

A Space of Their Own

- **A Comparative Perspective on Virginia Woolf's**
 - *Mrs. Dalloway (1927) and Anita Desai's*
 - *Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975)*

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Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai become two distinguished women writers from different countries and milieus. Virginia Woolf came from a distinguished literary family in London. Her father Sir Leslie Stephan, worked as the editor of the Dictionary of National Biography and the Cornhill Magazine. As a writer, Leslie Stephan authored a number of biographical and philosophical essays. Woolf's mother, Julia Stephan, was known for her beauty and royal mien. Consequently, Virginia Woolf and her siblings were brought up in the rich ambience of intellect and cultural excellence. Thus, Woolf's mind from the young age got nurtured in a literary atmosphere strengthened by literary pursuits. After the death of her father in 1904, she lived mostly with her brother and sister. Woolf's dwelling place at Grand Square in London also became the centre of 'Blooms berry Group'. In 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf and in 1917 they formed the Hogarth Press, which published all her novels.

Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie, India, on June 24, 1937. Her father being D.N. Majumdar, a Bengali Businessman and mother, Toni Nime, was a German. Desai does not

consider herself to be the part of the Indian Diaspora and she herself said, "I see India through my mother's eyes, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father's, of someone born here". Thus, Desai's sensibility as an Indian English Woman writer reflects a paradoxical mix of the native and the alien. Her two novels *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), portray the predicaments of immigrants, the former work about Indians in Britain and the latter one regarding Germans in India. Ostensibly, like Woolf, Anita Desai's family ethos displays itself as something away from the ordinary.

Virginia Woolf was born and bred in London and London is seldom absent from her works *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years* are both works with London as the backdrop in more ways than one. In 1914, the first World War broke out, ending an era of stability and security. Intellectual satisfaction became another casualty and Woolf developed a nostalgic addiction to the pre-1914 days of her life.

It has been often observed that Woolf took extreme delight in the pleasures of imagination and the ecstasies of the mind, veering towards fantasy and lyricism, a kind of dislocated idealism. A member of the 'Bloomsberry Group', Mr. Bell, once remarked that Virginia Woolf was the happiest human being he had known and her talk would be very scintillating, tinged with rich flights of fantasy. All the same, there is also the other side of Virginia's personality, the dark, disquieting side. All times Virginia looked like an unhappy highborn lady, a fairy-tale princess under the influence of a spell, with attractive forlorn eyes. Apparently, some kind of submerged inner loneliness, even a modicum of alienation haunted the inaccessible depths of Virginia's mind and psyche. The same kind of an inner orientation is also witnessed in the fictional heroines of Anita Desai's novels. The feminine sensibility and introverted intellectual and psychic turbulence witnessed in Desai's novelistic women protagonists, generates a language which quintessentially mirrors the

mind and the spirit of these female characters. In an identical fashion, Woolf's feminine existential arithmetic generated the famous writer's experimental technique of the stream of consciousness which, for the reader, constitutes the psychic vocabulary of her novelistic heroines. In her diary, Woolf made ominous references in January and February 1914 to "a battle against depression". Yet, she was determined not to be immersed in the world of despair. In spite of the plans for writing new books and even after visiting a few places, Woolf experienced a growing strain, eventually creating in her a psychological schism. Ultimately, on March 28, 1941, Virginia committed suicide by drowning herself in the river near her home. Interestingly enough, most of the novelistic heroines of Anita Desai also commit suicide. It seems that Woolf's extremely self-critical nature and an irreversible inability to come out of mental depression, finally made her to self destruct. After her death, Leonard Woolf published several volumes of her essays, sketches, short stories and extracts from her diaries. Like Anita Desai, Virginia Woolf, also explores the depths of human psyche with all the attendant problems and stresses. Woolf's external life remained totally different from the inner life of her mind and spirit, in which the stream of feminine consciousness flowed in a problematic and deconstructive manner.

Again, as in Desai's novels, it is the issue of feminine equality and a woman's life in a male-dominated social milieu that we find as a role-playing matrix in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In this novel, Woolf contemplates and envisions the city of London through a female perspective. *Mrs. Dalloway* tries to depict the fact that the voice of a woman could rise above the din of the urban space, a metropolitan area traditionally considered as masculine, reserved for men. Clarrisa Dalloway, within the stream of her consciousness remains addicted to the memories of her former lover and suitor, Peter Walsh. The Clarrisa-Peter affair ultimately ended as a failed relationship. In the role and portraiture of Clarrisa

