

**“JOURNEY OF THE WOMEN OF INDIAN DIASPORA: A STUDY OF ANITA
DESAI'S NOVELS**

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Abstract

The term 'Diaspora' has its root meaning in ancient Greek Language which means scatter. When it is applied to the people, it speaks about the scattering of people from their homeland to different places across the globe. There they spread their culture. Diaspora literature can be defined as the literature produced by the writers who are away from their homeland. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the Diaspora elements in the writings of Anita Desai the Indian woman novelist. Anita Desai has the mixed parentage as her mother belongs to German Christian and father is a Bengali Indian. This complex origin has given her the suitability to become a Diaspora writer. In her novels, she describes how her characters have felt alienation and displacement in a foreign home and what makes them describe the beauty and socio-cultural themes of their homeland. The feeling 'I never belonged to any place' often occurs in the mind of the main characters. The characters including the writer are torn between the double and often contradictory ideologies of 'homeland' and 'host land'. The title 'Diasporic Thought' in Anita Desai reveals though she wishes to go back to her homeland, the questions 'Where lies Home' and 'What is home' show the loss of identity space in a foreign location.

Keywords: Diaspora, Diaspora Literature, Complex

If Indian English Fiction has a place of prestige in English Literature, it is mainly the result of the contribution of the leading writers like Anand, Narayan, and Raja Rao. Each of them has contributed in his own way to the rich thought and technique of the form. The Indian English novelists have made remarkable contribution in the field of English Fiction. It is an accepted fact that the Indian novel has grown in bulk and variety after the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's wife* (1864). It is true that some novelists followed certain definite patterns and even imitated Fielding, Henry, Dickens, Meredith, Thackeray, Hardy, etc. It is also an accepted fact that some Indian writers made experiments in form and techniques and enhance Indian English novel, that becomes a class itself. These Indian writers are Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and Kamala Markanday, etc. have been recognized by foreign writers like E.M. Forster and Graham Greene. Their originality of form and content has been appreciated by most of the scholars all over the world. Many British critics asserted in their critical views that the people of the west should study the Indian novels if they want to understand the social and political powers of India. The novelists of Indian English fiction do not inspire their readers to escape to the world of imagination as it is a systematic study of Indian culture and civilization.

After independence, they noticed a lot of changes in various parts of the country and as a result, the western academic world got talented novelists. Tagore's *Gitanjali* had won the Nobel Prize in 1913 and as a result, the Indian novels of above-mentioned writers became popular outside India. Many Indian novels were translated into different languages of the world. Venkatesh Kulkarni, Nayantara Sehgal, Arun Joshi, Manohar Malgonkar, Anita Desai, Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Singh, V.A. Sahane, Gopal Gandhi, Balraj Khanna, etc. have been admired for their contribution to the Indian English novel. It is not an exaggeration of fact if the Indian English novelists of the 20th century are put in the category of Richardson, Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Meredith, Thackeray, Joseph Conrad, Maupassant, Somerset Maugham, E.M. Forster, etc. After Independence, the Indian writer became conscious of their mental strength and sense of liberty and as a result, the Indian English novels won universal applause.

Literature is an expression of human emotion in any form of writing. There are different kinds of literature. This paper is an attempt to discuss the diaspora literature. The term 'Diaspora' has its root meaning in ancient Greek Language which means scatter. As far as it is applied to the people, it describes the scattering of people from their homeland to different places across this planet. Where they spread their culture.

Diaspora literature can be described as the literature written by the writers those are away from their native land. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the diasporic elements in the writings of Anita Desai the Indian woman novelist. Anita Desai has the mixed parentage as her mother belongs to German Christian and father is a Bengali Indian. This complex origin has given her the suitability to become a Diaspora writer. Indian Literature has a big list of

diaspora writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, M.G. Vassanji, Shyam Selvadurai, and Kiran Desai.

