Perspectives on Diaspora in the Fiction of Anita Desai

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The emergence of interdisciplinary and cultural studies in the academic platform is pivotal to studies in literature. As Boehmer states, "…the postcolonial and migrant novels are seen as appropriate texts for such explorations because they offer multi-voiced resistance to the idea of boundaries and present texts open to transgressive and non-authoritative reading" (243). Literature on diaspora has projected the experiences of the emigrants and their diverse issues poignantly.

Diaspora is primarily concerned with emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland due to socio-economic or political reasons. The word diaspora may be explained as, "The voluntary or forcible movement of people from their home land into new regions" (Ashcroft 68). The group maintains its separateness from the host country based on common ethnicity or nationality, yet maintains attachments, nostalgic or related to culture to the home country. Though the group is physically or geographically displaced, they retain their social and cultural position to the old memories of the culture which they have inherited.

Anita Desai is sensitive in portraying the diasporic sensibilities in the characters in her fiction, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay.* Though the novels vividly represent emigrant situations, and the treatment of different issues related to diaspora, they significantly contribute to diverse interpretations that are characteristic of the postmodern milieu.

I

The post-colonial phase of the Indian Diaspora differs from the earlier forms of migrations. The migrants are from middle-class families, highly skilled and are attracted by umpteen favorable opportunities abroad. Professional migrations into the US, UK, Europe and Australia are common. *Bye-Bye Blackbird,* written on the Indian diaspora, revolves around two friends, Dev and Adit, in London. Adit has been in London for quite some time now and is married to Sarah, an English woman. Dev is in England in search of a degree and subsequent employment. Adit was disappointed with his job in India. He says:

> All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourist bureau. They were going to pay me two hundred and fifty rupees and after *thirty* years I could expect to have five hundred rupees. That is what depressed me-the thirty yeas I would have to spend in panting after that extra two hundred and fifty rupees. (18)

This has forced him to leave his homeland and settle abroad for a decent income.

Adit is able to withstand insults hurled at him because he has adopted England as his home and insults do not reach his ear. Dev, on the other hand, gets infuriated when a schoolboy calls Adit, 'wog'(14). As they take a walk down the street, they hear Mrs. Simpson muttering aloud, 'Littered with Asians! Must get Richard to move out of Clapham, it is impossible now' (16). Emigrants, especially Asians are looked down as the 'other' in England. 'Otherness' is defined by difference, typically difference marked by outward signs like race and gender. When Adit does not bother about the insults hurled at him, Dev says, "Boot-licking toady. Spineless imperialist lover….You would sell your soul, and your passport too, for a glimpse, at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home' (16). At this juncture, both Adit and Dev understand that they have been opportunists.

Within a few days, Dev and Adit decide to meet at a friend's home to eat and drink in the company of other colored emigrants. "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material

links with their countries of origin – their homeland" (Sheffer 3). A Pakistani claims 'My religion forbids me to drink or smoke or touch a woman. But here, in this country, what am I to do? I also do the things I see other men doing' (22). Then he clasps a young girl by the waist and enjoys the evening. Sarah and Adit enjoy the *bhangra* and dance. As the group enjoy, they hear a loud voice, 'Wrap it up, you blighters, where d'you think you are, eh?'(23) The scene changes and the group is forced to reduce the intensity of its merry-making. Dev, feeling slighted, says, 'The trouble with you emigrants is that you go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you wouldn't dream of doing it. You might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. Over here all you do is shut up and look sat upon' (24). Samar recounts the day he was called a 'bloody Pakistani' (26) as he refused to close his umbrella at the order of an Englishman.

These incidents leave a deep scar in Dev, who is divided between the opportunity he has received in England and the thoughts of bearing suppression and differences. He feels like an alien, insecure and unidentified. His agony is expressed by Desai:

> Dev ventures into the city…. The menacing slighter of the escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down – like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wondering through the dark labyrinth of a prison….Dev is swamped inkily, with a great dread of being caught, step in the underground by some accident, some collapse, and being slowly suffocated to a worm's death, never to emerge into freshness and light. (57-58)

