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Sita and her Mid-life Crisis: An Insight into Anita Desai's Protagonist in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India, is a novelist, short-story writer and children's author. Her works include *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), each of which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her children's book *The Village by the Sea* (1982), won the *Guardian Children's Fiction Award*. Her other significant works are *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), and *Cry, The Peacock* (1963). This paper explores mid-life crisis and elaborates how it plays a major role in the life of the protagonist in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The paper takes instances from the book to explain in depth the trauma a person who is in mid-life crisis goes through. It also uses Jane Polden's *Regeneration: Journey Through the Mid-Life Crisis* to substantiate its arguments.

Keywords- Anita Desai, Mid-life Crisis, Boredom, Reality, Escapism, Ennui, Utopia

Introduction

"About 250,000 people will go missing in the United Kingdom this year, as they do every year. Many will be under 18, and most will turn up again within a few days. But of the 20 new cases deemed serious enough to be registered every day by the National Missing Persons Helpline, four or five will involve people at mid life (between 36 and 55 years old). The families they leave are as likely to be comfortably middle-class as they are to be poor and disadvantaged, but disappearing men outnumber disappearing women by more than three to one" reads National Missing Persons Helpline, *Case for Support* (2000). If the aforesaid statistics are anything to by, we have a serious issue at hands to deal with. People suffer seriously from depression and their age has to do with all the anxiety, severe psychological stress and trauma they go through.

Why this is so? About which (mid-life crisis) Jane Polden Says “The mid-life crisis is a turbulent and often dramatic time likely to unfurl in fits and starts, over a period of several years. Its advent may announce itself through the appearance of nagging doubts and self-questionings, or apparently irrational or uncharacteristic actions. Sometimes a coincidence of unexpected or bizarre events seem to foretell - at least with hindsight – that great change may be on the way. Slipping into daydreams or erotic fantasies which are disturbing in their vivid intensity, we become haunted by strange obsessions and struggle with creeping dependencies, while at the same time the need to cut free of everyone and everything becomes sometimes overwhelming. It is a time when we may suffer unmanageable encounters with death and loss and become subject to intense but changing moods: disorientating confusion, self-doubt, depression, fierce joy or sudden tearing rage, moody free-floating angst and questioning” (10-11) *Regeneration:*

Journey Through the Mid-Life Crisis. It is definitely a testing phase in life where an individual encounters a plethora of questions the life throws at them. One has to understand the mental agony, stress and depression a person suffering from mid-life crisis would have to eventually go through. It is a phase where the future is in question and it might well turn out to be the very end of it if the person who is already in trauma when pushed more.

Anita Desai’s Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a ditto of a person who goes through mid-life crisis and tries to escape life which turns futile. Sita is married to Raman and is about to deliver her fifth child. Raman is a loving husband and Sita is a dutiful housewife who takes care of the house and children with utmost dedication. The household chores are carried out by the servants and Sita is left to do nothing at her home which makes her bored and she is overcome by ennui. To escape boredom (life) she backpacks to Manori Island with her son Kiran and daughter Menaka from the humdrum of Bombay.

Sita’s actual plan in her own words is “I think what I am doing is trying to escape from madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again.” (WSWGTS32) She wants to escape Bombay which is a total nuisance or so it appears to her during the later stages of her pregnancy. All that she needs is an escape route from the troublesome Bombay where she is going insane. “It is all madness -the boys acting out that scene from the film they saw, fighting each other on the floor,” (WSWGTS 32) by this Sita explains more or less the life in Bombay which is always aggressive and there’s no peace of mind for her in that place. There isn’t a serene moment for her in Bombay as she experiences extreme discomfort being there.

“She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, magic [for she is in her advance stage of pregnancy]. Then 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,” (WSWGTS 91) she believes so, as she thinks that’s her only way to escape from the world she is in right now (the world of reality). She believes strongly in Manori Island where she spent her childhood, she thinks going there would do wonders to her life which is heading into darkness as her mind envisions. The natural setting means she can take good rest and the Mother Nature would take care of her children and put them to sleep. Sita has had enough of children and she has reached a point where she wants no more, she is a soul who yearns for some care and affection.

