

Elements of Diaspora in the writings of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the greatest writers of Indian Diaspora. She was born in 1937. It is noteworthy to find that she is a writer as well as a teacher. Her father was a Bengali businessman and her mother was a German immigrant. During that period, it was very unusual for an Indian to marry a European girl. Mr. Mazumdar met his wife for the first time when he was a student of engineering in pre-war Berlin. After marrying the couple moved to New Delhi, capital of India. Desai was raised and brought up here with her two elder sisters and brother. Anita Desai learned German from her mother at home and she spoke Hindi with people around her in the society. She was also well versed in Bengali, Urdu and English. At school she got a special affinity with English language. With the advancement of time, it became her literary language.

Keywords: - Diaspora, Indian, Immigrant, Student, Marriage

Anita Desai started writing in her childhood. She herself has experienced the pain of Diaspora and it becomes evident from most of her writings. Her characters reflect the pain of Diaspora. At school she got a special affinity with English language. With the advancement of time, it became her literary language. It is amazing to find that merely at the age of seven she started writing in English. At the age of nine her first story got published. She completed her higher secondary education from Queen Mary Higher Secondary School, New Delhi. In 1957 she received the degree of B.A in English from Miranda House College, University of Delhi. After completing her graduation, she got married to Ashvin Desai who was working with a software company as a director. It is interesting to note that her husband was also a writer who wrote *Between Eternities: Ideas on life and The Cosmos*¹. In 1963, Anita Desai published her first novel entitled *Cry, the Peacock*². In this novel we can find themes like dissonance in the relationship of a wife and a husband. The novelist has tried to depict a woman who is responsive and caring. Maya is the central character of this novel. She is married to Gautama who is a practitioner of law. He is talented and wealthy but he is over busy in his profession. He loves Maya and cares for her in his own way but Maya is not happy because she considers her husband as a busy man who has less time for his wife. In this novel we can find that the married life of Maya and Gautama is sad and it lacks proper love and care. It seems that the marriage is a perfect mismatch because wife and husband are not connected well with their emotions. Marriage is not simply wedlock but it needs proper nourishment of love and care. In the beginning of the novel we find that Toto, the pet dog of Maya is dead. This incident is very serious for Maya and she becomes upset. She is childless and Toto seemed to her a perfect child. For her husband the death of Toto was just a simple incident. Gautama tried all the tricks to make her wife happy but it seems that she was deeply wounded by Toto's death. The unresponsiveness of Gautama creates a kind of mental illusion to Maya and it harms her drastically. In this novel there are hardly any elements of Diaspora but the kind of pain, agony caused due to identity crisis and seclusion gives us a glimpse of the variety of characters in novels of Anita Desai. In the novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*³ we can find the story of a man who is the victim of his own situation in India. He is one of the finest examples of a man who feels disturbed by civilization. In Germany he goes through the phases of racial segregation. In India he is considered as an outsider because he is a Jew. Although he has lived in India for decades but in the society he is not accepted. It can be one of the reasons that he feels alienated and repressed. His father's furniture business was prosperous but it was plundered by Nazis who were obsessive in nature. He wants to live with his ancestors business in majestic India. It is one of the

reasons that he approaches to Calcutta and tries his luck in the timber commerce. At this moment the Second World War breaks out and he is arrested because he belongs to Germany although he has nothing to do with his nationality. He is considered as a representative of Nazi Germany because his identity is German. He is behind the bars along with other Germans for more than six years. When the war is over then he along with other Germans is released. He goes to Bombay to live an austere life but ironically he is killed by a German drug dealer. The novel ends abruptly and we find the shattered life of Baumgartner is full of pathos and irony.