Anita Desai is a remarkable woman novelist. She began her literary career quite early at the age of 26 and wrote many novels even amidst her house-wifely. Some of Desai's novels are Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the City, Bye-Bye, Blackbird, Where shall We go this Summer?, In all her major novels, Anita Desai has dealt with the feminine sensibility more emphatically than the description of the man and his exploit. All major novels are replete with a powerful description of feminine sensibility. Not only this, even in her short stories, the central theme is certainly the theme of feminine sensibility and women of Indian diaspora. Diaspora literature is based on the content of the writing irrespective of its place where it has been written. If a piece of literature or a piece of work, though written in the motherland, speaks about the character's adoption and surviving outside the motherland it can be considered as diaspora literature. The Story of Joseph from the Bible and The Book of Job are the best examples of this type. In the story of Joseph through the book is written in Israel it speaks about Joseph's learning to survive outside motherland. There are different types of diaspora. They are victim diaspora, Trading diaspora, Imperial diaspora, and Labor diaspora. When it is applied to literature this present paper is an attempt of the Indian diaspora with reference to Indian English Literature.

Anita Desai is one of the great novelists who has tried to portray the psychology of Indian women from different angles. Anita Desai has described the journey of the women of Indian diaspora in her novels. She expressed the grief of Indian woman that how a woman leaves her parental house after the marriage starts living in the husband's house with the hope of love and affection. But there, all her fancies and dreams vanished away, when she is supposed to do all household chores and domestic responsibilities. In Indian society, girls are taught from their childhood to be obedient to their future husband and their mother-in-law. This Indian society mandates a woman's obedience to her husband and his family. So any type of disobedience disgrace her and lead to a woman being isolated and neglected by her own family in her own house. She has described such female characters in her novels, who are hypersensitive, solitary and introspective, they were bound to lead a life of seclusion, frustration, and loneliness, these women have their material needs taken care of by wealth and servants but their emotional needs remain unfulfilled. Indian women alienated from parents, families and even from themselves in search of love and emotional needs but their emotional needs were not taken care of by their husbands and in-laws. They are perplexed by the agony of their existence. Anita Desai portrays a wide range of her protagonists in her novels like hypersensitive, Maya, lonely Monisha, bored Sita, discarded Nanda Kaul, peculiar Raka sensitive, imbalanced Bim, lonely Lotte and separated Sophie. The diasporic element can be seen in the characters of Anita Desai when she describes the

solitude of the characters. External circumstances caused this solitude which affects the inner psyche of the characters.

Deeply devoted and affectionate in nature, over sensitive in mental proclivities, Maya requires a love partner who can sympathize commensurably with her sensibilities. But the tragedy begins in her life because her husband Gautam does not possess those wide-ranging sympathies, whereas she left her mother home and land because of her husband and his love. In nutshell, *Cry, the Peacock* is an effort to expose the psychological problems of an alienated woman. As Meena Beliappa remarks: "The ardent introspection of Maya marks valuable introversion in Indian Fiction. It points to a line of significant development-exploration, not of the 'social' man, but 'the lone individual,'" (5) the novel is a powerful study of the experience of a disturbed and alienated mind. Ann Foreman considers women's alienation profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves as the fulfillment of other people's needs:

"Man exists in social world.....For the woman, however, her place is within the home.....Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women, there is no relief. (1977: 101-102)

In 'Voices in the City', Protagonist Monisha has married into a very traditional family. There, outwardly she plays the role of a dutiful and devoted wife. But, internally, she is in deep turmoil because of the ugliness of her surroundings. She is unable to bear a child and that is one of her primary duties as a wife, which she interprets as an unwillingness to bring another life into this ugly society and world.

At the end of the novel, Monisha commits suicide by burning herself alive in the bathroom because this life seems meaningless to her, as her emotional needs remain unfulfilled. Indian women get married and alienated from parents, families and even from themselves in search of love and emotional needs but their emotional needs were not taken care of by their husbands and in-laws. Monisha is full of higher sensibilities which is self-evident when she is attuned to music in the conference hall. "I wonder in this labyrinth at will and blessedly we never touch, merely remain in mystic communion with each other. I am willing to follow until I die".

