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## Motherhood, Anxiety, and Female Subjectivity in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*: A Feminist–Psychoanalytic Reading

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### Abstract

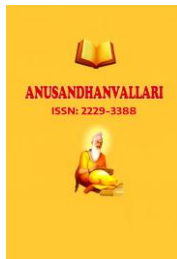
Anita Desai maintains a unique position in Indian English fiction for her subtle examination of psychological reality and the inner landscapes of women. In her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1982), she examines motherhood not just as biological or social institution but as a highly psychological and existential experience affected by patriarchal expectations and emotional fragmentation. This article addresses maternity, anxiety and female subjectivity in the novel from feminist literary criticism and psychoanalytic feminist perspectives. Using the theoretical insights of Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler, the study explores how the protagonist Sita grapples with maternal ambivalence, psychological instability, existential alienation and resistance to normative constructions of motherhood. The article contends that Sita's maternal worry is a way of female subject construction not simply an expression of emotional pathology. Anita Desai in postcolonial India uses psychological realism to show the conflicts between patriarchal domesticity and female selfhood. Close textual analysis reveals the workings of mother awareness as a place of resistance, identity negotiation and psychological agency. This paper contributes to feminist studies on Indian English fiction by reframing maternal anxiety as a crucial framework for understanding female subjectivity and postcolonial womanhood.

**Keywords:** Motherhood; Female Subjectivity; Maternal Anxiety; Feminist Criticism; Anita Desai; Postcolonial Feminism; Psychological Realism

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### Introduction

Anita Desai holds a prominent position in Indian English fiction for her treatment of psychological realism and female interiority. But Desai moved away from the nationalist concerns to focus literary emphasis on emotional fragmentation, existential alienation and the quiet tragedies of personal life. Her works are about women who have to cope with emotional invisibility and the shackles of patriarchy. She brings forth “the inner climate” of feminine consciousness, to quote Jasbir Jain (56). In novels like *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1982) she continued to explore the loneliness of women, their inner conflicts and the construction of identity. As Meena Shirwadkar notes, “Desai's fiction focus[es] on the psychic turmoil of women trapped within structures of social expectations and emotional deprivation” (113). Her recurrent concerns are not only with maternity as a biological fulfilment but as a psychologically loaded and ideologically controlled institution.



Feminist thinkers have long challenged idealised images of motherhood. Adrienne Rich defines motherhood as “experience and institution,” and claims that patriarchal cultures oppress women by enforcing parental expectations (13). Simone de Beauvoir, too, argues that woman is historically placed as “the Other,” constrained by socially determined gender norms (xxii). In Indian society postcolonial, where maternal obligation is linked to feminine identity, parenting is sometimes a psychic burden as well as an emotional fulfilment. Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* engages these conflicts in the figure of Sita, who, with her fifth pregnancy, suffers worry, emotional detachment and resistance to normative parenthood. Instead of seeing maternity as inherently gratifying, Desai portrays maternal awareness as fractured, conflicted and intricately linked to female autonomy and existential selfhood.

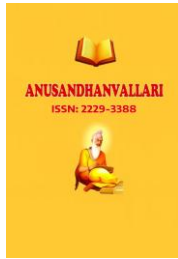
Alienation, feminine sensibility, identity crises and existential unhappiness have been the major subject of scholarly study of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. According to R. K. Dhawan, women in Desai’s works inhabit “psychological spaces of estrangement” where domesticity results in emotional suffocation (84). Jasbir Jain points out that her female characters are always searching for authenticity in patriarchal domestic environments (61). Critics like Suman Bala and Meena Shirwadkar have mostly analysed Sita’s instability in terms of the existential and psychological aspects. (Bala 144; Shirwadkar 118) However, maternal anxiety as a way of constituting female subjectivity has received relatively little attention. Existing literature tends to understand motherhood as social responsibility rather than embodied psychological experience, marked by anxiety, resistance, and identity struggle. As Nancy Chodorow has argued, motherhood is still “a central organising feature of women’s emotional lives” (7), and Julia Kristeva has described maternity as a transformational condition that disrupts identity and engenders diverse subjectivities (“Stabat Mater” 161). Also Judith Butler’s theory of performativity says that gendered identities are a product of social repetition, not biological necessity (Gender Trouble 33).

This study, employing feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic feminism, and maternal theory, contends that Sita’s maternal anxiety is a form of resistance, rather than pathology, to patriarchal notions of motherhood. The article contributes to feminist readings of Indian English fiction by filling an important critical vacuum, namely, an exploration of maternal consciousness as an arena of female subject development.