Dalloway, Woolf shows her heroine as a romantic, carefree, provocative woman, sexually desirable as well. Clarrisa, as much as like the heroine of Anita Desai, basically leads a lonely, alienated life, vacillating between her public identities and socialite in London and her private-self. In the entire novel, the innate strength of womanhood, through Clarrisa's character, is sharply focused upon, especially when displayed against the inadequacies of her husband's intelligence and life-style. Clarrisa possesses a gift of creativity as an admirable trait of a woman's feminine existence. Because of all these creative aspects, *Mrs Dalloway* becomes the first novel in which Woolf expresses her feminine sensibility and insights through the structuring of language and word-patterns, rather than by means of plot and character. Language, in case of Anita Desai's novels, becomes a metaphysical authority, an expressionist weapon in which she lays bare the inner, psychic lives of her heroines. Woolf, in case of Clarrisa Dalloway, employs the same technique vis-a-vis the structuring of language. It won't be an exaggeration to say that like Desai, Woolf also depicts the gradual shift from the external world to the inner world of an individual. Desai's heroine Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) comes pretty near to Clarrisa Dalloway as far as the reader's involvement in the flow of particular consciousness. Strangely enough, Clarrisa's creator Woolf, herself, closely approximates to the character of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* No doubt, Sita does not commit suicide in the narrative climax of the novel, yet, the real-life woman (Virginia Woolf) and the fictional one (Sita) become to sides of the same coin. The psychological essence of *Mrs Dalloway* as a novel reminds us of Desai's handling with diagnostic precision, the inner streams of consciousness constantly "flowing" across the mindscape of her fictional heroines. The metaphysical- cum-psychological inner monologues of Clarrisa, in *Mrs*

Dalloway and those of Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, closely approximate within the respective narratives of the two novels.

When Clarrisa walks on the streets of London or sits quietly in her attic room, even when she hosts evening parties at her home, her stream of consciousness becomes really staggering:

Now as she walks through London she feels herself part of the trees at home, of the house, of the people she had never met, being laid out like a mist, between the people she knew best, who lifted her on her branches as she had seen the trees. Life is the mist. What is spread ever so far, her life, herself.

(Woolf, 1927: 42)

These musings of Clarrisa reflect the grammar and the language of her mind. The intricate identification of her own self with different objects and people. Clarrisa's biggest problem, her main existential scourge, is to escape from the humdrum facts and routine happenings of her everyday life. Employing the same kind of technique and a complex stream of associated ideas and thought-patterns, Anita Desai with the help of different images conveys her heroine Sita's feminine personality, embedded in her stream of consciousness:

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. Her husband was puzzled, therefore when the fifth time she told him she was pregnant, she did so with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear, and revolt. He stared at her with a distaste that

told her it did not become her- a woman now in her forties, graying, aging, to behave with such a total lack of control. (Desai, 1975: 20)

Both the heroines, Clarrisa and Sita, have chronic obsessions and obsessive fixations rooted in their respective minds and psyches. Sita's recurrent fixation which unsettles her, even when she is a mother of four children and expecting her fifth child, in Manori island where she lived with her father, twenty years back, as a *femme sole*. In case of Clarrisa Dalloway, it is her lover Peter Walsh to whom her mind even at the age of fifty-two is irretrievably glued. In the beginning of the novel, a beautiful scene is narrated as we see the heroine making preparations for an evening party, she is going to host at her home. Her old flame and lover, Peter Walsh, suddenly pays a visit after a number of years and poor Clarrisa is taken aback by his sudden appearance. Even before Walsh appears, Clarrisa's stream of consciousness projects her feelings as the strokes of the painting brush, dabbing different colours of love on the canvass of Clarrisa's consciousness:

Yet how much she owed Peter Walsh later. Always when she thought of him she thought of their quarrels for some reason-because she wanted his good opinion so much, perhaps. She owed him words 'Sentimental', 'civilized' ; they started up every day of her life as if he guarded her. A book was sentimental; an attitude to life sentimental. 'Sentimental', perhaps she was to be thinking of the post. When could he think, she wondered, when she came back?

That she had grown older? Would he say that, or would she him thinking when he came back, then she had grown older? It was true since her illness she had turned almost white. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 41)

Life could any time get snuffed out by the drops of time, so why not brighten it and make it more lively and throbbing with the bright colours of flowers.

Virginia Woolf herself believed in the privacy of the soul. Clarrisa, as well, gets lost in the fathomless depths of her own soul. Even as a perfect hostess, her great moral strength emanates from her feminine intuition. It is the same feminine intuition which serves as the catalytic force in case of Sita in *Where Shall We go This Summer*, Sita entertains a firm notion that by going to Manori island she could avoid the birth of her unwanted fifth child by invoking the magical and mystic power of her late father, a power she believes still prevails on the island. If it is the father-fixation, acting as the major stumbling block between Sita's fourth and the unexpected unborn fifth child, in case of Clarrisa, it is the immersion of her own self and consciousness into her past. Unlike Sita, who all the time, displays a nihilistic proclivity towards life and living, Clarrisa feels blessed by life's bounties. Once in the privacy of her room, we see Clarrisa disrobing and revealing her real self, bereft of the superficial femininity. Both characters become unique and problematic in their respective roles.

