolation and that ‘something’ is none other than the Nature itself. But now she feels as if she has lost her identity or her sense of self. She decides to go back to Mother Nature to rediscover her identity. She thinks that the magic of the Manori island will help in resolving the condition of her present life and would transform her children into good-natured and innocent beings as she says “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 trees would shade them and protect them” (Desai 91). She goes to Manori in the search of real ‘Sita’. She has this deep faith in her heart that the only way to resolve this desperate and alienated condition of hers will be to return in the magical lap of Nature even her heart seems to request this to Nature:

*O, hide me in your gloom profound  
Ye solemn seats of holy pain  
Take me, cowl'd forms and fence me round,  
Till I possess my soul again (Arnold Stanzas)*

Nature has always helped human beings in the search of their real self. In the face of identity crisis, Nature has been the only refuge of man since times immemorial. Indian monks and saints used to go to the Himalayas when the questions of identity and existence tortured their spirit. Mahatma Buddha realized the truth of existence under a tree in the lap of Nature, away from palaces. In case of women, Nature proves to be a better guide because both woman and nature exist on a same plane. They are identical to each other in more than one ways. Both are considered to be ‘inferior’ and subordinate to man by man himself who considers himself ‘superior’ to all beings small or large, animate or inanimate. In the novel, an intimate relationship is shown between the Nature and Sita. The isolation of the city life does not pounce upon her in this natural world of the island. She feels much closeness with her children, Menaka and Karan even in the isolated house of Manori where “she never felt alone. She felt surrounded with presences – the presence of the island itself, of the sea around it, and of the palm trees that spoke to each other and, sometimes, even to her. They were so alive” (Desai 116). She likes to be in the presence of Nature and is one of those “that see the natural world as inspirited, not just people, but also animals, plants, and even “inert” entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill” (Manes 15).

While Sita (who may even be called the ‘modern Sita’) may be compared with the mythological Sita of the ancient epic *Ramayana*, her husband, Raman can be compared with Lord Rama. There is a great difference between the two Sita – the goddess Sita of the epic has a strong will power and an impressionable female identity whereas this modern Sita has no identity

of her own, no strength to exercise her will and is a docile being. However, there is some similarity in their conditions as both the women return to the lap of the Mother Nature to get love and solace after having been dejected from their homely conditions where their husbands visit to take them back. Sita, the goddess and the wife of Lord Rama refuse to go back with her husband and instead engulfs herself in the parted earth thus she completely owns and dedicates herself to the Mother Nature and becomes her true daughter, whereas this modern version of Sita is unable to adopt the wilderness of the island as her true home and she prepares to return with her husband to her cultural home away from this natural home. The natural environment of Manori helps Sita in realizing the reality of her existence. Nature has a positive impact on her psyche and removes all of her doubts, conflicts and pessimistic feelings. It is here in Manori for the first time since the twenty years of her married life that she realizes the goodness of Raman. She “felt rising in her a positive cyclone of feminine instinct” (Desai 119) – “She thought how nice he really was, how much the nicest man she knew” (137). After seeing him she forgot her own miseries and dilemmas and began to feel for his problems –

It struck her then that he had suffered during these weeks that she had been away – had suffered from worry and anxiety about her, the unborn child, Menaka and Karan, living alone on the island in this wild season. His boys at home must have worried him too, while he was at work in the factory which was not without its problems, either – he never told her of them and she never gave much thought to it but the possibility struck her now. (126-27)

For the first time, the realization dawned upon her that life exists not in an escape from it but in living it fully with an unswerving heart whatever may be the circumstances. And this made her follow the footsteps of her husband because this solitary world of the island’s natural surroundings made her to rethink her situation that can be likened with that of the sea-waves which after every ebb and flow on the shore return and recede back into the sea – the point of their origin. Nature makes her realize her fault, her madness in desiring to live in such an isolated place without her family without any facilities such as academic institutions, hospitals, electricity as well as proper housing facilities. Nature reveals to her not only her failure to connect, attach and associate herself with her family members – with her husband and children, with their likes and dislikes and her household duties but also her inability to cope with the world, with the culture around.

Thus, Nature helped the protagonist know the point where she proved weak. She realizes that “there was courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran. It took courage that was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be the superior in courage, in leadership” (Desai 127). Nature teaches her that being a woman, a mother, she has some responsibility towards her family i.e. her husband and children and that her completeness, her identity lies in discharging her duties and responsibilities wholeheartedly and not in running away from them. Thus, by connecting herself

with nature again, Sita discovers and assures her individuality and identity which helps in the formation of her identity, the sense of which she has otherwise lost.

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