

**The Theme of Quest: A Study of the Female Psyche in Anita Desai's  
*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Shashi Deshpande's**

***The Dark Holds No Terror***

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**Abstract:**

The aim of this article is to project the suffering of women as presented in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* with reference to their female psyche seeking their identity in the male dominated world. As our society gradually emerges from its cocoon of suppression into progressive permissiveness, these two women writers detail out these changes in their fictional narratives.

**Key words:** *Quest, suffering, female psyche, identity*

In the ancient India, the roles of man and woman were clearly marked. Woman was kept ignorant about political, social and economic affairs. It was the domain of man and woman learned early in the life not to encroach, "there is a tradition, perhaps not only in India, that women should not be worried, that the best way to ensure this is to keep them as far as possible in ignorance" (Sharma, 99). Woman was assigned a subordinate role as she was involved in housework, preparation of food and care of children which was regarded as unproductive labour.

The twentieth century has seen a host of female writers, in India, taking up the cause of the woman who is searching for ways to assert her selfhood in a society that is prejudiced in favour of man. By projecting the pathetic condition of their woman resulting from the conventions of traditional society, these writers are trying to emancipate their woman. They give their heroines new challenging perspectives that enable them to emerge out of their dominance into the openness of assertion. They are courageous enough to renounce the pattern of female expression set by age-old patriarchal codes of behaviour.

From the formidable array of Indian women writers Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are chosen for study because of their contemporariness, the similarity of their sensibility and the missionary zeal with which they expose the disgrace heaped on women. The chosen writers for study are women, writing about women and they question the assumption that marriage is the ultimate goal of the woman and reveal how it leaves them badly mauled and terribly frustrated.

The authors possess a special sensibility to record the undulations of the female psyche, in critical familial situations, especially in husband-wife relationships. Their female protagonists are tolerant and submissive but do not seem to be ready to compromise their identity and individuality. They suffer from intense isolation because they cannot reconcile to the demands of their psyche with those of the world around them. They view this world as a hostile place and often take a negative stance, which generates psychic states of fear, guilt, anger, bitterness, anxiety, helplessness and depression. These women writers question the need to accept the man-made image of the woman.

This article studies *Women's Quest for Self: A Study of the Female Psyche* in the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Their novels deal with the Indian middle class woman's suffering, frustrations, social agitations and their stillness as a means of communication. Their novels are portraying the suffering of women. Their heroines are occupied with the difficulties of fulfilment and self-definition in a man's world, the conflicting claims of self-hood, wife-hood and mother-hood.

They focus primarily on the psychological exploration of inner mind of Indian women in Indian novels in English. These writers being women penetrate deep into the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psychological and emotional imbalances in a male dominated society. These novelists started transforming their own experiences as women as well as their femininity into literary expression.

Gradually this shift is expressed by the quest for identity. This quest for identity leads to self-exploration which pervades in the selected novels of these writers. This quest enables a woman to be away from the mythological and constraining stereotypes. Since the two selected novelists are women, their women protagonists occupying centre-stage in their novels, their feministic outlook is bound to surface. As their roles are traditionally associated with women, the thoughts of these women characters are sure to crop up in their struggle for their identity.

The quest for identity is an often recurring theme in the fiction of the three writers dealt with: Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. This quest for identity is manifested in the different women characters in their rebellion against Indian tradition and conventions, their attempts in asserting their individualities, their efforts to develop a whole and harmonious self, at both emotional and intellectual levels and thus experience real peace and happiness in their lives.

Anita Desai is specially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of the female characters. Several of Desai's novels explore tensions among family members and the alienation of middle-class women. She explores the intricate facts of human experience bearing upon the central experience of psychic tensions of characters. Her chief concern is human relationship.

Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which she projects through incompatible couples – very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands.

Desai deals with thoughts, emotions and feelings and not so much with action because she voices the mute miseries and the helplessness of millions of married women through the stream of consciousness technique. She explores the emotional world of women, aware of the deeper forces at work, with a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology (M. Prasad, 139). Desai is interested in the motivation and the psychic turmoil of her characters.

