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The Intricate Spectrum of Egotism, Temporal Displacement and Real/Imaginary Nostalgia in the Character Portrayal of Anita Desai

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Abstract:

In many of the Diasporic writers, one can find themes and characters which are centred too much on the self and nostalgia about the homeland. The predicament of exile forces an imaginary world upon those who undergo that experience in order to save oneself from the imminent danger of alienation and depression and to cope up with the new socio-cultural positioning of one's self. These autobiographical and self centred narratives, in one sense, alienate themselves more and more from the pestering issues of their homeland! This paper discusses the themes and characters of these writers and contrasts it with the writings of native writers.

Keywords: Diasporic writers, self and nostalgia, alienation and depression, self centred narratives.

“It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.”

- Salman Rushdie
(Imaginary Homelands, 12)

Indian diaspora has a long history and this history is predominantly related to the writers who have preferred exile due to economic/ academic /intellectual /political concerns rather than forced migration. From numerous other parts of the world, people migrate against their desire to remain in their own home/native land. Hence the major concerns of Indian diasporic writers are different from that of the diasporic writers from other parts of the world. The subjects and significance of diasporic women's writing and diasporic men's writing also vary. This difference is evident in their strategies of narration, presentation and political and social aspects of character construction too.

The diasporic women writers migrate to other nations primarily after marriage, or else with academic/professional interests. Most of these women settlers encounter issues related to identity, racism, loneliness, displacement, home sickness etc. Thus, the themes repeat themselves in different forms in their literary activities.

If one analyses the literary tendencies in diasporic women's fiction, even though there is an element of liberal policies concerning women in the countries in which they settle down, the identity crisis and cultural gap make them alienated. In another country, away from the

homeland, the educated woman's aspirations and ambitions are high, expecting the absence of the patriarchal prejudices and social barriers which restrict them inside the four walls of their houses. But they become disenchanted due to the patriarchal and conventional attitudes of their men at home even though they live in a distant and different cultural context. The realization that it is all about the various masks that they put on outside home, and that all of them are still not psychologically very far from their homelands in terms of superstitions, patriarchy, religious and cultural aspects etc. make them disillusioned and frustrated. Most of the women writers portray the psychological trauma of women in exile. The complexity of emotions and realizations related to the growing up of a woman in one's own country and living an expatriate life in the country of exile is a frequent theme in women's writing. The identity formation/subjectivity of women and a conscious/unconscious subversion of it is also a major area of focus in all women's writing. The head/heart supremacy controversy plays a great role in acting as a barrier in the construction of subjectivity of women writers.

Instead of portraying sufferings and victimization, Indian women have started voicing their protest against exploitations, though many are pragmatically doubtful about the mode of protest in real life. A real/imaginary homeland has become a solace to the women writers in exile. Yet, the literature of women writers in exile is focused more on the inner world than on the outer world. The reasons can be the housewife/homemaker status of women in exile, or the inability to cope with the cultural differences in a distant land. There are attempts to celebrate the feminist perspectives in diasporic literature and in doing so the women writers portray the nuances of female body and mind in myriad ways. Unlike men, women are preoccupied with the internal conflicts rather than the external world. In migrant Indian women's writing the emergence of new themes and concerns are hopeful, though at present there is a recurrence of the character types and themes.

Sigmund Freud, in his informal talk on *Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming*, argues that the process of artistic technique helps the writer to emerge from the introvert life to the social space outside. The phantasy, day-dreams, childhood experiences are all reflected in autobiographical/ confessional literary artefact. This seems especially true in Anita Desai's women in exile, as there is also a sense of escapism in the act of literary activity.

The expatriate life in Anita Desai is also illuminated with the social and psychological struggles both inside and outside of the women characters of her novels. *Cry, the Peacock*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Fire on the Mountain*- all these novels deal with the existential and identity crisis of the women protagonists. In many of the diasporic works, the reality is fictionalised in order to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction in writing. Living an imaginary life- fictionalized nostalgia, fictionalised predicaments, fictionalized homeland, all carry the beauty of the creative re-construction of the past.

Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* recognises that everybody is an emigrant from the past. This is more relevant in the case of the diasporic writers, since they write about the emigration from the past, from one's homeland, from one's culture, from one's temporal, spacial constraints etc.

In Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, the protagonist Maya, has not migrated from the supernatural and superstitious space of hers. This causes emotional trauma and Maya gradually becomes insane. This novel focuses mainly on the story of a small family-Maya, her husband and her father- and their inter relationships and conflicting natures. The novel does not discuss any other social or political issues of the time and place, neither is it concerned about the characters outside their family; and hence is called psychological fiction by many.

Another of Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also depicts the pessimistic side of relationships, life in exile, existential anguish etc. Though the woman character suffering from patriarchal and cultural oppression here is an English woman, she is shown as submissive and extra sensitive like Desai's Indian woman protagonists. Sarah, a London citizen who marries the Indian migrant Adit, finds it difficult to adjust with the Indian ways of being. Here, Desai also refers to the racial discrimination against Indians. Dev, another Indian who reaches London for higher education, is troubled by the racial prejudices existing in the country; later he, like other Indians there, learns to live in such a country and use it for fulfilling his ambitions. Other than this pestering social and political issue, Desai focuses more on the familial discords. She doesn't go deep into the racial prejudices. Instead she looks into the psychological troubles of a family and she is preoccupied with only a very few people around them. The cultural assimilation and related concerns get priority in Desai's novel.