Sita accentuates her personality almost perversely vis-à-vis her husband, Raman and even her children. On the other hand, Clarrisa experience a true, deglamorized image of woman, when she suddenly envisions herself as "breastless". Yet, she feels like a virgin as she sits at her home sewing her dress for the evening party and feeling "I am alone forever." (WSGS,53) Ironically enough, in spite of seeming to be happy and involved in life and living, Virginia Woolf must have felt loneliness as a constant erosion within her

psyche, finally, resulting in her unfortunate suicide. Throughout the narrative of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, all the three parts of the novel gets thematically and symbolically fused by the person of Sita herself and she too like Clarrisa is perpetually alone in spite of having a husband, and four children.

Metaphorically speaking, both women reveal their inner nature and respective complicated personalities through the language patterns and images which well-up in their individual minds. Clarrisa Dalloway becomes her own problem and so does Sita. These two heroines, one English and other Indian, feel intensely cloistered and alienated within their own respective households. Woolf, in case of Clarrisa and Anita Desai in case of Sita, project to the reader the struggles of the inner worlds of these two fictional heroines by means of a language which expresses and illustrates an irresistible longing to assert selfhood. Clarrisa and Sita become feminist personifications of a metamorphosing and unrelenting feminine consciousness. To assert the inalienable prerogatives of the feminine self and to assert an identity of dignity, both these factors become prominent in Woolf as well as Desai . If Sita becomes victimized by chronic discord between a callous husband and a neglected wife, the same orientation applies as well to Clarrisa, who all the time neutralizes her feeling of neglect and deprivation of life's excitement by reliving her earlier days with her lover. The common existential axis between Clarrisa and Sita can be identified as the marital antithesis that operates between Clarrisa and her husband Richard, as it does identically between Sita and her husband Raman. Clarrisa gets sandwiched between two men and so does Sita. In case of the former, it is the husband Richard and lover Peter and in case of the latter, it is the husband, Raman and the Father who even when dead, still exerts a powerful gravitational pull on Sita's mind. The same kind of sentimental

tidal wave inundates the consciousness of Clarrisa and the wave emanates from an ocean called Peter Walsh.

The mind-sets of both the women, Clarrisa and Sita, and their respective conditions of being become almost the same. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* has her mind tuned to the mould of fantasy, especially about her dead father and Manori island. In the same way, the life Clarrisa Dalloway leads gets characterized by her dwelling mostly in the world of fantasy, vivacity and shallow impressions which crowd her inner-self. The reader can witness these manifestations as a kind of a mirror reflecting the lives of Clarrisa and Sita. Within her own family comprised of husband and four children, Sita virtually remains a stranger. The dichotomy of family displacement and marital fracture results in the intrinsic inability of both the women to adjust to the harsh and brutal realities of everyday life. When Clarrisa Dalloway leaves her house in Westminster and goes to Bond street to buy flowers for the evening party, she will be hosting in her house, the stream of impressions and images flowing in her mind takes her to different locales and personages from her past. Her husband, Richard Dalloway just hovers on the horizons of her mind, whereas it is her one time lover and flame, Peter Walsh, who occupies the centre stage within Clarrisa's consciousness. Clarrisa gets a real surprise when her lover visits her house after spending five years in India. Mrs Dalloway is busy with preparing her dress for the party when Peter peeps in and this is how she reacts:

It was outrageous to be interrupted at eleven o'clock on the morning of the day she was giving a party, hearing a step on the stairs. She heard a hand upon the door. She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy. Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened, and in came – for a single second she could not remember what he was called! so

surprised she was to see him, so glad, so shy, so utterly taken aback to have

Peter Walsh come to her unexpectedly in the morning !(MD , 45)

On seeing him, Clarrisa's stream of consciousness undergoes a replay taking her to the time when she could not make up her mind to marry him:

Now of course, thought Clarrisa, he's enchanting! perfectly enchanting!

Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind – and why did I make up my mind – not to marry him, she wondered, that awful summer? (MD, 47)

Clarrisa's temperamental dissonance within her household, including her husband Peter seems pretty identical to what happens in the case of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita feels totally alienated from Raman and nourishes a growing resentment in her mind about guests, visitors, friends, business associates, colleagues and acquaintances of her husband who frequently come to her place. So strong is Sita's obsessive antipathy vis-à-vis her husband's visitors that she even equates her husband with such people. This is how Sita thinks about Raman, in fact about men in general:

... So he could not tell what she meant or what she felt when she folded her arms about her and stared at the closed door, saying. "They are *nothing* – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals".

"I thought you liked animals".