Throughout the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Desai makes an attempt to go deeper into the extraordinary inner life of its protagonist, Sita. Part one of the novel deals with the present and immediate past of Sita's life. She, living in her flat, feels bored as members of her family follow their own ways of life. She is a daughter of a political celebrity. As her father was mostly in jail and she has no mother to look after her and she is denied the regular life of a normal child.

Sita lives in the island sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of her brother Jivan with clay and mud. With the passage of time, she finds her father turning an authentic legend on the island and its people respect him for his miracles. After the death of her father, Sita is taken to Bombay by Raman, her husband and the son of her father's old friend Deedar. She leaves Manori with relief, "longing for the same, the routine-ridden mainland as for a rest Sanatorium." (72) Raman later marries her drawn by her beauty.

Eventhough she has four children from him "with pride, pleasure—sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure—with all the placid serenity and supposedly goes with pregnancy and partition." (20) She remains restless and dissatisfied with her settled and dull domestic life. When she conceives for the fifth time in her forties, she is haunted by a new idea of not giving birth to the child.

In order to keep the baby unborn, she desires to take refuge in Manori, the island of miracles. Ultimately she takes her daughter Menaka and younger son Karan with her. Sita begins to enjoy the peaceful life in the island but Menaka and Karan get bored with it. Menaka sends a message to her father secretly to take them to Bombay for her Medical College admission. Sita does not want to go back and it would be hard for her to make compromises with her husband. She feels betrayed by all and ultimately compromises with the terms of life and accompanies her husband to Bombay.

Sita is a young sensitive and emotional middle aged woman, who has four children. She feels isolated from her husband and her children and becomes the victim of mental agonies because of her psychological contrast between the past and the present. She thinks of her past childhood,

free from all the tension and makes a contrast between her childhood and her present womanhood in which she is thrown to an environment of tension and shadows.

Sita craves to be hugged and loved by Raman. Seeing a couple in the Hanging Garden, loving each other free from all worldly feelings, her heart begins to weep and she utters, “Children only mean anxiety, concern—pessimism. Not happiness. What other woman call happiness is just—just sentimentality.” (147) Anita Desai remarkably voices – “the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assault of existence through a recurrent, favourite existentialist theme of husband wife alienation and non-communication that lays bare the agonised modern sensibility of an Indian woman.” (Prasad, 64)

Sita is unable to bear the violence around her—the quarrels of the servants and the fight amongst the children. She finds it difficult to adjust herself in her husband’s family and has longed for the sensitive approach from others. She hates not only the violence around her but violence in the world at large:

They all hammered at her with cruel fists - the fallen flocks, the torn water colours, the headlines about the war in Vietnam, the photographs of women weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan....they were hand grenades all, hurled at her frail gold fish-bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it...” (Jasbir Jain, 35-36)

Sita is not happy with her indifferent-husband. There is lack of harmony in her life. Like Gautama, Raman also keeps himself busy and indifferent to his wife. She finds her very existence threatened because of her husband’s indifference and children growing independent. Raman fails to understand her boredom:

She herself looking on it, saw it stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep, that in fright scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead. (33-34)

This married life presents before her more tensions. This is the reason why she wants to run away from her husband. Sita is unable to make her existence possible in the ground of patriarchy which binds her to her family. She feels all her life she has submitted her self-reliance and freedom. She possesses an inner fury which makes us think about the problem of life. Desai raises this problem in this novel through Sita, and writes:

On the boredom and loneliness experienced by married women when they feel ignored and unwanted. It is a crucial period when one feels a dilemma of

existence. The children grow up and become independent while husbands are increasingly busy with their routine. (112)

Sita's escape to Manori seems to be a flight from the constraints of traditional womanhood. She is confident that the traditional family infantilizes women. "She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror—it was so bright so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of childhood. It took her sometime to notice that this magic too, cast shadows". (63)

Sita suffers from father fixation as there is no mother in the offspring. But her awareness transforms her and she becomes indecisive as what to do. So she escapes to Manori. Her father fixation ends when she realises that her father was also responsible for her mother deserting them. So "she had to struggle to free herself from the chain or she might have spent her life in cold meshes, regarding the enigma of her father, slave to his undefined magic". (87-88) Her decision to free herself shows her emerging new image.

