

THE CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND HOMELAND IN ANITA DESAI'S *THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA AND FASTING, FEASTING*

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Abstract

Multicultural traditions have been a part of India's historical heritage and cultural ethos since centuries. Culture, migration, and assimilation form a major part of identity and homeland, as they are characterized by many forms of multicultural concern. The central question addressed in this paper is that how a vast multicultural, multi-ethnic country like India has thrived and survived despite many differences. The Indian diversity, post-colonialism, plurality and the concept of homeland is discussed in terms of their relevance in the modern world, and in context of Anita Desai's novels *A Village by the Sea* and *Fasting, Feasting*, where they are applicable not only outside India, amongst the diasporas, but also within India as a multicultural nation.

'Identity' is defined as a person's sense of a common identity with or affiliation to a cultural group, and his or her association with a homogeneous ethnicity, state, religion, region, caste or creed. 'Homeland' is understood to be the geographical region or territory closely related to a specific social group of people with a particular ethnicity and feeling of a sense of belonging to it, and rather a concrete manifestation of this sense of belonging and 'identity'.

In India several cultures exist simultaneously and multicultural traditions are a part of our historical heritage, cultural fabric, and an ethos of a peaceful and sometimes not so peaceful co-existence. Apart from being an integral part of our everyday life and culture since centuries; multiculturalism, identity and homeland are interwoven or fused in such a manner in our country that it's difficult to tell one from the other. The movement of thoughts and ideas, migration of individuals and assimilation in their new surroundings, interaction with the old and the new and complicated politics and policies associated with these ideologies as well as concrete forms of identity and homeland form a part of a common thought and concern, regarding the issues connected with these concepts.

It is self-evident that identities are forged and formed because of attachment to one's land of origin, imagination and a dominant will to retain the essence of one's homeland and the socio-cultural values prevalent therein as well as a feeling of not belonging to an 'alien' culture and way of life which is drastically different from one's own attitude to life. Salman Rushdie's concept of "imaginary homelands" comes to mind as this feeling finds expression in the many beautiful

novels created by the writers of the Indian subcontinent who reside not only in India but also in the far away corners of the world.

A vast and multicultural country like India--in expression of her nationality, creed, language, community, caste and global identity has thrived in the psyche, and hearts of the Indians not only in various parts of India but also the Indian diasporas in other countries. The Indian Constitution and the Supreme Court of India as well as the executive policies regarding multiculturalism, have also played a significant role to enhance this sense of belonging and love for one's place of birth notwithstanding how far away people live from it. At present the modern technology has eased quite a lot of interaction and exchange of ideas amongst the diasporas as well as Indians in India who move away from their homes but retain their regional identities.

The Indian diversity, plurality and the concept of 'homeland' and 'identity' is discussed in terms of its relevance in the modern world and in context of Anita Desai's novels *The Village by the Sea* and *Fasting, Feasting* where they are very much applicable not only outside India within the diasporas, but also within the Indian subcontinent itself with all its complex and multi-faceted ethnic and cultural diversity.

Desai's own life resonates in almost all her novels. Her multicultural perspectives can be clearly witnessed in her creations. Her novels present in a crystal-clear manner all the diverse aspects of 'identity' as well as 'homeland' as they are understood and interpreted by Desai, who has gone through many of these agonies and ecstasies herself, in her life in India and abroad and in the many multicultural homes that she created for herself. These concepts are recognized and presented by Desai in her two exceptionally realistic and brilliantly created novels, namely *The Village by the Sea* which presents these powerful concepts within India on one hand, and *Fasting, Feasting* where Desai presents in the United States the cultural, emotional and psychological traumas of Arun, an Indian who has gone to the United States for higher studies.

In *Fasting, Feasting* the two distinctive cultures of the East and the West are portrayed in the most profound manner by Desai. The predicament and cultural conditioning of Arun is captured and expressed brilliantly. Although he is clearly distraught at home but nonetheless starts missing it on encountering so many vivid pleasant and unpleasant experiences, half way around the world in Massachusetts where he experiences real life in an

American suburb. It is a cultural shock and Arun is terrified as well as perplexed at first. Both the cultures have been magnificently presented by Desai who uses subjective experiences to portray the pains and pleasures of her characters.

There is a constant question of 'belonging', 'identity' and 'homeland' along with how globalization has been destroying multiculturalism and cultural and social identities of so many indigenous groups in India and all over the world, by bringing a homogeneous culture everywhere. In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai presents these relevant and contemporary issues both inside India as well as outside, as a part of this novel is based in India and the other in United States of America, where Desai currently lives. The difference between India and the United States is depicted in a subtle manner and several problems relating to cultural differences are brought forth successfully in an objective but sympathetic manner.

