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**A STUDY OF WOMEN'S DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN
THE SELECTED NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI**

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A Study of Women's Diasporic Identity in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai

Rekha Rani

Research Scholar, Designation

Abstract – The world of Anita Desai's novels is an ambivalent one; it is a world where harmony is aspired but often not achieved; and the desire to live life fully with proper zeal and love, clashes, at times violently, with the desire to withdraw and keep inwards. Instinct, emotion, passion appear to be strangers in the world of sordid daily routine. Anita Desai's fictions are marked by 'existential' themes. Aspects of 'existentialism' are reflected in her characters in the form of fragmented individuals, alienated and estranged, both emotionally and spiritually, from the 'normal society'.

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai was born on 24 June, 1937 in Mussorie (India) as Anita Mazumdar, the daughter of D. N. Mazumdar, a Bengali businessman, and Toni Nime, a German. Having experienced a mixed cultural upbringing, the cross-cultural confrontation is inherent in Anita Desai. Her own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of her novel Baumgartner's Bombay (1988).

Desai was a student at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and received her B.A. in English Literature in 1957 from Miranda House, Delhi University. In the following year, she tied the nuptial knot with Ashvin Desai and they raised four children. Desai has been a member of the Advisory Board for English at the National Academy of Letters in Delhi. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, and of Girton College at the University of Cambridge, England. In 1993, she became a Creative Writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, where she is now the John E. Burchard Professor of Writing. She now lives in the United States and successfully manages to divide her time between India, Boston, Massachusetts and Cambridge, England.

Having lived a multicultural life: Anita Desai confesses that while she 'feels about India as an Indian', she thinks about it 'as an outsider'. Desai probably derived this point of view from her German mother, whom she aptly describes as carrying 'a European core in her which protested against certain Indian things, which always maintained its independence and its separateness'. Her oeuvre has explored the lives of outsiders within Indian society and more recently, also within the West. Her fiction has covered themes such

as women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationship and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions and anti-Semitism. The Eurocentric and social biases that are sometimes detected in her fiction, therefore, may be more productively read as the result of author's focus on uprooted and marginalized identities. (Prono)

Desai has incorporated her cross-cultural experiences in those of her works that are based on the East-West encounter. These works have grown out of Desai's past images. According to T. S. Eliot, "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, which remain there until all particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together".

Similarly, Desai has united the fragments of her memories and expressed them comprehensively through the experiences of culturally uprooted characters of her works. Desai has spent a major portion of her time abroad. Her prolonged stay in England and the United States has added a complexity to her view of culture. Bye-Bye Blackbird is one of the first novels of Desai which belongs to her diasporic phase. Her other works that focus on aspects of cultural affiliation and alienation are Baumgartner's Bombay, Fasting, Feasting, Journey to Ithaca and The Zigzag Way. All these works of Desai problematize different issues of acculturation.

The society has trapped the true self of women by imposing an idealized role upon them and by creating the feminine principle in nature. Desai has liberated her women protagonists from these patriarchal limits or social constraints. In all works of Desai, women are shown to "devise means of de-emphasizing some aspects of her role,... so that she may widen her identity" (Nandy 42-43). Anita Desai is specially noted

for the insightful depiction of the inner life of the female characters. Several of Desai's novels and short stories explore the alienation of middle-class women.

Anita Desai is adept at representing the innermost psyche of her female protagonists who are "alienated from their surroundings as a consequence of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence" (Gopal 7). These women either enter into a conflict or reconcile with the adopted culture. This chapter makes an in-depth analysis of the life of two major female characters, Mother and Sophie, in Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, who represents the contradictory roles of an immigrant and an expatriate, respectively.

The word 'journey' in the title *Journey to Ithaca* represents a quest motif – a search for identity. It delineates Matteo's quest for spirituality; and Mother's and Sophie's quest for identity. Keeping the feminist aspect in mind, my focus in this novel is on the female characters and their confrontation with the alien culture and the patriarchal oppressive environment that Anita Desai's feminism surfaces. The novel's prologue discloses the early life of Matteo, whereas the epilogue deals with Matteo's marriage with Sophie and his journey to India.

Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is a narrative that portrays the cross-cultural complexities of belonging and identity. Through the diasporic experiences of Laila (later called Mother) and Sophie, Desai depicts the subordinate cultural identities conferring their differences with the dominant cultural identities at the cultural border zone. Laila's and Sophie's journey through Egypt, Paris, Venice, New York and India gives rise to the multiplicity of voices arising out of the mixture of cultures (i.e. many centres and many peripheries), and the displaced voice trying to locate its centre through a never ending dialogue of 'self' with 'other'. This constant dialogue justifies Bakhtin's notion that nothing exists independently and we all live lives of "simultaneity" i.e. there can be no 'self' without the 'other'.

Anita Desai, an expert in delineating the ripped psyche, portrays the insecurity, alienation and anxiety of an uprooted individual through the character of Lotte in Baumgartner's *Bombay*. Lotte "claimed to have been a gypsy who had followed her artiste parents all over the globe" (BB 66). She is another homeless outsider like Hugo Baumgartner who is "Accepting—but not accepted" (BB 20). Her experience of exile begins as a "condition of living," and culminates as a "condition of mind" (Prasad 216).

"Scholar and Gypsy", the last story of Anita Desai's *Collection Games at Twilight* magnifies the clash of cultures through the diasporic experiences of David, the scholar and his wife Pat, the gypsy. The "intercultural osmosis and global mélange" (Pieterse

71) seem to have contrary impacts on David and Pat. Pat is afflicted with a feeling of cultural alienation because the absence of the motherland becomes a constant reminder and continues to colour her perception.

Barry Lopez comments: "I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity" (qtd. in Jain 102). The natural surroundings affect the immigrants' sense of identity. A change in climate, landscape, surroundings and social convention threaten the newcomers' identity. Their struggle to negotiate a new territory and culture culminates in the fragmentation of ethnic identity and leads to their psychic alienation.

Sophie in Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is one such victim of trauma of memory, whose memory triggers her alienation to an extent of claustrophobic tendencies. Her journey to India, to Mother's ashram, constantly rips her of herself, her past and her home. Once she begins to feel claustrophobic, she revolts by leaving Matteo and his spiritual quest, and goes back to the land of her origin.

Anita Desai has a multicultural parentage. Her father is an Indian and mother, Toni Nime, a German. Desai's mother is a perfect example of a dissociated host subject, whose cross-cultural confrontations resulted in her marriage with an Indian, D. N. Majumdar (Desai's father) and her permanent settlement in India.

Desai seems to have incorporated her mother's experience in the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* through the displaced identity of Sarah. The other two works of Desai which emphasise the impact of cultural interplay on the host subjects are *Fasting, Feasting*, and her collection *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*.

Anita Desai's multicultural feminist writings include *Journey to Ithaca* and *The Zigzag Way* which emphasize the pluralist co-existence of identities and multiple voices that arise out of the cross-cultural web. These narratives also highlight the carnivalesque features that give courage to the female protagonists to transgress cultural and patriarchal norms in different ways. The search for identity and the process of suppression and transgression refer to the dialogic and carnivalesque principle of Bakhtin. These writings are "open-ended" in the Bakhtinian sense as they acquire new meaning by entering into dialogue with various feminist and cross-cultural concepts. Moreover, the cross-cultural characters of these narratives are also fluid identities that continue to evolve by indulging in a dialogic relation with the 'other'.

Mother (alias Laila) in *Journey to Ithaca* and Doña Vera in *The Zigzag Way* are the characters who portray simultaneous existence of varied cultures and co-existence or merger of varied identities. They exist on "a site, indisputably, of conflict and violence but also one of contest, exchange, negotiation,

hybridization, and change” (Berman 221). The various narratives in these works assume a ‘living’ dialogical quality in Bakhtinian terms, and transform the novel into a dialogue about gender and culture.

In Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*, Laila (later known as Mother), the daughter of Alma and Hameed, starts her diasporic journey as a spiritual quest. Spending her childhood in Alexandria (Egypt), she is educated in Paris and Venice and finally comes to India for her spiritual emancipation. Laila is rebellious from the very beginning as she wants to give up “all orthodox religions” (JI 199), and cannot conform to the traditional code of Muslim religious and social conventions. She craves for self-identity. Her yearning for freedom is perceptible in her address to the fellow students at the Al Azhar University where she states that its “better to go to prison than live as slaves” (JI 172). Laila wants to break out of the orthodox social norms and the ethnic role designated to women. Laila exemplifies that, “A selfhood denied, controlled, rendered inexpressive over centuries can erupt, eventually, disruptive in its demands” (Kanitkar 197). This rebellious and disruptive attitude indicates Bakhtinian notion of carnival that embodies a “licensed misrule” set to oppose all forms of authority. According to Bakhtin, in “carnival misalliance”, there is no regard of hierarchies, structure and order. It is a celebration – just as in the case of Laila – who celebrates her freedom irrespective of any social, religious, cultural or patriarchal limitations.

In *The Zigzag Way* Desai depicts her capacious vision on culture and identity through the character of Doña Vera. She escapes from Nazi’s Austria to marry a Mexican silver baron named Don Roderigo, who brings her back from Europe after his first wife, Doña Josefina’s death. Vera is a theatre dancer in Austria and in all her European years, she had never had solitude or space. No one in Roderigo’s family or circle could know how she had lived—the small, cramped apartment at the top of a building of stained and peeling stucco, its dripping walls, torn linoleum and its battered stove and pots, smells of lavatories down the hall and cabbage cooking in the kitchen, and the fear of losing even that. (ZW 66)

She despises her past, and tries to reconstruct her life when “An outsider, a foreigner [Don Roderigo], presenting an opening to a foreign world” (ZW) takes her to Mexico where she re-identifies herself as Doña Vera. Doña Vera’s expatriate living highlights the multicultural and ethnic clashes. “When they [immigrants] uproot themselves from their motherlands either by necessity or by choice, they absorb the culture and history of the new land” (Vijaya Lakshmi 207). Vera is one such immigrant who wants to negate her past and acculturate completely with the adopted land. She does not treat the new land as an exile but as a domain to establish her new identity. In this domain: The self may be conceived as a multiple

phenomenon of essentially three elements (it is—at least—a triad, not a duality): a centre, a not-centre, and the relation between them. . . . In taking up the third item (element), the relation that centre and not-centre bear to each other, we will have to keep in mind one or two terms that are crucial to Bakhtin’s undertaking. Dialogism is a form of architectonics, the general science of ordering parts into a whole.

In other words, architectonics is the science of relations. . . . In addition, Bakhtin emphasizes that a relation is never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade. (Holquist 29) Doña Vera recreates her new identity, through this relation of the ‘self’ with the ‘other’ which is termed by Bakhtin as a ‘dialogic event’.

Both the works of Desai depict the theme of dialogics of cultural encounter that encompasses the larger dimension of the question involving the dialogue between cultures, between civilizations, between religious, political and social ideologies, and between the present and the past. These and other works of Desai discussed in this thesis foreground the conflicting and collaborative dialogues further culminating into multiculturalism or assimilation. Each cultural encounter is replete with dialogical social exchanges that emphasize that the walls between cultures are always porous. Homi Bhabha appropriately describes this cultural engagement in *The Location of Culture* (1994), saying that: The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

According to Dr. S.P. Swain: Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally disturbed milieu. Delicately conscious of the reality around them, her protagonists carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism.

Existential predicament in Anita Desai’s fiction is not primarily due to some philosophical or spiritual dichotomies of the self. The existential pangs from which her diasporic as well as the western characters suffer are generated due to rootlessness and maladjustment caused by cross-cultural encounters.

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