But Sita's battle with Raman becomes more intense when she becomes pregnant for the fifth time. Raman scolds Sita's escape to Manori. He feels that a woman's happiness is in the house of her husband. He is shocked when she tells him that the only happy moment in her life was when she saw a man and woman in a very intimate way, in the Hanging Gardens. He feels angry and ashamed of their relationship. He desperately tells

that any woman — any woman one would think you inhuman. You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always in my house. You've not had worries. Yet your happiness memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even of your own children. (147)

This outrage to some extent reveals the psychological abuse of a wife in the marital framework. The lack of sympathy generates struggle between Raman and Sita. When Raman comes to the island she thought he has come for her but he is there for Menaka's admission to Medical College. He keeps a distance from her. Raman towards the end realises his mistakes and is ready to change. He says in the end with a lot of empathy: "It wouldn't be bad to give up the factory and come to live here. Do some farming. I'd like that."(151)

Thus the battle between Sita and Raman is resolved. Sita feels emotionally drained out battling against her husband, her family. She desires to bear the child and returns with Raman to the mainland, signifies her return to life, community and society. Sita tries to achieve harmony in life but against the traditional manner, by her own new way. Her new sense of self-awareness empowers her with an understanding of her position in the family. When she resolves her inner conflicts, she is able to conquer the fear that alienates her from the society.

Desai too very emphatically points to the fact that women make unpleasant compromises for the sake of family. Sita powerfully lashes against Raman her husband thus, "Very hard — this

making of compromises when one didn't want to compromise..." (148) Desai challenges these compromises women have to make for the sake of the powerful patriarchal system.

A common trait in Anita Desai's all major women characters is their longing to be free from all kinds of social and familial involvement. Desai's women characters face a dilemma nurtured by marital disharmony. Desai's achievement lies in exploring the psyche of her characters. She plunges deep into the inner life of Indian women. It is the intimate world of the female self that is revealed in the majority of her novels. But this intimacy does not reject the exterior world.

Like Anita Desai's, Shashi Deshpande's novels also are exploration into the female psyche. She traces the woman's quest for life, the search for her place in the complex reality of life. Her women are tolerant, obedient and submissive to the breaking point. But unlike some of the characters of Desai, her women do not fall into the helpless mire of neurosis but, rather, salvage a new vision of life from their near-crippling problems. All her protagonists like Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmi and Sumi are determined and committed to oppose oppression and represent the new collective voice of the dynamic young women who are not ready to lead circumscribed lives and are precursors of the new woman who has learned to fend for herself.

*The Dark Holds No Terror* projects the dilemma of a woman who resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity. The novel begins with the returning of Sarita after fifteen years to her father's house, a place she had once sworn never to return to unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. The stay in her father's house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with the husband. Though she remains unchanged till the end, she has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives her the courage to confront reality. Sarita is highly self-willed and her problems ensue because of the outsized ego and inborn over for power on others. She defies traditional codes at the slightest threat to her importance and that is what she missed and craved for in her mother's house. Even in her childhood Sarita had realized that economy alone could be an insurance against subordination.

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Deshpande reveals the predicament of a real career woman, Sarita, a doctor by profession. She has to revolt against her mother who strongly supported Indian tradition. Her mother's preference to her younger brother makes it impossible for Saru to understand her younger brother. When he is drowned to death accidentally, Sarita is hurt by her mother's words: "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?"(191) Saru has to bear the guilty conscience throughout her life. So she hates her mother.

As a sign of rebellion, She takes up medicine as her career. She also falls in love with and gets married to a man her mother objects. She does not go back to her parental home till her mother's death. She wants to escape from the mother, an embodiment of authority and domination. But after marriage, she again finds the same domination of her husband, Manohar. He is less

successful in career than her. So he suffers from inferiority complex. He starts behaving sadistically towards her at night. Though he acts quite normal during day time, She hesitates to discuss things with him. She prefers to suffer the humiliation silently.

Thus in Sarita's character, Shashi Deshpande presents the dilemma of a successful career woman who suffers the pull of modernity as against the traditional attitude of an ideal wife who has to cope with her marital discomforts to the best of her ability. Saru is a so called 'liberated woman' only in name but she is a silent humiliated wife inwardly. She cannot break away from the constraints of her marriage when she thinks of the sufferings of her children.

