

Escaping the Domestic Self: Female Identity and Resistance in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

T. Narayana

Lecturer in English

Government Degree College (Autonomous)

Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract: Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* focuses on the psychological growth of a woman who tries to free herself from the duties of home. She wants to build new sides of her own personality. The protagonist, Sita, leaves her family and goes to the island of Manori. This paper studies Sita as a female literary hero who faces the pressures of marriage and motherhood. She responds by withdrawing from her domestic life to avoid these social traps. The paper's critical analysis is based on the theoretical ideas of Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan. Special attention is given to the home as a place of female oppression, and to the possibility of rising above it. The paper argues that in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Desai shows a heroine who is not as free as she appears after leaving home. This is because her subconscious mind is still ruled by old habits and by her desire for motherhood. By studying the imagery and metaphors used by Desai, the paper reveals a different idea of the domesticated woman. The paper also places Desai's work within the tradition of Indian English women's writing. It shows how far the freedom Sita chooses is not fully liberating, and may even be without real meaning.

Keywords: female identity, domestic space, resistance, Simone de Beauvoir, motherhood.

Introduction

Anita Desai is one of the most important voices in Indian English fiction. Her novels look deeply into the minds of her characters, especially women. She writes about their inner thoughts,



fears, and struggles rather than only their outer actions. Her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) is a good example of this style. The novel tells the story of Sita, a middle-aged woman who feels trapped by her role as a wife and mother. Sita is unhappy with her daily life in Bombay. She feels that her identity has been lost inside her duties as a housewife. When she becomes pregnant again, she decides to leave her home and go to the island of Manori. She had visited this island as a child with her father, who was seen by many as a miracle man. Sita hopes that returning to Manori will help her escape from the pressures of her domestic life and give her a new sense of self.

This paper studies Sita's journey to Manori as an act of resistance against the traditional roles expected of Indian women. The paper uses feminist ideas from thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan to understand Sita's inner struggle. The paper argues that although Sita tries to escape her domestic identity, she is not able to break away from it completely. Her mind is still shaped by old habits, memories, and her deep instinct toward motherhood. This shows that resistance to domestic life is not simple. It is often incomplete and full of conflict. This paper also places Desai's work in the wider tradition of Indian women's writing in English. It shows how Desai gives voice to the inner life of women in a way that was new for her time. Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* shares many themes with her other novels. But it also stands apart in certain ways.

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Desai's first novel, the protagonist Maya also suffers from deep inner anxiety. Like Sita, Maya feels disconnected from her husband. Both women struggle with a fear of death and a longing for meaning. However, Maya's suffering ends in tragedy, while Sita's story ends with her return to normal family life. This shows that Desai's early work presents female suffering as more extreme and final, while *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* offers a quieter, more uncertain ending.

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), the character Nanda Kaul also seeks isolation, much like Sita. Nanda withdraws to a house in the hills to escape her past duties as a wife and mother. Like Sita's escape to Manori, Nanda's withdrawal is also shown as incomplete. Her past continues to intrude on her peace, just as Sita's role as a mother continues to shape her thoughts on the island.



In *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Desai shifts her focus slightly. The novel looks at family memory and sibling relationships, especially through the character Bim. Like Sita, Bim also feels burdened by duty. But unlike Sita, Bim finds a stronger sense of peace by the end of the novel, through reflection rather than physical escape.

Overall, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* fits within Desai's larger pattern of writing about women who feel trapped by domestic roles. But it is unique in showing escape as a physical act, not just an emotional or mental one. This makes Sita's story a useful case study for understanding how Desai's female characters try, and often fail, to fully break away from their domestic identities.

Literature Review

Many scholars have studied Anita Desai's novels, especially her focus on the inner lives of women. Critics often note that Desai does not write much about outer events. Instead, she looks closely at the thoughts and feelings inside her characters' minds. This makes her work different from many other Indian English novelists of her time, who wrote more about society and politics.

Several studies have looked at *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* as a story about a woman's search for identity. Some critics see Sita's move to Manori as an act of rebellion against her role as a wife and mother. Other critics argue that her escape is not truly successful. They point out that Sita cannot fully leave behind her domestic identity, even when she is physically away from her family. This shows that her resistance is limited and complex.

