

## Anita Desai's 'Sarah': A Study of Diasporic Womanhood.

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**Abstract:** In the post-colonial era, migration has become a universal phenomenon and it has given rise to the vast cultural mosaics, melting pots and salad bowls in the places of migrant settlements. In the literary world, migration has forged new literary dynamics that foregrounds transculturalism which marks a significant feature of migrant experience. Migrant writings are the expressions of expatriate, immigrant, migratory, dislocated, displaced subjectivities which surface a number of emotional dispositions like feelings of alienation, loneliness, nostalgia, rootlessness, displacement and identity crisis etc.

The consciousness of the changed times on the one hand and the socio-cultural mores and values that have bestowed on the diasporas on the other hand have led to the fragmentation of their psyche. Anita Desai concentrates on the emotional worlds of her women characters, probes into their inner psyche and presents their inner conflicts and turmoil along with the strength and perseverance of her women characters. This article endeavors to study the diasporic consciousness of the protagonist 'Sarah' of Desai's novel *Bye, Bye Blackbird* (1971) in post-colonial India.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Diaspora, Displacement, Identity crisis, Exile, Expatriation, Globalization, Nostalgia, Transculturalism.

Date of Submission: 15-08-2019

Date of Acceptance: 30-08-2019

### I. INTRODUCTION

Alienation in colonial situations may be interpreted as the experience of the colonized against the colonizers. It has alienated the blacks from the whites in Africa and the cultured from the subalterns in India. Colour was identified with intellect. The British called Indians subordinate or inferior to them. Such racial differentiation or colour complex has produced tremendous hatred. *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, the victims are an English lady Sarah and her Indian husband Adit. Both the characters suffer from postcolonial alienation and exile being alienated from their own lands void from their own people. Their cultural roots are overthrown and discarded. Postcolonial alienation plays a distinct role in this novel as it is concerned with displacement.

Being a woman diaspora herself, in this novel Desai focuses on the internal aspects of Sarah who encounters displacement after marrying Adit, the Indian expatriate in London. As the two major protagonists of this novel belong to two different worlds; East and West, Desai has successfully reflected the socio-cultural aspects of both their worlds along with the characters' actions and reactions in alien lands. In comparison to the protagonists of her earlier novels, (Maya of *Cry*, *The Peacock*, Monisha of *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*.) who are the victims of existentialism, Sarah presents a developed consciousness that enables her to face the problems of existentialism as well as the diasporic problems of self estrangement and cultural exile that affects her physical, mental and emotional life. Desai deals with a wider perspective of human relationship, culture and race and shows through Sarah that a female can keep hold on her native culture and try to create her own identity both in the native as well as in the foreign land to manage harmony in diversity. In an interview with Yoshodhara Dalmia, Desai says:

I do not think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging. (The Times of India, 1979.p.13)

Sarah has exemplified that diaspora is both a physical and psychological journey towards self realization, self recognition, self knowledge and self definition. It is a journey of identity and culture through time and space. This study sensitizes the migrants memories and emotional loss and tries to examine Western psyche with Indian psyche in the post-colonial context of displacement and relocation.

The conflict between tradition and modernity, and jealousy between the British and the Indians, search of identity and space are some of the essential features of post-colonialism. It can be observed in As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out:

It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (Key Concepts in Post Colonial Studies, 1989, 8-9) .

Unlike the colonial writers, Desai does not merely rely on intellectual and cultural conflict between the ruler and the ruled but tries to expose the total picture of the individual under the postcolonial situation. Her characters are not only alienated under the new situations; they are also inspired to make a search for their cultural or national identity. Her writing identifies its mission as making a theory of consciousness rather than a theory of mere change. She frequently hints at the postcolonial alienation of the individuals accompanied by human quest for modern roots and its quest ranges all through cultural, racial and linguistic encounters. Culture may also be studied as a quest, which is not always mutually understandable. But it is not good if the quest is not a free choice. The themes of quest and choice are the two ingredients of culture. Cultural concepts are ancient and contemporary, traditional as well as modern. The cultural and linguistic roots pierce deep into the human consciousness and are therefore, difficult to separate. Such replacement creates a certain rootlessness and spuriousness. Desai's characters find a difference between themselves and the world, consisting of others, the natural environment and its life. They are unable to relate to the space around them. Space in existential context does not mean the physical area but "the human environment, and every other that provides the setting in which human life is to be lived." (Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, P.79) This very cultural rootlessness magnifies the torment of alienation in the live Sarah .Desai's views on culture and tradition may be viewed as 'trans-national and trans-cultural' .Traditions are yesterday's changes. The cultural is always intercultural. Culture changes and it must change. Otherwise it becomes static. Her novels can also be studied as products of change. Her characters seem nostalgic for the past when they try to adjust in a new society being far from their own native land. Along with the postcolonial crisis , her characters also suffer from the anxiety of fragmentation and of human powerlessness. She delights in being self-conscious with an urge for individualism .

