

# Trauma and Transcendence: A Study of Sita's Emotional Resistance to Modern Life in Anita Desai's *Where Shall we go this Summer?*

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## Abstract

This essay critically examines the emotional trauma and psychological resistance of Sita, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, through psychoanalytic and feminist literary perspectives. The novel, set in post-independence India, traces Sita's profound sense of alienation within a patriarchal society, an emotionally unfulfilling marriage, and the burden of motherhood. Through qualitative textual analysis, this paper explores how Sita's inner conflicts are shaped by modern urban life and how her fifth pregnancy symbolizing an existential crisis and emotional rebellion. Her retreat to the remote Manori Island is interpreted not simply as an escape but as a metaphorical return to the self—a space of introspection, confrontation, and healing. The study argues that Desai does not depict trauma as a moment of collapse but as an enduring psychological struggle rooted in neglect, disillusionment, and loss of identity. The research indicates that Sita's transcendence is achieved through the acceptance of life's contradictions, uncertainties, and emotional depth. The novel suggests that healing comes not from societal validation, but through silent resistance, emotional honesty, and embracing pain as part of the self. This analysis contributes to feminist discourse by emphasizing the quiet strength of internal transformation.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Trauma, Psychological Journey, Transcendence, Feminist Perspectives

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* using psychoanalytic and feminist literary frameworks. Drawing on theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Julia Kristeva, and Simon de Beauvoir, the paper explores Sita's psychological trauma and emotional resistance to patriarchal norms. Key passages from the novel are closely analyzed to reveal how trauma, silence, and alienation function as forms of inner rebellion and gradual transcendence.

## Literature Review

Anita Desai's works have been widely studied for their deep psychological insight and exploration of feminine consciousness. Scholars such as **R.K. Dhawan** and **K.K. Sharma** emphasized Desai's focus on inner emotional landscapes rather than external social dynamics. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* has drawn attention for its portrayal of a woman caught between tradition and modernity.

**Jasbir Jain** and **Sunita Sinha** have discussed Desai's women characters as emotionally complex figures who seek meaning in a world shaped by patriarchy. **R.S. Pathak** interprets Desai's protagonists as symbolic representations of modern Indian women who grapple with alienation. Feminist critics like **Simone de Beauvoir** and **Luce Irigaray** provide theoretical grounding to analyze how Sita's identity is shaped and limited by societal expectations.

In the context of trauma theory, **Cathy Caruth** and **Judith Herman** offer critical tools to understand Sita's psychological suffering as a prolonged, silent experience rather than a single traumatic event. These perspectives help situate Sita's resistance within the broader discourse on women's mental health and emotional autonomy. This review of existing scholarship forms the foundation for analyzing how Desai weaves trauma and transcendence into Sita's journey, offering a nuanced portrait of emotional resistance in postcolonial India.

Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a powerful psychological novel that explores the emotional turmoil of a middle aged women named Sita. Desai is one of the most respected voices in Indian English literature, known for her deep exploration of human psychology, particularly from a feminine perspective. Her work delves into the internal struggles and emotional landscapes of her characters. She frequently portrays women who feels displaced in society and wrestle with unspoken tensions within their families and environment. This novel, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* is set in post-independence India, Sita, who feel alienated and suffocated by the noise, violence, and emptiness of modern urban life decides to retreat to Manori Island. Sita is tired of the crowded, chaotic city of Bombay so she decides to leave Manori's quiet and mysterious island in search of peace.

Sita's father is a well-known freedom fighter, he spends much of his life in prison for political reasons and Sita's mother is not there to care for her, she grows up without a stable childhood. As she has to move from place to place, without any regular schooling or proper parenting, her early life is unusual and unsettled. Since her father is rarely around her to guide her, she feels that she belongs to society as a whole rather than to one particular

family. As Judith Herman observes, "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force" (Herman 33).

After Indian independence, her father decided to settle on a small island called Manori. Manori Island is portrayed as a quiet, isolated, and almost mystical place that stands in contrast to the city's noise, violence, and emotional chaos. Sita shares a strong childhood memories with the Manori Island as she spent a lot of time with her father. She grows up with her siblings, Jeevan and Rekha.

Sita's husband, Raman, is a businessman who is well-connected and successful in his profession. He is deeply involved in his work and has little time to connect with his family. He considers his work to be more meaningful than his personal relationships and expects Sita to accept his way without any question. Although Raman is not aggressive or argumentative by nature, he is a perfectionist with fixed moral principles. His personality and lifestyle were completely different from those of Sita. Raman consistently neglects Sita's emotional needs, whose logical and career-focused personality fails to resonate with her inner world. This emotional detachment reflects what Simone de Beauvoir critiques: "The woman is always the other, defined by and relative to man, never as autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 26).

These contrasting temperaments cause frequent disagreements, even in small areas. This emotional gap between them leads to lack of harmony in their marriage. Sita finds her life with Raman dull, repetitive, and emotionally empty. She expects Raman to be loving, expressive, and someone who makes her feel valued and cherished. However Raman did not respond to her emotional needs and her dream of warm relationship remained unfulfilled.