Feminist critics have used the novel to study the position of women in Indian society. Some scholars connect Desai's work to global feminist ideas, such as those of Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote about women being treated as the "Other" in a male-centered world. Betty Friedan's idea of the "problem with no name" is also useful here. This idea describes the quiet unhappiness many housewives feel, even when their lives seem comfortable on the outside. These ideas help explain Sita's inner conflict in the novel.

Other studies have focused on Desai's writing style. Critics often point out her use of symbols, such as the island, the sea, and the house, to show the inner state of her characters.



These symbols help readers understand Sita's mental struggle without the need for direct explanation.

The past studies show that *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a rich text for feminist and psychological analysis. However, more work can be done to closely study how Sita's resistance to domestic life is shown as incomplete and shaped by her own mind, rather than only by outside forces. This paper aims to fill that gap.

Research Gap

Many studies have looked at *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* through feminist and psychological lenses. Most of these studies focus on Sita's escape to Manori as a simple act of rebellion against her domestic role. However, fewer studies look closely at how this escape is incomplete. Not many papers study how Sita's own mind, shaped by habit and memory, pulls her back toward the domestic role she tries to leave. This paper aims to fill this gap by studying resistance not as a clean break, but as an inner conflict shaped by the woman's own subconscious desires.

Objectives

1. To study how Anita Desai presents the home as a place of both comfort and oppression for Sita.
2. To examine how Sita's escape to Manori shows resistance that is incomplete and shaped by her own inner conflicts.

Hypothesis

Sita's escape from her domestic role is not a full act of freedom. It is shaped by her own subconscious mind, which still holds on to old habits and the desire for motherhood. This shows that resistance to domestic life, as shown in the novel, is limited and complex, not simple or complete.

Methodology

This paper uses feminist literary theory as its main framework. Feminist theory helps us understand how women are shown in literature. It also helps us see how society limits women through roles like wife and mother. Three thinkers are especially useful for this paper.



The first is Simone de Beauvoir. In her book *The Second Sex*, she argues that women are often treated as the "Other." This means women are defined in relation to men, not as full and independent people on their own. Beauvoir also writes about how women can move toward freedom, but this process is difficult and often incomplete. This idea is useful for understanding Sita's journey in the novel.

The second thinker is Betty Friedan. In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, she describes a quiet unhappiness felt by many housewives. She calls this the "problem with no name." Women feel this unhappiness even when their lives look comfortable from the outside. This idea helps explain why Sita feels trapped, even though she has a home, a husband, and children.

The third thinker is Simone Weil. Her ideas about self-denial, inner struggle, and the search for meaning add another layer to this study. Weil's thinking helps explain the deep, quiet suffering that Sita feels inside her mind.

Using these three thinkers together, this paper builds a framework to study Sita's escape to Manori. The paper does not only look at what happens in the story. It also looks closely at the language, images, and symbols Desai uses. This method is called close textual analysis. It means reading the novel carefully, sentence by sentence, to find deeper meanings.

This paper studies key scenes in the novel, such as Sita's decision to leave home, her time on the island, and her final return to her family. Through this analysis, the paper aims to show that Sita's resistance to her domestic role is real, but it is also incomplete and shaped by her own inner conflicts.

Discussion

At the start of the novel, Sita feels trapped inside her home in Bombay. Her daily life is filled with household duties and the needs of her children. Desai shows this feeling of confinement through Sita's tired and restless thoughts (Desai 12). Sita does not hate her family. But she feels that her own identity has slowly disappeared inside her role as a wife and mother. This matches Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are often defined only through their relationships to others, such as husbands and children, rather than as independent people

Sita's unhappiness also matches Betty Friedan's idea of "the problem with no name" (Friedan 15). On the outside, Sita's life looks stable. She has a comfortable home and a caring husband, Raman. But inside, she feels a quiet emptiness. This gap between her outer life and inner feelings is central to her decision to leave home.

When Sita decides to go to the island of Manori, she is not only escaping her physical home. She is also trying to escape the idea of domestic duty itself. Manori represents her childhood, a time before marriage and motherhood, when she felt closer to her true self (Desai 47). Desai uses the image of the sea and the island to show a space that feels separate from ordinary time and social rules.