The anguish vanishes as Dev is ushered in by the fresh morning to meet the challenges of an immigrant. Constantly taunted and worried, Dev asks Adit about his feelings. Adit replies, '…the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench – and the boredom, Dev *yar*, the boredom of it' (49). 'I live for the moment. I don't think, I don't worry' (49). Adit insists on an annual visit to his former landlady, in Harrow. Sarah is strangely reluctant. 'That's where I lived for three years, Dev. That's the only landlady I stayed with for more than a fortnight. The others all threw me out, but I stayed with them, with the Millers, for three years' (77). At the Millers', Adit is treated as an outsider and his visit is rather unwelcome. Adit is sincere about his enquiries about their

daughter, but 'it is as though she wishes to reject the fact of Adit having lived in their house for three years'…. In spite of this, Mrs. Miller does not seem to like any personal questions about her house or family (81). Adit is no doubt taken aback, but he takes control of the situation and Adit, Sarah and Dev take their leave. On their way back, 'neighbors stare curiously from behind their technicolored rose trees and a dog barks' (81). The visit by a non- white is an unpleasant surprise to the white family and their neighbors.

This experience is unforgettable, and Adit 'is perfectly aware of the schizophrenia that is infecting him like the disease to which all Indians abroad, he declares, are prone. At times he invites it, at times he fights it. He is not sure what it might be like to be one himself, in totality. He is not sure. Any longer' (86). His uncertainty is best described by Desai:

> In this growing uncertainty, he feels the divisions inside him divided further, and then re-divided once more. Simple reactions and feeling lose their simplicity and develop complex angles, facets, shades and tints… there are days in which the life of an alien appears enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision and, drawing himself together, he feels he can never bear to be unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land, however abject or dull, where he has, at least, a place in the sun, security, status and freedom. (86).

Weeks later, Adit, Dev and Sarah visit Sarah's parents, Mrs. and Mr. Roscommon- James. This visit is nostalgic and Adit realizes that his mother- in-law treats him rather differently. He is annoyed at the treatment meted out to him. He is enveloped by 'The sudden, fresh odors released by the plucking and crumpling of mint leaves , and the soft, insistent fragrance of the tiny stars of jasmine aroused a thousand different memories in minds always open to the winds

of nostalgia'(139). This makes him unhappy. He says, "My mother-in-law hates and despises me. They make fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore I am angry. I am hurt (176). These fleeting moods of anger are new to him and '…faced with one, he was unable to deal with it – he merely stood still and felt his leaden feet sink in as though in quick-sands' (176). Adit develops such a hatred for England that he suspects everything English to be insulting and depressing. He loses control of himself:

> …he stood staring, not at one of the posters he so delighted in but at a piece of that *Nigger, go home* graffiti on the walls that had previously nearly skidded off the surface of his eyeballs without actually penetrating. Now he is screwed up his eyes and studied it as though it were a very pertinent sign board (181).

> …the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong (182).

Formulations of experiences of misunderstood frustrations are the outcome of issues of diaspora communities. The question of settling is a question to any diasporian unless one associates oneself with any of the two lands. This oscillated mind, the suffering and agony out of cultural change are expressed by the diaspora. Adit realizes that he has to escape from England 'and he began to tell Sarah of this nostalgia that had become an illness, an ache' (183). He tells Sarah, "Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself half-English, but it was only pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come?" (204) Sarah is happy that Adit has finally taken a decision and condescends. Under the pretext of the war between India and Pakistan, Adit resolves to return back to his homeland. When Sarah announces her pregnancy, Adit is delighted and tells her that the kid would be born in India.

Sarah, married to an Indian, faces an alienation that is internal. Desai has remarkably stated that Sarah 'shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as

though she watched them disappear' (31). Sarah is one who puts up with resistance and attitudinal differences within her community as she is the wife of an Asian. Her experiences are tormenting, and she feels an 'outsider' in the company of her own countrymen. At the school where she works, questions regarding her stay in England, and the fact that her husband cannot stay in England for long is raised. When Sarah stammers, she hears Julia say, 'If she is that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?' (37). She cannot ignore the comment 'Hurry, hurry, Mrs.Curry' (38) that are aimed at her in the school compound. Her friends at school no longer approach her in the way they used to before her wedding to Adit.