In India he had no family and it can be one of the reasons that he is itinerant. He loves those cats who are frequent visitor in his house and considers the cats as his family members. It is interesting to find that each cat has a forename. He remembers his family when he was a youngster not in India but in Berlin. His father was a wealthy man and his mother was a refined lady but he was not fortunate enough to live a life of permanent freedom because of racism. The happy childhood of Baumgartner is mentioned in the second part of the novel. We find that he keeps himself busy most of time by remembering his family and relatives in Berlin. The concept of Diaspora in the novels of Anita Desai is unique because the novelist has tried to analyze her characters from different angles. The literature of Diaspora deals with sociological concept of expatriate sensibility. *Clear Light of Day*⁴ got published in 1980. In this novel Anita Desai projects the sociological concept of family. The setting of the novel is Old Delhi. The plot of the novel deals with post partition condition of an Indian family. One of the important themes of the novel is existence of family life. There are four sections in this novel. Das family is at the centre of the novel. Characters like Tara and Bim are very interesting in this novel. Tara wakes up one morning in her childhood days in Old Delhi. She meets Bim and feels nostalgic. Tara is married to a man who works in India embassies. His name is Bakul and he keeps on travelling to different countries. Tara is not so intelligent like Bim. Forgiveness is one of the major themes of the novel. At the climax of the novel we find that Bim forgives her brother Raja and understands that family plays a very important role in shaping and nurturing the individuality of a person. In *Bye Bye Blackbird*⁵ the novelist Anita Desai has tried to show us the condition of Indian immigrants living in a foreign country. Diaspora is a term which means scattered identity. Diasporic literature is written by those authors who feel homelessness in abroad. It is interesting to note that there are different types of Diaspora. It can be classified as victim Diaspora, Trading Diaspora, Labour Diaspora and Imperial Diaspora. Scholars and critics are of the opinion that there are different subcategories of Diaspora. In *Bye Bye Blackbird* we can find Indian Diaspora which falls under the sub category of Indian English Literature. Different authors have different opinion regarding the concept of Diaspora. They call it by different names like expatriate or exile literature. Anita Desai is a kind of author who has mixed parentage. It is one of the reasons that she has been considered as both an insider as well as an outsider. We have already discussed that her mother is a German whereas her father is an Indian. The setting of the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* is 1960's England. Dev and Adit are the two central characters of this novel. They live in London and Adit has married an English woman whose name is Sarah. Dev wants to complete his higher studies and it is one of the reasons that he goes to London. Adit has come to London to earn more because he thought that in India there is less opportunity to earn more. He remarks that Indians are satisfied even in lower income but he always wanted more. Thus it becomes evident that decent income has attracted him to a foreign country. He finds western life style more attractive in comparison to Indian life style. Adit remarks that apart from economic freedom he likes personal and social freedom which he finds in London. Weekend at the seaside and B.B.C is the purest form of pleasure to him. He has married the girl whom he loved. He considers Sarah as a Bengali Girl although she is English. It is interesting to find that even Sarah acts like a typical devotee Hindu wife who loves her husband more than her own life. She is quiet and reserved like a typical Bengali girl. In comparison to Adit it is hard for Dev to adjust in a foreign country. School boys call him a wog and it infuriates him. He does not like discrimination on the basis of race and colour. Asian emigrants were looked down in England and they were treated as community of 'others'. The character Mrs. Simpson clearly says that Asians have littered their lives. It is overheard by Dev and he feels disappointed. Dev understands that Adit hardly cares for insult because he likes the sound of coins. With the advancement of plot we come to know that there is a social gathering of colored emigrants. This gathering is actually a party where those emigrants could eat and drink freely. In this gathering different migrants of different communities have participated. It is interesting to note that one Pakistani remarks that it is illegal to drink and smoke and touch any girl in his religion. In this foreign country he thinks that such rules are not applicable to him. He can enjoy his freedom here because he is not in his country. Adit and Sarah were dancing on the tunes of Bhangra. The radio was at its highest volume and the party was at peak but suddenly a voice came commanding them to stop the party at ones. The intensity of the freedom was reduced and it hampered the scene of merry making. Dev feels disappointed again and he says to other emigrants that they feel scared because it is not their country. Had it been their country they could have pulled blood from their spleen. It is not freedom but it is life in installment. The character Samar recounts an older incident when he was called as a bloody Pakistani because he refused the order of an Englishman who felt annoyed by his umbrella⁶. This incident left a scar mark on the memory of Dev and he felt that he was living a life of suppression in a foreign soil. It is one of the reasons that Dev felt alienated and repressed in London. The novelist Anita Desai has tried

