

A Different Outlook of Diaspora in Anita Desai's Novels

R. Padmavathi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kongu Engineering College, Erode.

ABSTRACT

The term Diaspora represents people's displacement which results in isolation and alienation in cultural spheres in new lands. The exile or displacement is mainly based on the three types of phenomena: forced, half forced – half willed and willed consequences. The Jewish community was forced to exile, whereas during the colonial period people were uprooted to serve the British Empire in different parts of the world and they settled there half forced-half willingly because option was given to them after the war, but the third dimension of expatriation is the willed choice of migrants from the third world countries for greener pastures in the developed countries. Whatever the reasons may be but the reality is that the immigrants experience a sense of up rootedness and unbelonging in the foreign countries. When people try to define Diaspora in different angles, Diasporic characters in Anita Desai are a result of the inner psyche of the characters as also their external circumstances. Loneliness is a manifestation of both inner and outer conditions and hence, its sense can be evoked even in the middle of society. My article focuses on the novels of Anita Desai and her characters with a view to Diasporic touch in it. Desai has clearly brought about the conflicts faced by her characters both internally and externally. This new dimension would bring about a sea change in the Diasporic literature.

KEYWORDS

Colonial; Diasporic; Isolation; Alienation.

Many writers have defined the term diaspora, which initially was used for the dispersion and expel of the Jews from their homeland. The term diaspora represents people's dislocation which results in isolation and alienation in cultural spheres in new lands. The exile or displacement is mainly based on the three types of phenomena: forced, half forced – half willed and willed consequences. The Jewish community was forced to exile, whereas during the colonial period people were uprooted to serve the British Empire in different parts of the world and they settled there half forced-half willingly because option was given to them after the

war, but the third dimension of banishment is the willed choice of migrants from the third world countries for greener pastures in the developed countries. Exile, in its literal sense, is a physical condition but the sense of exile is not necessarily an appearance of a dislocated existence. Even if there is a geographical displacement, the exilic condition in many cases is only superficially physical and fundamentally psychological and spiritual. The external exile either compounds or, occasionally, suppresses these internal conditions.

The Indian diaspora in the West has experienced a physical displacement but in a globalized world migrants are not treated

as aliens, moreover the newer migrants have migrated of their own will, and hence there is little cause for them to feel the sense of being in exile. Whatever the reasons may be but the reality is that the immigrants experience a sense of uprootedness and unbelonging in the foreign countries. The writers, themselves, experiencing diasporic, problematics are portraying different aspects of sensibilities and concerns, although these vary as per their generations, perceptions, attitudes and specific identities but the dominant factors are displacement, rootlessness, discrimination, marginalisation, identification, inter and cross-cultural conflicts faced by diaspora.

In this article I would like to focus on the complex situation of diaspora. With the support of various authentic thinkers, Anita Desai has formalized the different and new shades of diaspora. In fact the Third World Countries now are developing frameworks on how best diaspora can be re-incorporated, whereas the First World Countries are formulating policies to check immigration.

Anita Desai's fictions are generally existentialist studies of individuals and hence background, politicality, historicity, social settings, class, cross-cultural pluralities are all only incidental. But being incidental does not mean that they are essentially irrelevant. Their study is not only as important as the study of 'human condition' in Desai's fiction but in fact, they are essential to the latter study. This is especially relevant when the fiction deals with the condition of being in a Diaspora about migrant existence. The solitude of Desai depicts in her diasporic characters is a result of the inner psyche of the characters as also their external circumstances. Loneliness is a manifestation of both inner and outer conditions and hence, its sense can be evoked even in the middle of society.

The Jew, Hugo Baumgartner in the novel Baumgartner's Bombay had spent

his childhood in his native Germany with his parents. Even as a child, a sense of loneliness gnaws at his being and is evoked at his crucial moments of triumph. On his first day at school when his mother comes to take him with a cone of bonbons for him, he holds up his prize for the others to see but already "the other children were vanishing down the street" and "no one saw his triumph". He accuses his mother for being late and complains: "You don't look like everyone else's mother" (33).

Hugo's loneliness as a child, in the midst of society comes because of the lack of recognition. Even when he is not neglected, he feels the same loneliness as is obvious from the Christmas incident in the school when all his classmates were sent gifts by their parents to be distributed to them by their teacher. Hugo longs for the red glass globe that adorns the top of the Christmas tree. When the teacher makes it up as his gift he impulsively realizes that his parents have not sent any gift for him and he obstinately disinclines from accepting it even though forced by his classmates to take it. The Baumgartner family lives in fear in Nazi Germany and fear is an acute form of loneliness.

When Hugo has a physical displacement and migrates as a teenager to India, he is imbued with the thought of loneliness. Thus it seems that the change in location is only incidental to his sense of solitariness. But the circumstantial changes also help to aggravate one's solitude and hence it is not merely incidental and this fact is quite apt in consideration with the separation that Hugo suffers from his mother. That Hugo's mother stayed back in Nazi Germany and her highly censored letters only bear the abrupt statement that she was well and it provides no comfort to Baumgartner. The memory of his mother in Germany is a constant prevention against stopping him from succumbing to a sense of loneliness.