Saru takes refuge in her parental home where her mother is no more to question her. She realises the fact that in India there is a limit for a married woman with a career can hope to be liberated. Even educated men are against it. When analysing Sarabjit Sandhu's Novels of Shashi Deshpande makes a relevant comment:

The ideal man-woman relationship in the Indian context (as the dominant man and submissive woman) is so prominent that even the most brilliant and so called forward male is incapable of looking at woman in terms of equality. (14)

This duality in relationship accounts for even a educated married career woman compromising her ideals to submit to the traditionally accepted submissive roles for survival and for keeping peace at home. Sarita feels:

No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour god help you, both of you. And so you must pretend that you're not as rational as you are, and not as strong either. You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong. That's a wrong which will never be forgiven.

Don't struggle, don't swim against the tide. Go along with it...(137)

Sarita has lost faith in words which urge women to be independent and have an identity of their own. From her own experience, she realises that men cannot tolerate women who aspire to be successful individuals. After much introspection, she identifies the fear within herself. If she has the courage to emerge out of her cultivated conventional attitude, she would be able to face life boldly. Finally she takes real pride in being a doctor again which she had been formerly enjoying with a guilty conscience. Her self-awareness as a person with an identity of her own becomes the light of knowledge for her that drives out the ignorance within her.

Shashi Deshpande's heroine never thinks of divorce at all. Sarita does not decide to walk away from the marriage. Instead, she has decided to solve her marital problems and make her husband realise that she has to be treated equal. Deshpande women are not as bold or as assertive as Anita's characters. Her heroines represent the struggling middle class who cling on to their moral values to the utmost.

An analysis of the women characters of Shashi Deshpande reveals the presence of a definite quest for a true self identity. Shashi Deshpande's woman-centred novels and short stories give us a psychological insight into the working of a woman's mind; specially one belonging to a typically Indian background. The years of societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian woman to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to man, suffering of a patriarchal society in silence. Shashi Deshpande, by making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals than what their biological nature or culture have sanctioned.

These women strive heroically to overcome their cultural conditioning and the barriers created by society in matters of tradition and manners. They finally emerge as free, autonomous individuals, no longer content to be led, but desirous of taking a lead. In the Indian context, an ideal of self-hood in a woman requires to take into consideration the institution of marriage, wifehood and motherhood. Formerly these were the only identities women had. Even woman who wanted an identity of their own, were required to fulfill these three stages in life. In the present day also, women seek an identity of their own mostly within the family circle, without unduly disturbing the status-quo of the Indian family set up. This working-out of their individuality is seen in Shashi Deshpande heroines. Women are seen to function as individuals within the familial background.

An attempt has been made here to identify and compare the major feminist thoughts embedded in the selected novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. In order to live as dignified human beings and liberated women, women have to fight against many powerful agencies of patriarchal society. Therefore feminist writers consider it their main duty and responsibility to provide women readers with ideological weapons to fight against all these sexist forces and enable them to lead a life of dignity and equality. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are two such eminent novelists who are acutely conscious of and sensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of their fellow female human beings. They raise their voice against female oppression and spell out the problems of women with such clear conviction through their characters that the reader should pause and ponder over it.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary, woman writers in India, writing in English. Her novels raise important issues including: a woman's quest for self; an investigation into the female psyche; an understanding of the mysteries of life; a woman's encounter with the

difficulties in the contemporary Indian society. The women in her novels are interrogating and defining their identities as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and above all as human beings.

Deshpande's women characters have strength of their own, and inspite of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. Most of her novels present a typical, middle-class housewife's life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself to create space for oneself or for one's own. Her imaginative flashes and the role played by memory in her novels. She presents a conceivable story of authentic characters and not shadowy abstractions. She believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. For her portrayal of the predicament of middle-class Indian women, their inner conflict and quest for identity, issues pertaining to present child relationship, marriage and sex, and their exploration and disillusionment.