“She had come here in order not to give birth. Wasn’t this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind. His legend was still here in this house... and he might work another miracle posthumously. She had come on a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn” (WSWGTS 28). This firm belief in Manori Island is due to the popularity that her father enjoyed there. He was once a politician who turned saint; he was celebrated by the masses and enjoyed much fanfare over there. Sita is firm that she doesn’t want the fifth child, she also was in no mood as it has become little too late and that thought never crossed her mind too. She hopes that she doesn’t deliver her fifth child and considers Manori Island as the only hope which can work a miracle similar to that.

“By giving birth to the child now so safely contained, would she be performing an act of creation, or by releasing it in a violent, paint wrecked blood-path, would she only be destroying what was, at the moment, safely contained and perfect.” (WSWGTS 50) Sita is not in a mood to shed blood anymore, she has seen enough blood and flesh by bearing four children. She has died four times during childbirth and she has had enough of it. The pain, suffering, blood doesn’t seem like an act of creation to her, she believes it would be better if her fifth child doesn’t see the light of the day and remains intact in her womb.

“... knowing that accepting that, she knows it was because ordinary lie, the everyday world had grown so insufferable to her that she could think of the magic island again as of release. If the sea was so dark, so cruel, then it was better to swim back into the net. If reality was not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative” (WSWGTS 74) Sita has reached a phase where she isn’t afraid to live in an imaginary world as it provides her the much needed break from the world of reality. It also functions as a sigh of relief and a welcome alternative to escape the harsh reality which strikes her faint heart real hard.

“But you are leaving for such small incidents, Sita? They occur in every one’s life, all the time, they are only small incidents” (WSWGTS 34). This might appear such a simple thing to her husband Raman who is practical at heart and in his approach towards life. Sita spends her time at home taking care of her children in an apartment. The fast paced life of Bombay is in no way a match

for a person like her, she struggles so hard to cope and adapt to reality. She is a person who loves a place like Manori Island where there is peace for a mind similar to her.

“More and more she lost all feminine, all material belief in childbirth, all faith in it, and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in the world.” (WSWGTS 47) Sita’s mind is affected so much so that she starts to consider the act of giving birth as violence and murder. The act of creation which was once so divine is not appealing to her anymore. Sita has lost all the faith she had in motherhood; she appears to be more and more losing out on all the feminine qualities which were once part of her nature.

Raman sipping his morning tea says, “They’ve made a good job of your eagle.” (WSWGTS 37) And Sita replies “perhaps it flew away.” (WSWGTS 37) This symbolism of eagle is more of a reference to the life of Sita in Bombay. The baby eagle is surrounded and attacked by crows. It explains the helpless state of the baby eagle which is at a metaphorical level the state Sita is in. Sita is stuck in Bombay like the baby eagle, helpless and neglected. She feels so and she is ready for the moment to take off any moment from Bombay.

“they are ‘nothing’ – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matters. Animals” (WSWGTS 47). Sita shows her disgust towards her guests and calls them “pariahs... in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins waiting to pounce and kill and eat” (WSWGTS 47). The people of Bombay, her neighbours and guests are no more than animals which lust for money, food and women according to Sita. The above lines portray the mental condition of Sita and it shows how life at Bombay has affected her psychologically. She yearns for a Utopian setting similar to that of Manori Island where she had a magical childhood with her beloved father.

“of course if one is alive, in this world one cannot survive without compromise, drawing the lines means certain death and in the end, Sita opts for life – with compromise” (WSWGTS 21). Sita has to swallow the bitter pill called life and has to lead a life full of compromises. She learns the lesson the hard way and she also understands she cannot escape reality as she thinks. Everyone live their life in the design and pattern which has been presented, Sita tries to break the pattern which adds to her anguish. At the end she also falls in the wheel of life which runs over her.

All that Sita needed was love which was nonexistent in her husband. Sita had no possible vent to let out all her anger, frustration, sadness, pain, happiness and much more. She needed a partner who could understand what she was going through and be her support system. Sita was a kind of woman who gave everything for the sake of her family and she should have been taken care of in a much more mature manner during her time of need. Raman being practical has always thought that Sita is overreacting, life is completely normal and she is acting silly. It is not so, and especially for a

character like Sita to be left to fend for all alone in a place like Bombay is so naïve from the side of a practical person like Raman.

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