However, this escape is not simple. Even on the island, Sita cannot fully leave her role as a mother behind. She continues to think about her children and worry about their wellbeing (Desai 63). This shows that her resistance to domestic life is incomplete. Her body may have left the home, but her mind remains partly shaped by it.

One of the most important tensions in the novel is Sita's relationship with her own pregnancy. She initially wants to avoid bringing another child into a world she sees as violent and unkind (Desai 20). But as the novel continues, her attachment to her role as a mother becomes clear. This shows an inner conflict between her wish for freedom and her deep emotional bond with her children.

This conflict supports the paper's main argument. Sita's escape is not a full rejection of domestic life. It is instead a complex mix of resistance and attachment. Her subconscious mind, shaped by years of habit and duty, pulls her back toward the very role she is trying to escape.

Sita's memories of her father, who was seen by others as a spiritual miracle man, also shape her time on the island. She hopes to find in herself the same kind of power her father seemed to have. But she slowly realizes that this memory may be based more on childhood imagination than on truth (Desai 55). This realization adds to her sense of disappointment. Her escape to Manori does not give her the transformation she was hoping for.

By the end of the novel, Sita returns to her family. This return could be read in two ways. One reading is that Sita has accepted her role as a wife and mother, showing personal growth and

acceptance. Another reading, which this paper supports, is that Sita's return shows the limits of her resistance. She is not able to build a new identity outside of her domestic role. Her return suggests that true freedom, as imagined at the start of the novel, remains out of reach

This matches Beauvoir's idea that women's path to freedom is often difficult and incomplete within a society still shaped by traditional gender roles (Beauvoir 61). It also reflects Simone Weil's idea of ongoing inner struggle, where the search for meaning does not always end in clear resolution (Weil 22).

Conclusion

This paper has studied Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* as a story about a woman's search for freedom from her domestic role. Sita, the novel's main character, leaves her home and goes to the island of Manori. At first, this seems like a clear act of rebellion against the duties of marriage and motherhood. But a closer reading of the novel shows a more complex picture.

Using the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Simone Weil, this paper has shown that Sita's escape is not a full or clean break from her domestic identity. Her mind remains shaped by old habits, memories, and a deep emotional bond with her children. Even on the island, away from her family, she cannot fully separate herself from the role of mother. Her hopes about her father's spiritual power also turn out to be based more on childhood memory than on truth. This adds to her disappointment and sense of loss.

By the end of the novel, Sita's return to her family suggests that true freedom, as she first imagined it, is not something she is able to reach. Her resistance to domestic life is real, but it is also incomplete. This shows that the path to female freedom, as Beauvoir also argued, is often difficult within a society that is still shaped by traditional roles.

This paper has also placed Desai's novel within the larger tradition of Indian English women's writing. Desai's close attention to the inner lives of women, especially their quiet and hidden struggles, makes her an important writer in this tradition. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* does not offer an easy answer about female freedom. Instead, it presents a honest and complex picture of the limits placed on women, both by society and by their own minds.



Future research could study other novels by Desai using a similar approach. This could help build a wider understanding of how Indian English women writers have shown the inner struggles of women across different generations.

Works Cited

1. Bande, Usha. "The Far Side of Despair." *The Novels of Anita Desai*, Prestige Books, 1988.
2. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
3. Chellappan, K. "Being and Becoming in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*" *Subjects Worthy Fame: Essays on Commonwealth Literature: In Honour of H. H. Anniah Gowda*, Sterling Publishers, 1989, pp. 10–16.
4. Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Orient Paperbacks, 1982.
5. Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. Jain, Jasbir. "In Pursuit of Wholeness." *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai*,
6. Printwell Publishers, 1987. Ram, Atma. "A View of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*" *Journal of Indian Writing in 7. English*, vol. 9, no. 1, Jan. 1981, p. 74.
8. Rao, B. Ramachandra. *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study*. Kalyani Publishers, 1972.
9. Srivastava, Ramesh K. "Introduction." *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Vimal Prakashan, 1984.
10. Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, Routledge, 2002.