to project the anguish of Dev. He felt like he was going to a place where he never wanted to go. He was falling down and down like Alice falling down through the rabbit hole⁷. He thought that somebody has caught him eternally. He wanted to evolve out but it was a complete failure. The intensity of the anguish was reduced with the fresh morning. He started accepting the challenges of an immigrant with more zeal and energy. He was haunted by the questions of his identity and individuality. It is one of the reasons that he asked Adit about his moral consciousness. Adit said that he likes the fast and updated life style of London. He has nothing to do with vulgar comments and insults done by English men. In other words, we can say that it became part and parcel of his life. He is a kind of person who cares for the day and hardly thinks about past and present. This can be one of the reasons that he is different from Dev. With the advancement of the plot we find that Adit wanted to meet his landowner with whom he lived for more than three years. Sarah does not like this idea and becomes reluctant to accompany him. When Adit visited the millers then he was taken a back because of their behavior. He was not treated well by them. It is interesting to note that neighbours were watching him like an animal in the zoo. His presence was unpleasant for the white family. Adit understood that it was better to leave the place quickly. He now understood the odd circumstances of life. He was a kind of person who was never serious in life. This incidence compelled him to think about the possibilities of life on a foreign soil. He always thought that money is everything in life and it was one of the reasons that he left India. He wanted to earn more in life but earning with dignity was never a prime concern for him. He became aware after this incident that money is a tool to live happily but it is dignity which safeguards our happiness. Earning money is good but earning respect along with dignity should be given priority in life. Dev knew all these things and it is one of the reasons that he valued tradition and culture of his country. Adit tried hard to forget the insult he received from his land lady but every time he failed. He could not forget the insult and he thought that something is missing in his life. He felt that he was getting divided from inside. The thought that he was an unwanted immigrant was disturbing him. Again, he planned to visit his mother-in-law. He thought that he will be respected at the house of his mother-in-law. His hopes were shattered when he found that his mother-in-law hates him and his ideas. It is noteworthy to find that his mother-in-law wanted to get rid of him. His lifestyle and presence were not admired even at the house of his mother-in-law because he was an Indian. This kind of racial discrimination was not expected by Adit but he received the reality. It taught him a lesson that all that glitters is not gold. Adit was annoyed of his situation. He was hurt but he was unable to do anything. We can say in other words that he was helpless. These circumstances compelled him to think of his motherland. He started hating England because he understood that this country was a foreign country to him. Earlier he used to admire the life style and beauty of England but now his school of thought was changed. He was trying to find out his identity which was scattered on the streets of England. He was trying to recollect his memories of India. It is the condition of Diaspora. It reflects the conditions of an oscillating mind. The suffering and agony of Dev and Adit is not normal. They have come to England only to prosper ahead in life but the kind of discrimination which they face in life is new and irritating. Adit decides to leave England. He wants to go to his native land. He asked her wife Sarah about her conditions. Sarah is a brave girl who knows that her husband loved England more than his life but in return England gave only alienation and repression. She agreed to go with Adit but she knew that all of her relatives were in England. It was a hard decision for Sarah but she valued her relationship. Sarah was leaving behind her twenty-four years of life. She was trying to recollect her emotions. England was inside her nerves and blood. At the end of the novel we find that Dev remains in England. He succeeds in getting rich harvest in England but Adit and Sarah leaves England. At the time of bidding good bye Dev remarks to the couple- "Bye Bye Blackbird"⁸.

Notes and References

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