For instance the cultural differences between the United States and India are highlighted by Desai very poignantly, when she describes the feelings of freedom felt by Arun for the first time when he is away from home:

"It was the first time in his life away from home, away from MamaPapa, his sisters, the neighbourhood of old bungalows, dusty gardens and straggling hedges where he had grown up, the only town he had ever

known; he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country. The summer in the US stretched out open, clear, and blank. Arun had every intention of keeping it so.” (172)

The plight of Uma, the spinster sister of Arun who considers herself a miserable failure in life, because she was not allowed by her parents to be well-educated, or her failure to bring in a good match, unlike her sister Aruna, is intensely depicted. Her parents' disappointment in her saddens and shakes her to the core. The various aspects of the eastern and western thoughts are profoundly brought out by Desai in her vivid portrayals of all her characters, and especially in *Fasting, Feasting* which is psychologically as well as socially important, in the ever-changing yet static concepts of 'self' as well as the 'other'. Desai depicts how a man's love for his parents, friends, family and social environment regenerates in a foreign land after a constant denial of reality in that part of the world which is not only 'alien' but also a challenge to his 'Indian' sensibilities.

Uma's plight is the plight of many dreamy-eyed Indian girls who are neglected by their parents, their right to freedom of choice, snatched cruelly away from them. These girls are not encouraged to study as that would be a major problem in finding a 'suitable' match for them. Desai expresses poignantly and realistically the fraud, and humiliation that many women have to go through in India, in order to be married, and their confidence is shaken badly, because their identities are solely attached to the fact, that whether they are able to find good matches or not.

Desai tells one such tragic story of Uma and the greed for dowry that the family of the groom generally have in India, the man to which Uma is engaged turns out to be a fraud, a petty criminal, whose family is in the 'business' of cheating people in the name of marriage. There are countless examples of people getting duped in this manner in India, where women's lives are stigmatized for no fault of theirs.

Desai describes the various evils in the traditional system of marriages in India:

“While Mama searched energetically for a husband for Uma, families were already ‘making enquiries’ about Aruna. Yet nothing could be done about them; it was imperative that Uma marry first. That was only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour.”(80)

Thus Uma represents to a large extent, the common Indian womanhood, which has no say in the making of its own future, and is treated like a commodity that is transferred from one owner to another. Desai tells of the various ills that negatively influence a woman's psychology and identity in India, to a great extent due to her various cultural conditionings’.

The Village by the Sea (1982) is a children's novel based on the trials of a poverty stricken Indian family and tells about the determination and courage of siblings Lila and Hari who rise above their circumstances and create their own destinies by overcoming their overwhelming poverty and misery.

It is based in Thul, a small village close to Alibagh (near Bombay). Lila, the elder sister of Hari is just thirteen years old. Twelve year old Hari is the only sibling with whom she can talk about her problems. Their mother is weak and requires medical care and attention because she is inadequately fed. Their father is an out of work drunkard. They have two younger siblings Bela and Kamal who need their love and care and right guidance. The family has fallen on hard times and because of their fathers' drinking problem incurred a lot of debt, as well.

Hari feels responsible for his mother and siblings and decides to work in Bombay, about which he knows nothing. Desai has highlighted the very roots of the problems of migration in India, which is owing to lack of enough work in the villages and overpopulation. These harsh and real problems form the bases of *The Village by the Sea*. Lila is on her own after Hari leaves for Bombay and looks after her sisters Bela and Kamal, and their parents. Unexpectedly the rich De'Silva family helps to make her life tolerable. She starts working in their vacation home with earnest devotion and is appreciated for her integrity and hard work.

In the meantime, her brother Hari is in Bombay all by himself, he finds shelter with a kind hearted and compassionate restaurant owner Jaggu, through the De'Silvas' watchman, and befriends the wonderful watch maker MrPanwallah who later trains him in the art of repairing watches, which comes in handy when Hari decides to return to his native village in order to start his own watch-mending work to help his family.

MrPanwallah tells Hari,

““Good!” cried MrPanwallah. ‘ That’s what I wanted to hear you say. Learn, learn, learn – so that you can grow and change. Things change all the time, boy – nothing remains the same. When our earth was covered with water, all creatures lived in it and swam. When the water subsided the land appeared, the sea creatures crawled out and learnt to breathe and walk on land. When plants grew in to trees, they learned to climb them. When there were not enough plants left to eat, they learn to hunt and kill for food. Don’t think that is how things have remained. No, boy, they are still changing – and if you want to survive, you will have to change too. The wheel turns and turns: it never stops and stands still. Look, even Bombay is not always the same. Fifty years ago there were hills, gardens, beautiful palaces and villas where you now see slums, shops, traffic, crowds. Once I lived in a villa with a garden and roses and fountains – now I live in a pigeon roost over a railway station!” He cackled with laughter as though it were all a great joke. ‘So Hari the fisherman, Hari the farmer will have to become Hari the poultry farmer or Hari the watchmender!”

Hari beamed to see MrPanwallah so excited and lively. If he was so much better, he would surely come back to the shop soon and start teaching Hari again. Hari knew he still had much to learn.