Sita, already a mother of four, was overwhelmed by the weight of her responsibilities and the emotional emptiness of her married life. Sita's fifth pregnancy is not merely a physical condition but a central symbol of her emotional and psychological crisis. Cathy Caruth writes, "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its insistent return" (Caruth 4). Unlike her earlier experience with motherhood, this pregnancy brings her no joy or anticipation. Instead

it filled her with dread, confusion, and resistance. As **Nancy Chodorow** argues, the process of mothering is socially constructed and often reinforces gendered expectations, placing disproportionate emotional and physical burdens on women (Chodorow 1978). Sita's rejection of her fifth pregnancy may thus be viewed as a refusal to conform to these inherited roles.

The modern urban lifestyle she inhabits, which is marked by violence, detachment, and routine that deepens her fear that the child will be born into suffering. This makes her unable to accept the idea of bringing a child into a world that feels hostile and soulless.

This pregnancy becomes a point of intense internal conflict with her. This conflict gave her a deeper emotional and existential rejection of the world around her. The pressure of daily life, the emptiness of relationships, and a sense of being lost in a fast-moving world often push a woman inward, into a space of silent reflection. Sometimes, that reflection can lead to choices that may seem unusual to Sita, such as the desire to escape, to pause life, or to protect herself and her child from a world she no longer trusts. When a woman finds herself unable to fit into the rigid roles that society expects from her, often, she is not tries to abandon life, but trying to find a life that feels true and whole to her. Sita's inner world is rich in confusion, longing, and a deep yearning for peace and authenticity. Her fifth pregnancy becomes a symbol of this tension, a moment where all her suppressed fears and hopes to rise to the surface. This causes Sita to experience emotional neglect, a form of trauma in which an individual's emotional needs are consistently unmet.

The pressure of the urban life, her restrained relationship with her husband Raman her sense of isolation and has begun to weigh heavily on her. Desai writes "She had had four children with pride, with pleasure- sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition." (Desai 32) The use of the word *Freudian* shows that Sita has a deeper unconscious motivations and psychological complexities from her past acceptance of motherhood. According to **Freud**, repressed fears and unresolved emotional conflicts often resurface through symbolic acts or irrational behavior, suggesting that Sita's resistance to her fifth

pregnancy reflects deep-rooted anxieties tied to her early emotional deprivation (Freud 1977). Sita feels something within her has snaps or evolves. Hence she no longer finds joy in her motherhood and it feels like a burden or even a threat to her.

Desai writes about Sita's control, "Control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold, without his noticing it, over the years, till now she had no more than an infant has, before he has begun the process of acquiring it..." (Desai 32) Here Sita's state is compared to an infant, lacking any control, which underscores her regression and breakdown. Her emotional control "has slipped out her hold"(Desai 32). This line reflects not only her personal crisis but also tells about the societal expectation that women should remain composed when they are aged.

When Sita confronted about her opinion of not giving birth to her fifth child, his reaction was marked by distaste and confusion. He expected her to be the same women who once found joy in motherhood. There is no acknowledgement of her internal suffering; rather, he views her behavior as irrational. This emphasizes isolation Sita experiences even with her her marriage. Sita says "' I'm not pleased, I'm frightened,' she hissed through her teeth. '*Frightened.*' "(Desai 32) This clearly shows that Sita's fear is not just of childbirth, nut of what it represents like entrapment, loss of identity, physical vulnerability and perhaps a life she no longer wants. She says, "' It's not easier. It's harder-harder. It's unbearable,' she wept." (Desai 32) The repetition of "harder-harder. It's unbearable" reveals the deep psychological trauma and exhaustion. This moment captures a turning point in Sita's psyche as a rebellion against the roles she played in her life.

Sita's emotional breakdown is not simply a moment of hysteria; it is the accumulated outcome of long-term emotional trauma. Her trauma is deeply rooted in the repetitive, unacknowledged experiences of emotional neglect, bodily strain, and societal expectations, all of which have slowly eroded her sense of self over time. Throughout her life, she has subjected to the physical demands of motherhood such as pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing, not as a personal fulfillment, but as duties imposed upon her by traditional domestic structure.

Initially she appears to accept these roles with pride and passive contentment, but as time progresses, the emotional cost becomes increasingly apparent. By the time of her fifth pregnancy, Sita's emotional and psychological toll had reached a breaking point. No longer able to suppress her feelings, Sita reacts with fear, rage, and desperation. This reveals the cumulative weight of her internal suffering.

On the other hand, her husband, instead of offering empathy, responded with confusion revealing the emotional void in their relationship and the broader patriarchal disregard for a woman's mental health and well-being. The trauma experienced by Sita is not caused by a singular moment of grief, but rather by a prolonged condition of being unheard, unseen, and emotionally invalidated. Her body feels like a battleground, showing how little control she has over her own life, while her mind slowly breaks down because of the pressure to fit into society's expectations. In this way Anita Desai presents her Trauma as a silent, enduring force that gradually diminishes Sita's identity, pushing her towards desperate need for escape and transcendence.