At home, she has to put up with the mannerisms of her husband, learn the Indian way of cooking and at times take lessons from Adit. At her mother's place, she is asked questions that are directed against her family and her adopted culture. Her mother asks, 'Do you know, I always thought Indians were – what do you call 'en-intro-intro-'. Introverts? Yes yes. People say they are so moody and self-conscious. But my dear, your – your husband and his friends, they are the very opposite. Aren't they?' (139). Sarah has to maintain silence or divert the attention of the gathered, to avoid an unpleasant stay. Torn between two cultures, she tries her best not to confront embarrassing situations in her family and within her community. Sarah retains her mannerisms, but she is unable to cope with Adit's demands always. She understands that she has to adjust to the situations. When Adit confides his longing to return back to his motherland with her, she almost readily agrees. At the same time, the thought of being 'uprooted' creates fears that are new. She thinks, 'There was the baby. There was the voyage. The uprooting' (206). She is a victim of her own decisions. She is bold enough to face any situation in life, in spite of the gnawing fears in her mind.

One afternoon when Sarah is alone and Emma, her friend is upstairs, conducting a committee meeting, she recollects her recent emotions:

> She felt all the pangs of saying good bye to her past twenty- four years. It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew it, it was her English self to which she must say good bye. That was what hurt – not saying good bye to England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance from her, but always within the scope of a return visit. England, she whispered, but the word aroused no special longing or possessiveness in her. English, she

whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already (221).

She can neither shed her native English culture nor accept the adopted Indian culture completely. During their farewell, when Christine enquires about her baby, Sarah says, 'You mean boy or girl? I don't mind either. "Or do you mean who it will look like, Adit or me? I hope it will look like Adit, brown as brown, with black hair and black, black eyes" (224). Christine replies, "Well, in that case …I suppose it will be better to have the child in India" (224). Her identity as an English woman is lost. She is now a multi-cultured, Mrs. Sen, the wife of an Asian, rather than Sarah, the English woman.

Dev has decided to stay in England and reap a rich harvest. Though it is Dev who blames the English and Adit, it is he who finally succeeds in firmly establishing his 'roots' in England. He resolves to teach the English a lesson for the abuse that has to be borne. When Adit and Sarah bid him goodbye, he calls out, 'Bye-bye Blackbird'!

II

Baumgartner's Bombay traces the journey of the Jew, Hugo Baumgartner, in India, his land of refuge from the Nazis. Desai has etched out the life of a Jew, whose escape from Germany during the Second World War has cost him his identity and nationality. Suffering internal exile, the Jews stay in their own country and feel alienated. The novel brings out diverse interpretations on the Jewish diaspora and its problems like migrations, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, culture, gender, nationality and place.

As the story opens, Baumgartner, who has been in India for fifty years, remains a *firanghi* to his friends. His only acquaintances, he claims his own are his homeless pet

cats and Lotte, a run-away German cabaret singer. He recalls the years he has spent in India and the desolation that he feels now is the result of his inability to assimilate with the Indian culture:

> He had lived in this land for fifty years – or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference – and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic; it was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on earth. Yet, the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: *Firanghi,* foreigner. (19)

Baumgartner could certainly not recognize himself as an Indian, for he has been the survivor of a marginalized sector in his homeland, Germany and the longing for belongingness is a part of him. 'The Jewish Diaspora is made possible by the development of a proto nationalism, which prevents its assimilation into other cultural formations,' says Sayyid (38).

'A Diaspora is formed when people are displaced but continue to narrate their identity in terms of that displacement' (Sayyid 38). He represents the minority group in Germany that yearns for a homeland which is unassailable. "Diaspora signified a collective trauma, banishment, where one dreamed of home, but 'lived in exile" (Cohen ix). Disempowered, robbed of representation in the social, religious and the political world, these oppressed people are treated as aliens in their own land. Baumgartner recalls, 'In Germany he had been dark- his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair- and that marked him the '*firanghi'* (Baumgartner's Bombay 20).

Baumgartner is a regular customer at Farrokh's tea –shop. On this particular day, Farrokh, asks Baumgartner to befriend a person sitting behind him. To Baumgartner, the person appears as a cat that signifies homelessness. In Farrokh's presence, Bumgartner is reminded of the racial differences between them:

> A dignified man who made much of wearing the sacred thread, of reading the scriptures and remaining aloof from all those of an inferior race, to him a mass of *mleccha.* For all the kindness shown him, Baumgartner had always felt he

> belonged to the latter. (13)

To Baumgartner, the issues of culture, race and caste are so deep-rooted that he finds it impossible to be one among the others in this locality. The young boy, Kurt, a German, recognizes the Jew, Baumgartner, and 'the looks they had exchanged had been the blades of knives slid quickly and quietly between the ribs, with the silence of guilt' (21). Baumgartner gives shelter to the young boy in his own room, despite his natural hatred for Germans.