As *Bye, Bye Blackbird* focuses on the post-colonial problems of dislocation and the search for space territory and identity of the protagonist Sarah . The plot of the novel moves out of India. It depicts the problems of the Indian diasporas in England in 1960. England during those days was the most accomplished seat for the economical and educational perspectives for the diasporas all over the world as the USA is at present. The novel portrays the xenophobic attitude of the English towards the migrants from the commonwealth nations. During those days the South Asians in England were known as blackbirds who were treated as unwanted foreigners. They were marked as the other, as inferior beings which was a sign of racism prevailing during those days. Anita Desai has beautifully captured the plights of the migrants in 1970s with their problems in the contrasting cultures of Britain and India. She shows how the protagonists strive to make their life meaningful there despite feelings of emptiness, alienation and emotional disharmony, loss of identity due to cross-cultural encounter. The migrants have to face cultural shocks in the adopted land.

Being an expatriate herself and having the mixed parentage as her mother belongs to German Christian and father is a Bengali Indian, Desai has the experience and sensibility of a diaspora. This complex origin has given her the suitability to become a diasporic writer who speaks about the adoption and survival of the characters outside their mother land. She deals with the diaspora's experience of the sense of homelessness, insider and outsider syndrome with problems of uprooting from native culture and re-rooting in the foreign one in order to assimilate and adjust in the adopted land. Desai presents the domestic as well as the social problems faced by diasporas while trying to adjust with their spaces of origin and adoption. The novel opens with the arrival of Dev, Adit's friend, in England. Adit is an Indian immigrant married to Sarah, a British girl . At the outset, Adit regards British culture as more refined and superior to the Indian culture, because it is characterized by logical thinking whereas he regards Indian culture as traditional, underdeveloped and conservative. He tells Dev, his friend:

I love it here. I am so happy here, I hardly notice the few drawbacks. I will tell you - I did go back three years ago when I got engaged to Sarah and my parents wanted me to come with her. I stayed there looking for a job for four months. All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government Office..... I like the freedom a man has here. Economic freedom! Social freedom! (P.17-18)

Adit regards England as 'a land of opportunity' (19) and material prosperity. For him England is a symbol of refinement and sophistication while India is a land of crudities and dirt. Adit is an Anglophile. His friend Dev, on the other hand is critical of English society and culture. He came to England to pursue his study in London School of Economics. He feels alienated and lonely. Emptiness prevails all-round him and he wishes to return to India. In course of time both the friends experience realities of life and great changes take place in their attitudes towards England. Dev decides to stay in England whereas Adit decides to return back to India.

Many of Desai's novels deal with the theme of alienation and the characters striving for survival accompanied by human quest for meaning and truth in life. Desai tries to explore the life of the individuals, who become victims of the conflict between tradition and the newly acquired values of modern life. Since Desai is concerned with the inner self of her protagonists their psychic dimension and emotional aspects are what interest

her most. Accordingly to her,' writing is an effort to discover, and to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things'.(Sophie,The New Statesman vol-iv 2011 ) Desai's novels, "deal with the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence."(Dalmia,The Times of India. 1979)

Endowed with remarkable sensitivity, she can apprehend the emotional problems of her fellow beings. What distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual and his inner world of sensibility– the chaos inside his mind. Concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual, her forte is the exploration of the inner world, plunging into the limitless depth of the mind and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche. She uniquely prefers the inner reality to the outer, insight to sight. She exhibits her disfavour for the novelists "who take interest in the outer rather than the inner world."(Dalmia, 1979)

Anita Desai embarks to explore the inner reality, or in her own words she is not concerned with "the one-tenth visible section of ice berg that one sees above the surface of the ocean" – but with "the remaining nine – tenth of it that lie below the surface."(Desai,Kakatiya Journal of English Studies. 2011) She prefers the private to the public world because for her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social, religious and moral ideas, but an exploration and an inquiry. Desai feels that besides having a creative genius, a novelist must be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he could give acute descriptions and "pick up the tiny details that others might not notice."(Jain,*Dislocation and Multiculturalisms*,2004 p. 68).

Besides sensitivity and observation, a rich experience and a good training are also essential. It is not imperative, however, that a writer has all kind of experience. For in a writer "lack of experience may be a handicap, but lack of sensitivity, thought, intelligence of memory would be far greater one." (Srivastava,*Perspectives on Anita Desai*,1984 p.210)

In *Bye, Bye Blackbird* , Desai keenly probes the psychology of Sarah who is doubly displaced, first, by her own people in England after marrying Adit, an Indian and secondly when she left England and came to India to settle with her husband. The white people did not like her choice of marrying a black- bird and therefore they look down upon her along with her husband. In India, she is not accepted by her Indian in-laws. In such a situation she feels desperate and deserted still she wishes to face the world with confidence. Her character can be studied through the argument of Homi Bhabha that cultures can be understood to interact, transgress and transform each other in a much more complex manner than the traditional binary oppositions like centre/margin, civilized/savage and enlightened/ignorant and etc can allow. When Adit gets ill-treatments from his in-laws in England and from other English people, he starts realizing and accepting realities about the English in England. His attitudes changes and he starts thinking about his nation and people. He suffers from an identity crisis as he feels uprooted as an outsider, as an Indian . He intensely longs for his motherland India and he decides to leave England for good. He asks Sarah if she will accompany him. He says, 'I cannot stay here anymore. Our lives have been so unreal do not you feel it?..... it has no reality at all. We just pretend all the time..... I have got to go home and start living a real life. ( p.203-204).