Anita Desai explored the collapse of human relationships, in search of individual meaning, and the burden of isolation. Her concern for the unborn child's future is not just maternal but existential. Raman's inability to understand her revelation underscores their emotional gap, a gap rooted in fundamentally different understandings of life and fulfillment. When Sita opens up honestly, she says that the only time she truly felt happy was when she saw a moment of kindness and love between two strangers, Raman reacts with shock exclaiming, "And that was the only happy moment of your life?" (Desai 149) Raman finds it hard to believe because he thinks happiness should come from having a family, a home, and a good life.

He feels safe and happy through these things and believes that comfort and success means emotional happiness too. This is evident when Raman says, "You have four children. You have lived, comfortably, always, in my house," (Desai 150) attempting to remind Sita of the tangible securities he believes he has provided. For Raman comfort and duty are enough, but for Sita, they feel like prison that traps her. Through this painful exchange, Desai

powerfully captures the miscommunication between two people who, live in emotionally distant worlds, though bound by marriage.

Silence becomes Sita's form of resistance to a life which negates her voice. Hélène Cixous affirms, "Silence, far from being passive, can be an active and strategic form of resistance" (Cixous 881). Sita prepares to leave the island, and experiences a profound emotional shifts. She feels like an actress who, at the end of a performance, must clear the stage and pack away the costumes, signaling the end of an act. In line with **Gilbert and Gubar's** idea of the "madwoman" as a symbol of female resistance, Sita's emotional volatility and withdrawal from domestic expectations may be read as a subversive critique of patriarchal control over women's identities (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). As Sita's emotional world spirals, she experiences a profound psychological breakdown. Julia Kristeva contends, "The speaking subject is shattered at the site of trauma. The symbolic order collapses and identity becomes fragmented" (Kristeva 15). The island, which she once imagined would offer her a space of pure, primitive reality, now seems like another stage where she had merely played a different role. Sita is in a deep confusion that she cannot clearly distinguish which part her life was genuine and which was an illusion. Raman's response to Sita's emotional crisis is one of confusion and dismissal, revealing the patriarchal gap in understanding women's inner lives. Luce Irigaray observes, "The male subject often demands a logic and coherence that female experience, rooted in bodily memory and emotion, resists" (Irigaray 47). Sita feels stuck between two lives, the busy, traditional life with her family and the lonely but more honest life she found on the island.

Amid this confusion, a subtle but powerful transformation occurs within her. Sita began to accept that life cannot be easily categorized into neat, separate phases of joy and sorrow, reality and illusion. Despite feeling emotionally disoriented, tired, whirling, and overwhelmed, she recognizes that life is an ongoing, chaotic blend of pain, fleeting happiness, confusion, and loneliness. This realization marks the beginning of Sita's transcendence. She no longer seeks a perfect space or a pure life. Instead,

she acknowledges the complexity of existence, where clarity is rare, and where emotional chaos must be lived with rather than conquered.

This phase of Sita entering into transcendence is not dramatic or loud; it happens silently within her, as she prepares to re-enter the life she had tried to escape. She moves beyond conventional ideas of happiness, family duty, and societal roles, instead choosing an inner truth that accepts uncertainty and imperfections. Her transcendence is not about escaping sadness, but about understanding it and living with it, with a quiet strength inside her.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai paints a deeply moving portrait of a woman caught between two conflicting worlds — one of noisy societal expectations and the other of silent, inner truth. Through Sita's emotional journey, the novel shows how trauma, alienation, and disillusionment shaped her resistance to the demands of modern life. Her retreat to Manori Island, far from being an escape, becomes a space for self-reflection where she confronts her fears, confusion, and longing for purity. Though the island does not offer the clarity she seeks, it leads her towards an important realization: that life is messy, full of pain, and cannot be divided into simple stages of happiness or sorrow. True transcendence for Sita lies not in fleeing reality but in accepting its complexity with quiet strength. By confronting her own fragmented self, Sita stepped toward a deeper understanding of existence. She accepted that loneliness, confusion, and emotional pain are inseparable from human life. By the end of her journey, Sita emerges not as someone who has escaped suffering, but as someone who has found the courage to live with it, embodying a subtle but profound form of healing and self-acceptance.

Through Sita's journey, Desai portrays healing not as the removal of trauma, but as the ability to carry it with strength and grace. Thus, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is not merely a story of escape, but a powerful exploration of inner resistance, psychological resilience, and the painful beauty of self-realization in a fractured world.

### Suggestions for Further Research

Future research could examine the emotional trajectories of other female protagonists in Desai's

fiction, such as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* or Monisha in *Voices in the City*, to identify recurring themes of psychological isolation and resistance. Comparative studies of Desai's novels may reveal patterns of internal rebellion against traditional gender roles. Scholars might also explore how Desai's settings—like the island of Manori—function as symbolic landscapes of emotional introspection, particularly through an eco-feminist lens. Interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with psychology and gender studies could offer richer insights into the complex inner lives of Desai's female characters.

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