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Multiculturalism in the novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai now lives in America is most celebrated and senior most writers. She is well thought out of the most illustrious novelists in English literature of India. Desai is diverse from other modern women writers in Indian writing in English in terms of her perception and unique style. Desai has emerged as a very grim, expert and talented novelists in Indian English literature. Born to a Bengali father and a German mother in 1923 at Mussorie, India, Desai inherited a legacy of multiculturalism. She later married a Desai (a Gujrati) and created several multiculturalism homes of her own in many parts of India and the world. Desai's novel analyses the focus on Globalization, multiculturalism, and the essentials oneness of all religions. It also suggests how the study of multiculturalism in Desai's novels add a new insight into her work and by relating it to postcolonial and post national concerns all over the world, it points to cultures everywhere. This paper adds a new dimension to the interpretation to Desai's novels.

Keywords: Technique, fiction, multiculturalism, harmonious

Introduction

In India Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and a vibrant tribal culture have simultaneously co-existed since the last so many centuries and have been given equal importance in the constitution. Desai has constantly spoken about this mosaic that influenced her writing from the very beginning. She could be called as one of the true inheritors of India's rich multicultural legacy. Multiculturalism, dialogue, mutual co-operation, understanding and tolerance have always brought prosperity, peace and progress; as has been witnessed throughout the history of the world. Unlike conflict which only brings devastation and tragedy in its aftermath. In the whole world and in India, multiculturalism is more relevant by each passing day; it is a moral and political term and evolved as a reaction against orthodox systems of thought and behaviour. Any country evolves in to multicultural one by the existence of indigenous populations, political asylum seekers, immigrants, religious groups and refugees. It insists that there is no single superior culture or system and believes in cultural and ethnic plurality. Many global problems could be solved if the world becomes truly multicultural. India has always had a vibrant, diverse and rich cultural co-existence, non-judgmental acceptance and compassion for all faiths and kindness towards every religion, caste, community and cultures since historical times. This characteristic has been the priceless heritage of this country and reflects the intrinsic values of the cultural co-existence, which its ancient civilization has imbibed throughout the ages, as it has been the melting pot of various civilizations. India and its culture are unique as many cultural identities have co-existed since thousands of years ago which make it a free and tolerant society with freedom of each individual to practice their own faiths.

Anita Desai expressed in her novels the essence of Emperor Akbar's "Din-i-Ilahi" or the divine faith. Her writings also imbue the true spirit of Sri Aurobindo's concept of "Viswa Manava" or what Gandhi and Tagore described as the religion of humanity. Sri Aurobindo imagined a world without boundaries. In 1968 the foundation of Auroville was laid, with the soil brought from twenty-three countries, Tibet and twenty-three Indian states. The township of Auroville is dedicated to the ideal of human unity. Anita Desai has extensively written about the East-West cultural clash, gender- relations, hegemonic ideas of control, along with the various multi-generational historic and cultural nuances, that still exists everywhere. Along with her personal growth her outlook and perspectives on life have also developed and matured and as a result, she explored multiculturalism as an insider as well as an outsider in

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India and the world. Desai's later novels, compared to the earlier ones, reflect this aspect in much more vivid manner. They are truly multicultural in their origins, as Desai herself matured as well as traveled extensively as time passed. She comes across cultures.

Anita Desai has over the years developed a writing-style that is genuine and inevitable with a deliberate intent to disclose the undying spirit and tell of the human nature which is same all over the world, notwithstanding culture, religion, caste, class or other disparities. Her stories have sarcasm, humor, wit, wisdom, philosophy, sincerity, and an unintentional critical look at the socio-political, cultural, and moral norms and practices throughout India and the world. Desai's characters live the world in their own imagination surrounded by the demons of the past, present and the future. Her characters are winners by and large, sometimes while belonging to different cultures they come together and form everlasting bonds that last a lifetime and more. Her ever-enduring endless stories surrounded us as they transcend all barriers.

The various stories of multicultural integration and existential concerns held sway over her mind and heart, as she captured their essence with integrity. This thesis has explored in detail the various multicultural aspects of her novels and short-stories, hitherto unexplored. Her novels and their vary origins are colored with her own personal memories and attitudes to life. Multiculturalism forms the bedrock of Desai's creative writings which is analyzed in this thesis along with her take on religion, spirituality, the problems of urban women, East-West encounters, alienation, loneliness, tragedy of abandonment, loss and pain. Desai explores minutely in her own works the arguments between logic and emotions, the divided-self as well as the nature of artificial and transitory love that human beings seem to have for each other. She seems to offer a resistance to the ideas of boundaries and narrow-mindedness, in almost all her novels and short-stories.

Desai's novels and short-stories explores almost every perspectives of the East, and the West, of the majorities, and the minorities, of feminism and bigotry. Her novels also explore the West's superficial and official commitment to multiculturalism and the fear of getting labeled as a thought-racist, which is sometime displayed, in the far-right acts of their parliament. She seems to have captured the very essence of the human existence in her stories. Her characters make the supreme sacrifices to attain their true calling, they rebel, struggle, win, loose. They are ordinary people caught between tradition and modernity, sometimes these men and women appear to be the nowhere people who belonging to nothing. Hari, Bim, Deven, Noor, Maya, Nirode, Sita, Arun, Uma, Monisha, Adit, Sarah, Dev, Nanda Kaul, Tara, Raja, Baumgartner are some of her memorable and immortal characters.