### **Maternal Anxiety and Psychological Fragmentation**

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai foregrounds parenting as a psychologically uncomfortable experience, formed by emotional burden, social expectation and existential ambiguity, rather than as sentimental fulfilment. Sita’s fifth pregnancy appears as the main site through which mother concern becomes psychic catastrophe. Instead of the conventionally idealised maternal joy of pregnancy, Sita experiences emotional suffocation and internal fragmentation. From the first pages of the work, Desai develops Sita’s mental instability via her great displeasure with the metropolitan household life and her growing incapacity to cope with everyday circumstances. The story observes that Sita had gotten “sick of the city” and its “violence, corruption and ugliness” (Desai 3). Her mental weariness is more than typical household exasperation, and slowly becomes psychological estrangement.

Sita’s emotional condition has often been read by critics in existential terms. According to Jasbir Jain, the women characters of Desai are located in the “zones of emotional incompleteness where psychological pressures heighten individual alienation” (Jain 63). Such incompleteness is all the more acute with Sita’s pregnancy. Her worry is not only a function of biological motherhood, but rather of the cumulative emotional exhaustion of her caring duties, patriarchal home expectations, and existential discontent.



One of Desai's most significant departures from normal maternal representation is Sita's refusal to give birth. Sita does not celebrate motherhood but gets obsessed with delaying the birth itself. She resolves to go to Manori Island, believing that "there would be miracles there" that would avert the birth of the baby (Desai 31). This unreasonable hope is not only a sign of mental illness but of deep psychological resistance. Nancy Chodorow claims that "motherhood is a central organising feature of women's psychic lives" (Chodorow 7). The experience of motherhood not only forms emotional identity but also subjects women to societal pressure and psychological anxiety.

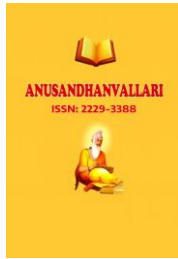
Sita's anxiousness is caused by the same tensions. Childbirth, she increasingly sees not as continuity but as violence. The idea of having another baby in a chaotic world becomes emotionally impossible. She could not stand to bring another live life to this world she deemed impossible (Desai 35). Desai states: This is maternal consciousness working through dread rather than through nurturing assurance. Feminist maternal theorist Adrienne Rich makes a distinction between motherhood as lived experience and motherhood as institution. Rich states that in patriarchal countries, parenting becomes an ideological apparatus that calls for emotional sacrifice and reifies female subjectivity (Rich 42). Sita's retreat of feeling speaks to her frustration with such institutional expectations.

Her mother concern finds expression in bodily distance, too. Pregnancy is increasingly related with loss of autonomy and psychological destabilisation. Here, Julia Kristeva's theory of maternal subjectivity is useful. Kristeva contends that motherhood destroys stable identity as pregnancy creates "a splitting of the subject" where the body's metamorphosis destabilises psychic coherence ("Stabat Mater" 181). Sita undergoes just such a fragmentation. Her emotional detachment is not just from her husband Raman, but also from her children and herself. Desai continually stresses Sita's psychological deterioration through fractured views. The city looks vicious and brutal: "She saw knives everywhere, saw them cutting, slicing, piercing" (Desai 28).

Repeated images of violence stand substitute for internal psychic conflict. Meena Shirwadkar claims that Desai's characters often externalise psychological struggle in environmental symbols, creating what she calls "landscapes of emotional disturbance" (Shirwadkar 119). Sita's sense of violence is a reflection of the internal emotional fragmentation, not the objective fact. Psychological instability is also expressed in Sita's failure to conform to normal mother expectations. She progressively tires of the emotional drain of caregiving tasks. Her maternal labour is socially inconspicuous but psychologically exhausting. In patriarchal society where there are few opportunities for autonomous selfhood, women are often limited to reproductive identities (Beauvoir 523). It is out of just such a reduction that Sita's resistance arises.

Her rejection of the perpetuation of unquestioned domestic routines is thus an act of psychological resistance, not that of parental failure. This resistance is explained with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler contends that femininity is not biologically determined but rather the result of repeated social performances (Butler 33). Motherhood too is a performative expectation not a natural inclination. Sita's pregnancy spoils such a performance. Her denial subverts patriarchal ideals of maternal satisfaction. She is an example of what feminist study is increasingly acknowledging as maternal ambivalence, the coexistence of attachment and resistance within the maternal identity. Rich writes that parenthood is sometimes rife with "contradictory feelings, swinging back and forth between fulfilment and frustration" (Rich 21). Such conflict is reflected exactly in the emotional situation of Sita.

Her psychical fragmentation thus operates not simply as individual sickness, but as critique of patriarchal maternal ideology. Desai foregrounds anxiety, weariness and subjective conflict to show the emotional costs of idealised parenthood. Sita's maternal consciousness becomes a locus of psychological resistance against society demands of emotional conformity.