‘You are lucky,’ MrPanwallah twinkled at him, sinking back to his chair. ‘You are young. You can change and learn and grow. Old people can’t, but you can, I know you will.’” (210-11)

His various adventures in Bombay help him to understand the world in a much better way while making him courageous and open to challenges. Desai also highlights the corruption within the Indian political and administrative framework, which forces people to part away with their ancestral farmlands, because they are usurped by unscrupulous persons in the name of government rules. Desai writes, while describing an agitation by the farmers:

““We have come to tell the government we don’t want the miserable sums of money they are offering us – our land is too valuable to sell. We are not going to be turned

into slaves working in their factories, we have always worked and lived independently and have been our own masters. Now let us march to Mantralaya and give our petition to the Chief Minister himself. Let us march, brothers!'" (125)

She has also portrayed the picture of a truly multicultural India in this novel. Hari curiously asks MrPanwallah:

"While they worked, Hari said, 'MrPanwallah , you celebrate Coconut Day and Diwali and yet you are not a Hindu, are you? I thought you are a Parsee and celebrate only the Parsee festivals' 'Oh no, no, boy,' cried MrPanwallah comically. 'What would be the fun of that? And why should I miss the fun of all the Hindu and Muslimfestivals? No, no, I believe in sharing everything, enjoying everything. That is why I have so much fun, eh? No gloom for me, eh?'" (214)

The individual, social and cultural conflict in a child's mind and his emotions are highlighted with great sensitivity by Desai while drawing attention to the problems of illiteracy, ignorance, heart-wrenching poverty, addiction, squalor, unplanned and rapid urbanization of the Indian cities, and the failure of political, social and economic measures to deal with these basic problems that give rise to exploitation of the poor by the rich, and crime in the underbelly of big cities where unemployed migrants from near and far come to find work and their fortune.

The novel creates an atmosphere of hope and happiness quite unlike the earlier novels of Desai. It also depicts the dichotomy between the rural and urban attitudes to living life. Desai successfully depicts the will of the weak to transcend their destiny, through constant hard work. The trappings of the town do not influence Hari who wants to create a decent source of income for himself and a sense of well-being for his family.

The novel also presents the issue of migrants within India who go to big cities in search of livelihood. The shift from their small rural communities as well as the shock that the culture and environs of the big cities instills in these poor migrants is successfully captured by Desai. The hope in the heart of migrants like Hari to secure a dignified source of income and the success with which he transforms his own life provides a vibrant optimism to this novel. It is a beautifully created masterpiece with lovely imagery of the sea side village of Thul and the peaceful life which its people live, in stark contrast to a life of hustle and bustle which the bigger cities of India have, along with the various facets and problems of dislocation, maladjustment, crime and the complete vulnerability of the migrants.

The complicated, multi-dimensional and the multi-faceted concepts of identity, homeland and multiculturalism and their importance in today's globalized scenario are brought forth in these novels by Desai with her exceptionally skilled writings and brilliant vision. Desai reflects Salman Rushdie's feelings, which have been expressed by him in his famous book *Imaginary Homelands*:

"....It is also relevant that Terry Gilliam is a migrant. ' America bombards you with dreams and deprives you of your own,' he says, and *Brazil* is about that, too: the struggle between private, personal dreams (flying, love) and the great mass-produced fantasies, eternal youth, material wealth, power. But Gilliam's migrant status is not important just because of his alienation from the American consumer society. *Brazil* is the product of that odd thing, the marginal sensibility, whose development I believe to be one of the central themes of this century of displaced persons. To be a

migrant is, perhaps, to be the only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism (to say nothing of its ugly sister, patriotism). It is a burdensome freedom. The effect of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest delves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of loss of familiar habitats. And for the plural, hybrid, metropolitan result of such imaginings, the cinema, in which peculiar fusions have always been legitimate..." (124-25)

Desai's unique take on the advantages, disadvantages, joys, sorrows, love, loss, sense of belonging and un-belonging is a constant roller coaster ride of raw emotions witnessed, and expressed by someone who has faced these trials herself and gone through the conflicts originating as a result of a dichotomy between her sense of 'identity' and 'homeland'. As a first-hand observer of all these stories she not only makes them real and life-like but also fills in them varied colours and euphoria that were hitherto unknown to her readers. Her stories are set in surroundings and landscapes at once foreign and one's own. The subtle nuances and beautiful contrariness of her stories are fascinating and profound. Desai's novels seem to resonate Rushdie's views expressed in *Imaginary Homelands*:

"Between religion and literature, as between politics and literature, there is linguistically based dispute. But it is not a dispute of simple opposites. Because whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one set of values above all others, one text above all others, the novel has always been *about* the way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel, and about the shifting relations between them, which are relations of power. The novel does not seek to establish a privileged language, but it insists upon the freedom to portray and analyse the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges." (420)

To conclude, the sense of 'identity' is not only felt by people (in Desai's case the Indian people) who are outside their homelands but also people who have to move from one place to another in search of their livelihoods within a country. This feeling could be best understood in the Indian context as it is a huge country, where rural workforce migrates to the urban cities in search of their livelihoods and survival. 'Homeland' is an emotional benchmark and it is impossible to come up with anything more sacred. People's fascination and respect for it is never ending, because of the unique capability of the human race to feel the emotions of love, and respect for their 'homelands' as well as a proud sense of their unique 'identities'. The poor and the rich equally feel for it notwithstanding the differences in their ways of interpreting its meaning, intensely in their hearts. They fathom it just like all graceful human beings would. There is no other feeling that is nobler than or equal to it.

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