Influences and counter-influences that mould one's perceptions govern human life. When the tension generated by these counter-acting influences rises to a critical level, human beings suffer. The molding gives rise to senses that off late were in a hidden state. Thus Baumgartner's loneliness is also aroused from latency when in India he is in the loneliness-alleviating company of Lotte, a German cabaret singer. Hugo's relationship with Lotte is no doubt vital but acts only as a poor substitute for all the relationships he craves for.

Just as Baumgartner keeps stray cats and cares for them in an attempt to give some purpose to his lonely existence, his relationship with Lotte can be thought to be in parallel to it. The relationship in itself is important but it is more important because it gives some purpose to Hugo's "Sisyphus-like" (37) existence as explicated by G. R. Taneja in the essay "Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay: A Note".

In the camp Baumgartner is among other Jews yet he stays detached because he, unlike others, could find no way "to alleviate the burden, the tedium, the emptiness of the waiting days" (Baumgartner's Bombay 125). Even after the war, when he meets one of his camp-mates, he finds that he has changed his name from the "too Jewish" Julius to the "very English" Julian. If Julius deliberately dilutes his Jewish identity, Baumgartner unknowingly suffers from an identity crisis and to counter it, there arises in him a sense of non-belonging. Baumgartner cannot go back to Germany because the Germany of his childhood no longer exists and hence his perennial sense of loneliness continues.

The German, Kurt, follows the typically corrupt lifestyle of the hippies in India but another German, Sophie, from the novel Journey to Ithaca is most unlike in that regard. She has come to India following her Italian husband, Matteo, who

is seeking spiritual love. Sophie cannot identify with Matteo's ideals and does not find the Mother as inspiring as Matteo does. She is left abandoned and lonely in a foreign land. It is quite sarcastic when Sophie discovers that the Mother herself is a seeker of divine love and is of Egyptian origin who has travelled all over the world until settling in India. But by the time she comes to make the disclosure to Matteo, the Mother is already dead and Matteo has vanished. She is left high and dry bearing in her the sense of spiritual loneliness that has come out of the mysticism in the churning of differing cultures.

Anita Desai's novel Bye-Bye Blackbird has the Indian refugee Dev disappointed by an England represented by the London of the 1960s because his mind has the image of an England as depicted in English literature studied in schools and colleges. Dev's psychology aggravates his exilic condition because his artistic sense cannot classify with reality. But when he visits the countryside he finds:

It was something he was visiting for the first time in his life, yet he had known it all along – in his reading, in his daydreams – and now he found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirror like reflection of reality. (Desai, Blackbird 170)

Dev decides to stay in England after making this mental recognition that eases his exilic condition. In St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, Dev finds "little religious aura" (Desai, Blackbird 68) and "has an uneasy feeling that these are no temples of Christ, but temples dedicated to the British Empire" (Desai, Blackbird 68). It is in the countryside that he visits an "old, small and silent village church" (Desai, Blackbird 172) and on touching

the rounded pillars felt soft to his hand as do the stones in Hindu temples that have been touched by so many devout foreheads. The

stone tiles were curved beneath his feet as are those of temples on which Hindu worshippers kneel and walk incessantly (Desai, *Blackbird* 171).

Dev wishes that “he had a stick of incense to burn, a handful of jasmine or marigold to offer, Hindu fashion, to the grace of Christianity” (Desai, *Blackbird* 172). It is the aesthetic and spiritual familiarity that suppresses the psychological sense of exile.

Arun, from the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is a very good example of an Indian in the periphery of Massachusetts, finding himself lonely and unable to adjust to a culture of freedom. He is not only taken aback by American college life but also by the ways of the Patton family, his host for the summer. He cannot understand the obsession with which Mr. Patton himself barbecues red meat after coming home early only to find his son Rod and daughter Melanie absent from the ceremony. He finds it strange that Mrs. Patton keeps her refrigerator always stocked to the full, despite knowing that there are not many heads in her family to consume that food. Arun cannot even identify with Rod and Melanie. Though Arun takes up jogging like Rod, unlike him he simply cannot devote himself to such physical exercise. Arun is shocked to find Melanie’s condition of bulimia amidst the plenty that America

provides. All dysfunctional indulgences of Americans make Arun puzzled and from this puzzlement breed his sense of loneliness. Faced with an apparent paradox of a new culture, he is lonely.

The first encounter that any migrant has with his/her country of adoption is with superficialities. It definitely takes time to scratch this surface of superficiality and till then it is only loneliness for company. Arun tries to bleed in through the surface for he knows that the meeting place for two cultures can only be some middle ground. To reach this middle ground he has to diminish the distance that he has to travel, for which he has to know the distance of the other extremity. Arun does so by delving deep into the core of a suburban American family and invariably he is shocked at his first encounter. He takes the first step in overcoming his state of shock by giving to Mrs. Patton as parting gifts, the parcels that have been sent to him by his parents from India. What he has alienated himself from to become a Westerner gives rise to his sense of loneliness. This not only proves that loneliness is an inherent character of diasporic life but also that the sense of loneliness acts as an umbilical cord attaching oneself to one’s native place, irrespective of its existence, while living in a diaspora. It is perhaps consoling that loneliness is in this sense a necessity.