In *Fire on the Mountain* also, the protagonist is an alienated person who prefers solitude; even the arrival of the postman is an intrusion here. The characters seek 'inside' for remedies for their problems; they do not look at other people in similar or worse predicaments. They do not share or empathise with the life around them. These women characters look inside more and more as a defence mechanism, they seem to exaggerate their sufferings and try to move away from others to avoid further emotional damage caused by others.

The women characters in all these three novels belong to middle class or upper middle class of the society. Unlike native narratives or African American women's narratives, they do not share a feeling of sisterhood or possess a platform for informal gatherings. These women can be called in-between-women, as they have not completely ignored the Indian traditional way of life, and their appreciation for the new life in a migrated country is transitory and not completely genuine. The rootlessness and alienation in the migrated country haunts them; instead of finding an optimistic way out, they become recluses.

In *Fire on the Mountain* and *Cry, the Peacock*, the psychological problems of the protagonists seem to arise due to the pessimistic and fragile existence of the characters themselves. And mostly, this has its roots in marital discord, loss of comfort zones including private and public spaces and cultural alienation. The realizations appear late. The nostalgia in the case of most expatriates is a myth, and people resort to this myth to escape from the feeling of cultural alienation.

In all these three novels of Anita Desai, the women are reluctant to leave behind their prejudices and fundamentalist attitudes when they start living in a context different from that of their homeland. Even if they adjust psychologically with the social, cultural and political context in the country to which they migrated, there is a sense of sin and feeling of guilt associated with it. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, an old lady wishes to spend her old age in a tranquil and peaceful countryside; a life of solitude and happiness for her own self. But when other people intrude (here, her great grand-daughter Raka) she feels guilty of being a non-traditional woman. All her happiness and peace is broken at that moment. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is described as neurotic; she dreams of an albino astrologer and his prediction about the death of either her husband or herself. After the fears and nightmares regarding her death, she consoles herself that her husband Gowthama can be the one who dies; she even thinks of the word 'murder'. But looking closer, one can find another explanation for her intention to murder her husband, which is the already existing dissatisfaction and discord in their marital life. Here also the self-centredness of the protagonist is self-evident.

Sarah and Adit in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Maya and Gowthama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*- all of them are flat characters who do not grow up and mature. Their prejudices, cultural features, insensitivity/oversensitivity are all the same in the beginning of the novel till the end of it. They don't learn from anybody or anything, they live in a confined geographical and psychological space, and finally everything results in explosions in the form of divorce, extra marital relationships, insanity, and violence like murder or suicide. They manipulate justifications for their actions, but do not try to explore the world of 'others'.

When the individual's egotism is hurt, they find refuge in an imaginary nostalgia where their egoism/egotism/ solipsism are safely kept. Maya being the centre of attention in her father's house expects the same intimacy and care from her husband too. This egotism is threatened when she starts living with her husband Gowthama. Nanda Kaul is trapped in the egotistic feelings associated with her self-made past, and she firmly believes that she has a right to live the rest of her life in the way she wants it to be- in solitary serenity. Nanda Kaul's feeling of guilt arises from her nostalgic feelings associated with the other women folk of her native country, especially the women of her own house. In the case of Sarah, her unconscious self believes in the cultural superiority of her race. So, when she marries Adit, she is not able to adjust with the Indian ways of Adit, and his family. In all these three characters, when the egotism is challenged, hurt or threatened, they get disillusioned with their life and most often accuse others for their predicament. The ultimate result is disappointment and depression. Nostalgia for the past and homeland is one means of escapism from this complex struggle with an unconscious sense of egotism. The individual strives to attain happiness imagining, reimagining and reproducing similar conditions in another context, where it is a difficult and often impossible task.

Fictionalisation is another response to the complications posed by the diasporic dilemma. The characters tend to fictionalise the self, often exaggerating the complexities of the self in their social relations. The problematisation of identity and existence is also part of this response to

the threatened egotism in a host country. Fictionalising the past and ‘others’ is also found in the literary trends of the diasporic individuals. Imaginary constructions of the unconscious mind find expression and partial satisfaction in their fictionalisation.

Adit and Sarah, in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* reimagines their homeland and culture in a somewhat fictionalized form. Adit’s songs, his deliberations about native place and ancestral home, Sarah’s reflections on her past are such fictionalized memories. Nanda Kaul’s feelings of guilt and sin are evidences of the haunting past which follows her even in a distant place and old age. Maya’s irrational fear is also a fictionalised and it further leads to a neurotic, schizophrenic condition.

In the words of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, an individual becomes a subject by showing fidelity to an ‘event’ in life. From this perspective these protagonists of Anita Desai cannot be called subjects at all. They do not pass through the process of ‘becoming/being a subject’; instead they remain plain, flat, static individuals not completely grown up or matured.

Hence, I wish to conclude my arguments with the quotation given in the very beginning of this paper. The ultimate sense of displacement and discontent is due to the weight of memories and expectation, rather than the cultural or geographical dislocation. The Diasporic predicament in Anita Desai’s selected works is not concerned mainly with a geographical displacement, but with a temporal displacement- a displacement from the past to the present, present to the past, and at times, also from future to present, future to past and vice versa.

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