Being a broadminded, educated lady, Sarah does not have any sense of racial discrimination in her mind for the Indians rather she always admires India. She has a fascination and inclination for Indian culture and tradition. She knows India as a land of diverse cultures and religions for centuries. Despite all the social and religions contrasts Sarah has real affections and indulgence for her husband. Thus, she promptly answers in positive. She tells that if the German Millers (about whom she has heard a lot) could leave Germany and make England their home, why could she not do likewise and adopt India as her own country. She wishes to adopt Indian lifestyle and become a loving wife so that she can get love, affection and respect from husband as well as from her in-laws. But after coming to India her dreams fell apart. She realizes that there is hell and heaven gap between her dreams and reality. She faces social, psychological and emotional trauma beyond her imagination. "She had become nameless; she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear(P.31)

Humiliation enhanced her feelings of alienation, rootlessness and identity crisis. Earlier she felt homeless in her homeland i.e. at home, school (where she was working as a teacher), and in every surrounding. In Calcutta she has to adopt multiple identities. She plays the role of Sarah at morning in her school and then as Mrs. Sen at home. She tries to relate herself with the world around her to adjust herself with each and every situation but Adit does not allow her English self to be preserved. Both the husband and wife suffer from adjustment problems at various levels of their existence. Sarah mutely suffers as Adit fails to consider her interests through she is ready to sacrifice her everything to save her marriage. Adit says his friend Dev: These English wives are quite manageable realty, you know. Not as fierce as they look very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week. (P.29)When she gets continuous insults from her own husband she becomes depressed, her alienation becomes more intensified. She questions her own identity. Who was she? Where was Sarah? (p.34) Identity is an important issue in diasporic literature.

Stuart Hall comments that 'identity' should not be thought of as an accomplished fact, but should be seen as a production which is never complete. This view problematizes the authenticity of the "cultural identity".

According to Hall:

There are two different ways of thinking about "cultural, identity in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective" one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (Stuart Hall "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Rutherford , 1990 p.223-225).

Anita Desai tries to reveal the inner recesses of Sarah. For her it is the depth which is interesting delving deeper and deeper in the character, a situation or a sense rather than going round about it. The pursuit of being, the search for identity and the process of becoming are the most essential concepts of diasporic existentialism. The former concept is the reality about the existence of man and woman and the later refers to the quest for survival accompanied by the individual's strive to seek the reality by refusing to conform to the present situations of life. Sarah confronts her own existence as per her potentials to fight the odds and obstacles of her life. In the process of her search and struggle she undergoes transformation leading to self knowledge that helps her to know the reality, the truth of life. She moves from bondage to freedom, from in decision to self-assertion, from weakness to strength and she happens to be the strongest of Desai's protagonists who could take the boldest initiative to move out from her country during that time when England was considered as a superior land. She represents how a woman can strive hard to retain her identity by upholding her own values, seeking assimilation in a multicultural, multi-racial, fast changing world. Expatriation causes a deep sense of alienation and exile but she has overcome her suffering through her self-discovery. Desai says:

I do not think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think the problem is how to exist in the society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging.(Dalmia ,The Times of India 1979, p.13)

Sarah has to live in a liminal space , an interstitial space ,deficient in a sense of belonging both in England and in India so she suffers from a sense of dislocation which entails a relentless search for a new beginning, a new identity ,a split identity. She acts as Mrs Sen inside her husband's house and as Sarah the English lady inside the school campus where she works as a teacher. She ventures out for a new space, in-betweenness ,which is regarded as the 'third space' by Homi Bhabha in his book the *Location of Culture*. Bhabha applies socio-culturalism directly to the post colonial condition where there are... unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation'. He asserts:

The theoretical recognition of the split space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exotics of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of cultures hybridity. It is the inbetweenness space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring the third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. ( *Location of Culture*,P.33-34)

Sarah asserts herself and faces and attempts to transcend the harsh realities of life through her psyche considering it as a part of human condition that she cannot change. Her effort glorifies her strength and optimism. She points towards infinite possibilities for the exploration of new experiences of life and tries to create her own cherished values on the path of her meaningful survival as a diaspora.

Madhusudan Prasad discovers in her novels a skilful exploration of the "emotional ecology, their rumbling and turbulence in the inner world."

(Prasad, *Anita Desai :The Novelist*.p.13).

Sarah could balance that emotional ecology through an optimistic and broad attitude and hence sets an example for the diasporas that the socially, culturally ,spatially and emotionally disturbed psyche can get solution by a deliberate attempt of appropriation of a new space with a new identity. Through the character of Sarah Desai brings a new dimension to the status of women diasporas of her time.She creates woman solely responsible for her being and becoming.

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Kalpna Mishra. "Anita Desai's 'Sarah': A Study of Diasporic Womanhood." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 24, no. 8, 2019, pp 21-25.