"My pet animals – or wild animals in the forest, yes. But these are neither – they are like pariahs you see in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat. (WSGS,31)

Had it been Manori island and the house of her dead father, the visitors would have been welcome. Like Clarrisa Dalloway's married life with her

husband Richard, Sita even during the early days of her marriage to Raman, treated him little better than a stranger:

She never got used to anyone. When they lived, in the first years of their married lives, with his family in their age-rotted flat off Queens Road, she had vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost subhuman placidity, calmness, and sluggishness. (WSGS, 32)

In both the novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, what we witness is “... a sense of contrast between subjective and objective, mental state and outward condition, individual and social ...” (Hassan, 1961:59) Clarrisa and Sita have identical patterns of fictional experience in the respective Internal Fiction of *Mrs Dalloway* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

Clarrisa lives in a upper British class society in London, a society acutely conscious about class distinctions with a perceptible Victorian hang-over. In the same way, Sita, refuses to accept the reality of everyday life and living and instead lives in an inner sick world of her own in which happiness simply does not exist. Unlike, most of the novelistic heroines of Anita Desai, Sita does not commit suicide, yet an inherent dilemma corrodes her mind with a psychological scourge. This psychic imbalance afflicted Virginia Woolf also in real life, in spite of belonging to the upper British class. Woolf, eventually committed suicide as an outlet of deliverance and escape. In case of Clarrisa, there seems to be no escape at all from her cloistered existence within the walls of her Westminster residence. In Clarrisa and Sita, what crystallizes as a bonding essence is a kind of formal abstractness and a “tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness ... to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society....” (Chase, 1957:VIII)

Clarrisa and Sita, in context of the narratives in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, become personages transcendent by virtue of their nakedness rather than their communal authority. For Clarrisa Dalloway, “the essence of the self and the essence of the world are not one and the same...” (Hassan, 1973:328) and the same applies befittingly to Sita, as well. As wives and women with families, Clarrisa and Sita become characters who at the end, in the respective fictional worlds of *Mrs Dalloway* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, remain central protagonists “whose individual selves and the world are thrown out of joint”, (Hassan, 1973:327) and “self-transcendence is sought though all the gods may be defunct.” (Hassan, 1973:327)

The narrative in *Mrs Dalloway* climaxes with the opening scene itself and the entire novel becomes a mini-ocean of inner consciousness on the waters of which the only ripple that disturbs the surface is Peter Walsh. In an identical fashion, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, also becomes a constantly flowing river of Sita’s thoughts and perceptions about her dead father and Manori island. When the novel ends, Sita as the heroine reveals her own complicated personality in terms of a sequestered pattern of existence. She speaks less and feels more, holds a constant dialogue with herself within which, we as readers, can easily discern her marital alienation which germinates out of the total temperamental discord and emotional disparity governing Sita’s married life with her husband. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarrisa is still working at her evening party dress, at the end of her novel’s plot and the guests who attended the evening party start leaving and back goes Clarrisa to Peter. When Sita returns to Manori island with her husband and children with which *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* ends, Manori island at last proves to be an illusory *oasis* in the *desert* of her life. As two fictional heroines from two different cultures and eras, Clarrisa and Sita still possess identical existential disorientations. For both the women the self versus self

antithesis proves much stronger than self versus others problem. To substantiate this argument, one can quote a few lines from the respective climaxes of both the novels, which symbolically denote complicated feminine personalities. The concluding lines in the narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* come like this:

I will come up,' said Peter, but he sat on for a moment. What is this terror?

What is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarrisa, he said.

For there she was. (*MD*, 215)

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Moses and Jamila, as husband and wife, execute the job of caretakers on Manori island and both nourish hatred for Sita. These people consider her dead father as a god and to them Sita is "A plain woman Nobody. Not like her father. *That* was a man ... (*WSGS*,113) Moses further eulogizes Sita's dead father in these words. "He was like a god- a magic man." (*WSGS*,113) For Clarrisa Dalloway, Peter Walsh is a magic man who simply executes magic for her. Yet, be it Sita's father or Clarrisa's lover, Peter Walsh, both these men one dead and the other living, become epicentric personalities presiding over the inner universes which structure the minds of Clarrisa and Sita. As two central protagonists, from totally divergent worlds and cultures, Clarrisa and Sita still possess one strong determining essence which defines, determines, shapes and governs their respective lives. And this essence is knowledge of themselves, an intriguing proposition, besides reflecting the life of Clarrisa and Sita as both problematic and exciting. Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai invite our harshest awareness regarding the odds against feminine happiness and contentment which constantly eludes

both these unforgettable novelistic heroines. Both become unfortunate victims of their inner streams of consciousness, due to which they never succeed in creating ‘a space of their own’ as the ultimate happiness. This ‘space’ becomes an ever receding “mirage” for Clarrisa as well as Sita.

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