Baumgartner spends his childhood in his native Germany with his parents. The sense of loneliness haunts him and is evoked at his crucial moments of triumph. On his first day at school when his mother comes to fetch 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 is the outcome of the lack of identity in his homeland, so he feels lonely even when he is not neglected. This is evident in the Christmas celebrations in school. When all his classmates are 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 realizes that his parents have not sent any gift for him and he refrains from accepting it even though he is persuaded by his classmates to take it. It is perhaps this sense of loneliness experienced by the Jewish community in Germany that helped Hitler aggravate loneliness into fear. The Baumgartner family, like the other Jew families lives in constant fear in Nazi Germany and loneliness is the outcome of fear.

During the Second World War, Baumgartner is interned in a camp in British India because he carries a German passport. In the camp he is among other Jews, yet is alone as he cannot 'alleviate the burden, the tedium, the emptiness of the waiting days' (125). After the war, he meets one of his camp-mates, Julius who has changed his name to Julian. Julius has successfully shed his Jewish identity, which Baumgartner cannot do. The reasons for the differences between their ways of thinking could be assessed in the opinion of Arendt that the Jews have two significant personal standings open to them. One is based on assimilation, when the Jew became part of the 'host' society as an exceptional Jew. The other is the Jew who is totally distinct from the 'host', and does not belong to that society– an outcast (22). Baumgartner is certainly the figure who is not at home. Therefore, diasporas possess an 'antinational' character (Sayyid 41). According to Sayyid:

> Unlike the nation with its homogeneity and bounded ness, Diaspora suggests heterogeneity and porousness. Nations define 'home', whereas Diaspora is a condition of homelessness; in the nation the territory and people are fused,

> whereas in a Diaspora the two are dis-articulated. The Diaspora is not the other of the nation simply because it is constructed from the antithetical elements of a nation, it is, rather, an antination since it interrupts the closure of nation. The existence of Diaspora prevents the closure of the nation, since a Diaspora is by definition located within another nation. (41-42).

Moreover, an identity surfaces in the 'hegemonic practices' and 'hegemonic narratives' and this results in 'being at home' (42).

Baumgartner reaches Bombay when his father commits suicide, and his mother stays back in Germany. Hugo suffers both a physical and psychological displacement. The estrangement from his mother, coupled with the sense of homelessness worsens matters as he is unable to situate himself within the society. His mother's letters do not provide any solace as there is scarcely any information other than all is well. The memory of his mother in Germany is the only link with his homeland. In India, there is temporary relief from solitude in the company of Lotte, a German cabaret singer. Hugo's relationship with Lotte is sexually gratifying but meaningless otherwise. The relationship is important to him as it is the only outlet of suppressed passions that result in purposeful involvement. Lotte is secure at the hands of Kanthi Sethia with whom she has developed an incestuous relationship. This is probably the fate of a woman who is lonely and uneducated. To keep alive, prostitution is the only way out. Lotte has no other native acquaintances other than Baumgartner. It is ironical that while the company of Kurt is detrimental to Baumgartner, Lotte's relationship sparks a few embers of life in him. Baumgartner makes every effort to establish a meaningful relationship with Kurt, but it turns out to be tragic. Kurt robs and murders Baumgartner, who is helpless. Neither Kurt nor Baumgartner can withstand the pressures of loneliness. While Kurt reacts violently to the situations in life, Baumgartner reconciles. It is perhaps the ultimate judgment that no reconciliation is possible and all attempts at overcoming diasporic loneliness are futile.

Diaspora continues to pose questions related to its fluidity and expanse and writers interpret the multiple issues that are inherent. Migrations and acculturation are pertinent phenomena that dominate human perceptions. As Bhabha opines:

> The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of otherness. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature,

> perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized or political refuges – those border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. (12)

Diaspora issues are discussed from the individual viewpoint and then magnified globally. Desai deserves acclaim in being able to delve into the characters' responses to situations that are beyond their control. She has dealt with refined emotional states that find their ultimate expressions in the form of attitudes or behavioral tendencies. She is certainly one of the observant writers who have succeeded in opening fresh grounds in analyzing and probing further into this area of study.

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