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### **Motherhood and Patriarchal Expectations**

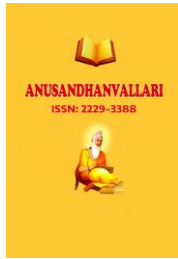
Sita's experience of motherhood is highly affected by patriarchal family arrangements. Desai explores parenting as gendered labour within unequal emotional economies, where women provide caregiving and are unrecognised and unfree. Sita's family life shows how patriarchal ideals turn parenting into duty rather than choice. Raman is the embodiment of sensible masculine authority in the household. Raman is pragmatic, emotionally repressed, socially conformist and unable to grasp Sita's inner issues. Desai claims he was a man "who dealt with facts" and was suspicious of emotional complexity (Desai 18). Raman is rational and Sita is emotional and this causes a great alienation between them in their married life. Raman continually dismisses Sita's fears as irrationality and not a true emotional experience. Such dismissal is consistent with patriarchal inclinations to deny women's psychological realities. Patriarchal regimes determine women in terms of relationship roles, rather than as separate subjectivities (Beauvoir xxii). Sita becomes more and more defined only as wife and mother. Domestic responsibility amplifies this erasure. She loses her identity in the task of care-giving. Nancy Chodorow argues that mothering is still a historically feminised form of labour which produces emotional dis-equilibrium within the domestic realm (Chodorow 209).

Women are often socialised to accept caring roles with little emotional return. Sita's fatigue is exactly such an asymmetry. Desai shows how parental labour is emotionally demanding but psychologically undetectable. Sita carries out caregiving chores consistently, while experiencing increasing emotional depletion. "Patriarchal motherhood demands selflessness while denying maternal complexity," Adrienne Rich says (Rich 43). Sita refuses these demands. Her retreat to Manori is symbolic of rejection of domestic expectations. As critics like R. K. Dhawan point out, Desai's women often oppose patriarchal norms not by way of overt rebellion but by psychological detachment and emotional disengagement (87). Sita's resistance destabilises patriarchal ideas surrounding perfect motherhood. Her refusal to celebrate maternity is an implicit critique of the mainstream cultural narrative that equates maternal sacrifice with feminine fulfilment.

### **Female Subjectivity and Existential Alienation**

Existential detachment is a crucial part of Sita's subjectivity. Desai creates a protagonist who is deeply detached from domesticity, social reality and selfhood. Sita's emotional isolation is not only a product of external circumstances but of patriarchal structures that inhibit real selfhood. Existentialist feminist theory offers essential interpretive insight. According to Simone de Beauvoir, patriarchal culture alienates women by limiting their transcendence and autonomy (Beauvoir 67). Female identity is confined into socially imposed roles. Sita is very restrictive. Desai notes, "She felt surrounded by people but terribly alone" (Desai 48).

The isolation becomes physical, not existential. Sita feels a huge emotional void despite the presence of family. According to Jasbir Jain, Desai's women exist in "psychological landscapes characterised by loneliness and emotional dislocation" (Jain 69). Sita's isolation is exactly such displacement. She is as alienated from feeling as she is from parenting itself. Pregnancy exacerbates existential anxiety, because motherhood means another loss of identity. Julia Kristeva argues that the experience of maternity destabilises coherent subjectivity since pregnancy affects bodily autonomy ("Stabat Mater" 175). Desai often shows Sita's struggle to maintain a psychological identity against the demands of her mother. Her opposition is an existential will to an autonomous personality outside of reproductive roles.



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### Manori Island as Psychological and Symbolic Space

Manori Island as a geographical space, as a psychological haven, and as a symbolic act of resistance. Manori, thinks Sita, is a getaway from the urban violence and the maternal load. Manori, tied to childhood memories and paternal mysticism, is the prospect of emotional repair. Desai states “The island was memory and hope” (Desai 52). Memory is psychologically meaningful because Sita connects Manori with emotional security missing in adult domestic life. However, critics have said that Desai's landscapes are extensions of psychological moods. Meena Shirwadkar suggests that Desai creates room symbolically to externalise emotional turmoil (Shirwadkar 121). Manori reflects Sita's longing for psychic renewal.

But then, Manori is not a permanent shelter after all. Nostalgic idealisations are broken by reality. Contemporary emotional turmoil cannot be erased by childhood recollection. Postcolonial feminist scholarship asserts that escape cannot alter patriarchal institutions. Sita learns to accept progressively that calls for psychological reconciliation are calls for negotiation not disengagement. Manori, thus, is both resistance and limitation.