Deshpande does not believe in offering ready-made solutions. Her protagonists finally try their best to conform to their roles and the novels end with an optimistic not with the possibility of some positive actions in future. For this the basic reality of Indian society and the place of women in it in a sensitive and authentic manner her novels are immense value. The new women have developed different attitudes towards this aspect of life. These attitudes sometimes reject the tradition and sometime rebel against them.

Her protagonists are strong. They refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role models laid down by society for women. But they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal. They display a tangible development during the course of the novel. They go through a process of self-examination before they reach self-actualization.

Thus, Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face life with great courage and strength. Comparatively, they appear to be more life-like and more akin to the educated, middle-class, urban Indian woman of today. The novelist's greatness lies in the fact that her women characters seek and find harmony within the traditional social setup.

The prime concern of both the authors is the married woman and her circumscribed world where she has a very precarious existence. The lure of security in marriage and the consequent confinement within a self-enclosed world have degenerated women into emotional beggars. While Desai presents characters like Maya, Sita and Nanda who quite passively accept their dependent, inferior status in marriage, being unable to find support from within themselves or from other broader interests, and cling on shamelessly to their husbands, pathetically grateful for the random moments of companionship. Deshpande gives women like Saru, Indu, Jaya, Urmi and Sumi who are pitted against incompatible husbands but possess an undaunted spirit to demand their chunk of flesh.

In analyzing the predicament of the married woman both Desai and Deshpande trace the causes to their very childhood experiences and seem to suggest, like Bala Kothandaraman, that the “child is mother of the woman”(38). Though they do not have many child protagonists, they look very seriously into their mature women protagonists and analyse their childhood experiences in the backdrop of their present status in life.

The stress they give to the childhood of their characters reveals their conviction that all of them carry the legacy of their disturbed childhoods into their married lives and also seems to suggest the need to impart due care and support to girl children in order to have a healthy society.

This discrimination in the society injures the psyche of the girl child and impairs her growth leaving variously a sense of guilt, rejection or an unrecognized repulsion for men as seen in the cases of Sita and Saru. The rejection of Sita by her too busy magician father who doted on his elder daughter, Rekha, instilled in her a fear of rejection by Raman, though she fought it by reacting violently to every unpleasant situation. The discrimination shown by her mother towards Saru and her constant accusation developed in her a sense of guilt that stood in the way of happy communication between Saru and Manu.

While exposing this wilful discrimination towards the girl children, Desai and Deshpande show them to be vulnerable in other ways also. Love is the only basic requirement of children and often they are deprived of it due to various familial circumstances of which broken family relationships is the foremost. It is the family that has to provide children with space and opportunity to grow and develop into healthy adults and hence damaging home conditions always exert a paralyzing effect on children. Among them, girls are seen to be more sensitive than male children, to parental love and especially mother’s love, since they themselves are to become mothers later on in life.

The individual’s quest for identity in this distracting world is the central theme of Desai’s and Deshpande’s novels. It is self-analysis and self-probes into the existential problems of a woman. The traditional Indian society gives little scope for the independent growth of a woman. She has to undergo a number of restrictions and inhibitions, originating from her terribly controlled life during her childhood, youth and old age.

The search for self enables them to throw away the rotten customs and rituals and to instil a sense of dignity and self-respect in their lives. It would be worthwhile to examine how far Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have thrashed women’s problems and situations in a fast-changing social scenario. They deal with the middle class Indian woman who represents the overwhelming majority of Indian women and is struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. They have analyzed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and role towards themselves and the society. Their chief

contribution consists of their exploring moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges. They evolve the threads of their plots from the restlessness and tension of a married couple. They build it up step by step until the climax is reached and the realization occurs in the self-seeking woman.

This article finally concludes that these women's inner urge to be recognized as human beings in this male dominated society. They are highly conscious about their identity. They don't want to be happy with mere a wife and a mother. The present article is a modest effort to explore the similarities and dissimilarities from the point of woman character's search for identity in the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.

The study shows the point of view of these novelists on the condition of woman in the male chauvinistic world. It focuses on the situation and experiences of the modern, urban, middle class Indian women, which are filtered through the hopes, fears and uncertainties of an urban, middle class consciousness. The woman suffers, but she also endures the emotional world, which is consequent upon being the kind of person she is. The novels of both the novelists mirror the different faces of feminine treatment.

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