In the novels of Anita Desai there is a stress on the Indian multicultural traditions and on international dimensions to multiculturalism in her later novels which is suggestive of Desai's own paradoxical perspectives which influenced her personal growth as a creative writer. The sense of a morbid fascination for tragedy and paranoia are subdued and give way to real understanding of the cross-cultural world as her characters mature in her later novels. The voices of reason become more vociferous and strong as Desai herself explores her sensibilities and values. She opines in an interview: "What I have tried to prove is that although time

appears to damage, destroy, and extinguish, one finds instead that nothing is lost, nothing comes to an end, but the past and the future-existing always in time present." She has also written about how multiculturalism opens the realm hitherto unknown, and leads to freedom of women and also how women have to face institutionalized misogyny which is quite prevalent although covertly in a lot of countries. Her themes include vast cultural similarities and dissimilarities that exists throughout the world both in the East as well as the West.

In *Cry, the Peacock* she explores many cultures simultaneously; of men and women, past and present, rational and irrational, conscious and subconscious, traditional and modern, and so on and so forth. "*where Shall We Go This Summer*" tells of the contrast of cultures of the town and the country, of reason and emotions ; it is as if Desai brings to the fore the feelings of all human beings notwithstanding their cultural conditioning. "*Voices in the City*" contrasts the frustrations of the youth and their cultural dissimilarities with their parents' generation. It also contrasts the culture of the decaying Calcutta with the innocence of beautiful Kalimpong. "*Fire on the Mountain*" captures the cantonment revelry of Kasauli and contrasts it with cosmopolitan Madrid and New Delhi. "*The Village by the Sea*" captures the ever enduring miseries of the poor in their march to prosperity. The novel also contrasts the modern culture of metropolitan Bombay with the laid-back life of the seaside village of Thul, and the country resort of Alibagh. "*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*" portrays the xenophobic British attitude towards the migrants from commonwealth nations. The novels also contrasts the culture of Britain and India and tells of an uneasy multicultural bond, which exists between the erstwhile "masters" and their "slaves". *Clear Light of the Day* tells of the dichotomy between the Hindi and Urdu languages. The novel also portrays the differences of cultures of married and single people, and the contrasts in cultures of individuality and familial bonds, as well as feminism and femininity.

Desai's later novels like "*In Custody*" explore the cultures of sleepy towns like Mirpore with that of the metropolitan Delhi, the cultures of artistic refinement with that of the materialistic vulgarity and the questions of the superiority and competition of language; in this case Hindi and Urdu" *Baumgartner's Bombay*" tells the story of the tragic exile of the Jewish people from Germany during the Second world war as well as their genocide by Hitler. The novel also tell of the cultures of Germany and India." *Journey to Ithica*" portrays the cultural similarities and dissimilarities as well as influences of India on the disillusioned hippies, and the children of affluence, with their reckless ways, and how they took to India and identified themselves with its spirituality and chaos." *Fasting Feasting*" explores the identity of an individual outside his or her country of birth." *The Zig Zag Way*" tells of the contrasts and similarities between the cultures of Mexico and India, and how Indians and Mexicans have many traits in common; including perseverance, family values, and poverty. Although they are far away from each other, but share similar cultural and ethical values.

Anita Desai's novels reveal that multiculturalism is multi-factorial in origin, and is constantly changing in the globalized, post-national, temperate secular world of today, that is largely desired by the mainstream. She writes about the superficiality of religions. Her novels celebrate the

culture of oneness and a common heritage which is inherited by all persons on account of their co-existence and integration. Desai's writing are thought-provoking and prove that how art, literature and music transcend cultural differences and the artificial barriers created by human beings. Although multiculturalism has increasingly come under attack since the terrorist attack of 9/11 in the United States, after that in places like Tunisia, Indonesia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, Russia, Britain, and India. There were global versions and consequences of these attacks all over the world.

Desai's writings reflect the multiple identities (for instance, her characters are British by citizenship, Indian by memory, Hindu or Muslim by religion, European by culture and so on and so forth) longings, complex cross-cultural values and memories, homeland psychosis, race relations, "space" or "nowhere in-between" existence, the paradox of ethnic equality, pride, existential ambiguity, people living in the cultures of the bygone decades, a sense of dislocation, alienation of minorities, breaking barriers, universal literal or physical voyages and a journey back to one's roots. Her novels and short-stories also prove that there are many more things that unite people, than what separates them. They seem to resonate Salman Rushdie's words in *Identity and Homeland*. What seems to be urgently to be required is a new world order, way beyond the divisions of humanity's survival the future has to be shaped by a synthesis of each without destroying the essence of either by managing diversity. Multiculturalism raises profound ethical questions where ordinary collides with the profound, and past explored fully as it shall be appropriate that the intellectual, artistic, spiritual, technical and material cultures of the world are accessible to all its citizens.

The importance of multiculturalism was evident on December 25, 2010 when Queen Elizabeth II of England in her Christmas address, stressed the "widely recognized" importance of sports in uniting the people "of all races and backgrounds together" she further expressed that "people are capable of belonging to a group who are dedicated to helping each other ..." and "quite how important sport and There are dangers of cultural relativism as well but with determination, national and international laws, co-operation and courage various culture can survive simultaneously, and fulfill their aspirations and beliefs, while enshrining the values of multiculturalism by not encroaching upon the space of other cultures. Desai's novels have helped in a subjective understanding of this phenomenon in India and the world.

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