### Maternal Ambivalence and Female Agency

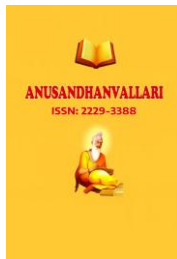
Perhaps Desai's most important intervention is the portrayal of maternal ambivalence as a realistic female experience. Sita both loves her children and avoids the emotional weight of motherhood. Adrienne Rich states: “Motherhood contains contradictory impulses that coexist rather than disappear” (Rich 52). Sita is so contradictory. She avoids idealised mother performance and still remains emotionally attached to her children. Her ambivalence is psychological honesty, not maternal failure.

Maternal identity is both structurally conditioned and emotionally rich, as Nancy Chodorow points out (Chodorow 211). Desai expands on this understanding by conceptualising motherhood as a fluid negotiation of attachment, resistance, autonomy, and sacrifice. Sita's eventual homecoming is not an indication of patriarchal acquiescence. It is a symptom of psychological change, not. Her homecoming is not a sign of the end of the parental war, but that she has come to understand that selfhood must be built via negotiation, not escape. This shift is explained by Judith Butler's notion of performativity. Resistance does not necessary include outright rejection of social systems but rather reconfiguration of identity within them (Butler 145). Ultimately, Sita finds agency by confronting rather than repressing her parental ambivalence.

### Conclusion

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* by Anita Desai is one of the most psychologically sophisticated examinations of parenthood and female interiority in Indian English fiction. Through Sita's emotional challenges, the novel deconstructs idealised depictions of motherhood and foregrounds maternal consciousness as a place of anxiety, resistance, fragmentation, and identity negotiation. Rather of portraying maternity as a biological fulfilment or social obligation, Desai investigates the emotional responsibilities and psychological complexity of maternal being in patriarchal family settings. Sita's fifth pregnancy is not only a matter of reproduction but an existential crisis in which the conflicts between female autonomy and institutionalised parenthood are laid bare.

The analysis shows that maternal worry in the novel is a constitutive process of female subject development, rather than a sign of emotional instability. Sita's psychological disintegration is the result of several overlapping pressures: home containment, patriarchal standards, emotional invisibility, existential unhappiness, and the enormous responsibilities of mother obligation. Her trip to Manori Island is an attempt to achieve psychological freedom beyond the boundaries of restrictive societal systems. But Desai is not interested in simple answers.



Manori does not offer permanent relief; she explains that female selfhood cannot be restored by physical retreat alone. Psychological reconciliation is about facing emotional contradictions, not walking away from them.

The feminist paradigms used in this study further illuminate Desai's nuanced portrayal of parenting. Beauvoir's conception of the woman as the culturally constructed "Other" offers a helpful perspective from which to consider Sita's fight against mandated gender roles (Beauvoir xxii). Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic insights reveal motherhood as emotionally constitutive, rather than biologically deterministic (Chodorow 7). Adrienne Rich's difference between institutional motherhood and maternal experience allows for a critical assessment of Sita's resistance to patriarchal demands (Rich 13). Pregnancy's disruption of mental cohesion and generation of emotional ambiguity is clarified by Julia Kristeva's idea of maternal subjectivity ("Stabat Mater" 181). These overlapping theories situate maternal anxiety as an embodied response to gendered norms that govern female identity, rather than a pathological lack.

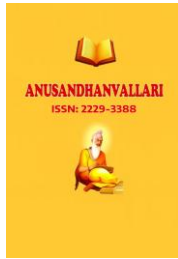
The work also contributes to existing literature by addressing a major crucial gap. Previous interpretations of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* have been mainly preoccupied with alienation, existential crisis and feminine sensitivity. While these approaches are still useful, relatively little emphasis has been paid to maternal consciousness as a crucial framework for understanding female subjectivity. This piece re-casts motherhood as a major psychological and political term, where Desai interrogates the postcolonial domesticity and women's quest for autonomy.

Moreover, Desai's depiction of maternal ambivalence undermines prevailing cultural discourses that define motherhood as a site of fulfilment and sacrifice. Sita is a vessel of conflicting feelings – connection and wrath, care and withdrawal, acceptance and rejection. These conflicts do not undermine her maternal identity; rather, they are part of what makes it complicated. Desai foregrounds ambivalence, expanding feminist understandings of motherhood beyond sentimental idealisation, and uncovering maternal experience as emotionally nuanced and psychologically dynamic.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is the ultimate proof of Anita Desai's amazing ability to convert psychological tensions into literary form. Through Sita's emotional journey, Desai exposes patriarchal notions of femininity while simultaneously illuminating the complex processes by which women negotiate agency and identity. It is a significant locus of female self-formation where maternal worry intersects with larger frameworks of gender, culture and power. By re-framing motherhood as a psychologically transformational and politically relevant experience, Desai delivers a lasting feminist contribution in Indian English literature. The work is thus still highly important to current feminist literary conversation, and demands further scholarly engagement with motherhood, subjectivity and women's emotional life in postcolonial literary traditions.

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