In 'Bye-Bye Blackbird' there is a powerful encounter of the east and the west. The background of the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* is set in 1960s England which is written by Anita Desai. The story revolves around two friends Dev, and Adit in London. Adit has stayed for a longer period of time in London and married an English woman, Sarah. Dev comes to London for his higher studies and subsequent employment. The words of Adit shows his disappointment.

Whereas fascination for England has been presented through Adit and Dev, that for India through Sarah. Dev is used to complain about the country and its people so he decides to settle in England to become a Richman. He became successful and established his roots in England. This was the reason that he left his mother country and settled in abroad for a decent income.

As Adit adopted England as his home he is able to withstand the insults hurled at him and humiliations. He admires the Western life and erstwhile masters. He says:

I like pubs, I like the freedom a man has here-economic freedom! Social freedom! ... And I like the weekend at the seaside. I even like the B.B.C.

In the case of Sarah, she feels alienated from her own culture because of her marriage with Indian immigrant. She is a great lover of India so she gets married to an Indian. She came to know about India from the glimpses of pictures on the stamps. Emma is her co-sharer. Both Sarah and Emma loves to read Tagore's poetry. They are fond of Himalayan flowers, Henna patterns on the palms on ladies, food items, music of Bismillah Khan and Ravishankar. So Sarah is very close to India and Indian culture. Nevertheless, she puts away all her wishes. She starts feeling that her face is only a mask and her body is only a custom. Mrs. Miller insults her... "What about you Mrs. Sen? Have you no intentions of starting a family or do you think it wiser not in view of". These all the things haunted her a lot. Thus, she is culturally alienated and her marriage with a 'wog' obliges her to keep "to the loneliest path". This is how Anita Desai describes the diasporic element to the eyes of readers.

'Where shall we go this Summer?' Is again a powerful novel delineating identity crisis and journey of a woman of the Indian diaspora? Despite the fact that this delineation is chiefly expressed through the projection of one single theme, the crisis of conscience and values. Sita, the female protagonist in the novel, who is fully trapped by her familial relations and finds herself alone and lonely in her own family. She suffers from an identity crisis, who is a sensitive, emotional middle-aged woman. Sita has four children. She feels alienated from her husband and children and undergoes acute mental depression and agonies. Sita undergoes silently in isolation solely because of her sharp existentialist sensibility and explosive emotionality. Although she is placed in comfortable circumstances. Still, she feels so lonely at heart that it doesn't matter to her she was, with her husband and his family or away from him. 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".

Anita's 'Fire on the Mountain' symbolizes feminine sensibility and the journey of the women of Indian Diaspora in a heightened way. This novel presents a study of the trauma of a housewife, the trauma that takes refuge in seclusion. The life-long faithlessness of Mr. Kaul

to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical situation forced her to go in isolation. Nanda Kaul has a bitter experience of her marital life. Their wedding is merely based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr. Kaul. Mr. Kaul does not love Nanda as a wife. She plays the role of a gracious hostess all the time and enjoys the comforts and social status of the wife of a Vice Chancellor in return. She ever passes her life to arrange the dinner table as a hard-working hostess. Nanda Kaul becomes a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother of many unwanted and unloved children. Her frustration, feeling of emptiness and vacuum of un-fulfillment in her life could understand very clearly. The tag of a “wife of Vice Chancellor” was meaningless and unsatisfactory for her. But to the outer world, she was enjoying the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary but deep down in her heart, she felt so lonely and neglected. Like a dutiful wife, she was attending all the needs of her husband and the children. But their relationship of husband and wife was unhappy. Thus, she is culturally alienated and her marriage leads her to the loneliest path. This is how Anita Desai describes the diasporic element to the eyes of readers. The novelist presents the trauma of a housewife through the following passages:

*"The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the vice-chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world,.....
.....then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families. (F.O.M., 29-30)*

The journey of the women of Indian Diaspora as carriers of culture and preservers of identity is not so easy because of the circumstances in which they start their journey and the patriarchal nature of Indian society. A study of the fiction of Anita Desai reveals the creative potentialities of a human being who is cramped in by her associations with social mores and conventions which reflect her connections with the objective world.

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