

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is one of India's most celebrated and senior most writers. Born to a Bengali father and a German Jewish mother in 1923 at Mussorie, India, Desai inherited a legacy of multiculturalism. She later married a 'Desai' (a Gujrati) and created several multicultural homes of her own in many parts of India and the world. She now lives in the United States of America. This paper analyzes Desai's explorations of her multicultural legacy through her novels. It also fuses the current attitudes of the whole world to globalization, multiculturalism, and the essential oneness of all religions. It also suggests how the study of multiculturalism in Desai's novels add a new insight in to her work and by relating it to postcolonial and post national concerns all over the world, it points to ways in which literature can reinforce harmonious relationships between cultures everywhere. It is believed that this paper adds a new dimension to the interpretation to Desai's novels. It establishes the multicultural ethos in Desai's novels. The paper also expounds the basic constructs of a truly multicultural society, and how it went through rapid changes time and again. This paper is an important insight in-to representations of multiculturalism, in the novels of Anita Desai, while exploring the importance of multiculturalism in Indian Writings in English.

“In the sky, there is no distinction between east and west; people create distinctions out of their own minds and then believe them to be true.”

- The Buddha

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 behavior. Education, political affiliations and popular culture influence and reshape multiculturalism all the

time. 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 culture 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 which make it a free and tolerant society with freedom of each individual to practice their own faiths.

Celebrating diversity is the foundation of the multicultural ethos. The world has changed rapidly after September 11, 2001 and multiculturalism almost came to the brink of being rendered dysfunctional (for instance in France during the Football World Cup Zinedine Zidane lead a multicultural team, but at present immigration and French identity are sensitive issues there, with the increasing influx of immigrants) on the other hand the “glorious mosaic” and the “salad bowl ” with their distinguished values have helped multiculturalism in transforming from a vague ideal to a cherished reality in the whole world, as cultural diversity is mandatory for the progress and development of humanity. A cultural synthesis with ethics and responsibilities, respect for human dignity, along with exploration of the common consensus together enhance multiculturalism. With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on December 10, 1948 in Paris, every citizen of every nationality had the freedom to follow his or her faith which was, a great global milestone in the history of multiculturalism and human rights.

In India Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, 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.

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 " Vishwa Manava " , or what Iqbal, 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 the twenty-three Indian states. The township of Auroville near Pondicherry (where Sri Aurobindo lived and meditated for a long time) is dedicated to the ideal of human unity. Many residents of various nationalities live and voluntarily work in Auroville. Desai has extensively written about the East-West cultural clash, gender-relations, hegemonic ideas of control, along with the various multi-generational historical and cultural nuances, that still exist 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 India and the world. Her later novels, compared to the earlier ones, reflect this aspect in a much more vivid manner. They are truly multicultural in their origins, as Desai herself matured as well as traveled extensively as time passed. She came across cultures and multifaceted ways of life and found herself ready to explore many more multicultural themes in her creative writings.

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 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. Through the prism of a life lived in India, the United States and various extensive explorations while traveling in several countries, she seems to dwell upon the deep and abiding connections of man with nature, resilience of women, and cross-cultural predispositions to a multifaceted multicultural world, which is the reality of globalization.

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. Her characters live in the world of their own imagination surrounded by the demons of the past, present and future. Despite their weaknesses Desai's 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 surround us as they transcend all barriers.

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 sometimes displayed in the far-right acts of their parliament (for instance the recent ban on "Burqa" imposed by the French parliament) Desai's novels and short-stories explore almost every perspective, of the East, and the West, of the majorities, and the minorities, of feminism and bigotry. She seems to have captured the very essence of the human existence in her stories. Her characters make 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 belong to nothing. Hari, Bim, Deven, Noor, Maya, Nirode, Sita, Arun, Uma, Monisha, Adit, Sarah, Dev, Nanda Kaul, Tara, Raja, Hugo Baumgartner are some of her memorable and immortal characters.

There is a stress on the Indian multicultural traditions in her earlier novels 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 spiral of life leads as much upwards as downwards and is in perpetual circular motion, both the past and the future-existing always in time present."

She has also written about how multiculturalism opens the realms 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 exist 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 and contrasts it with the unsympathetic rich as well as good people who take along 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 novel 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 Day tells of the dichotomy between the Hindi and Urdu languages, the cultures of the Hindus and Muslims, tradition and modernity, the diplomatic and Diaspora's attitude towards India that is contrasted with that of the ordinary citizens. The novel also portrays the differences of cultures of married and single people, and the contrast 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 metropolitan Delhi, the cultures of artistic refinement with that of materialistic vulgarity and the questions of the superiority and competition of languages; 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 novels also reveal that how India has from times immemorial offered shelter to migrants. The tragic consequences of the life of Hugo Baumgartner unfold in this sad saga. The novel also tells of the cultures of Germany and India.

Journey To Ithaca 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 contrasts between the industrialized West and the mystical East, as well as the cultural alienation of a supposedly ‘unsuccessful’ spinster Uma within the four walls of her own home. *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.

Desai's portrayal of the immigrants, irrespective of their nationalities and creeds is thought provoking and intense. Political correctness is the last thing on her mind. Her novels are

more like interpersonal conversations with her readers. Desai is unmatched among her contemporaries. Khushwant Singh, one of India's most distinguished writers, says about Desai in his autobiography, *Truth, Love And A Little Malice*:

“Ruth (Jhabvala) introduced me to Anita Desai, the half- Jewish, half- Bengali wife of a business executive. She was a frail, good-looking girl with two small children. I suspect she was inspired by Ruth and their Jewish ness brought them closer. There was a certain similarity in their writing, and Anita too enjoyed more esteem among foreigners than she did amongst her own countrymen. She spent one summer in Kasauli. That year there was a terrible forest fire which devastated an entire hillside covered with inflammable pine-needles. Some houses were also burnt down. Anita's novel *Fire on the Mountain* was based on this experience. Like Ruth Anita remained conscious of her Jewish heritage. Her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* is based around a Jewish family.” (390).

Thus Desai deals in all her novels and short stories with mixed emotions and muted discontent and dissent, with complicated social dynamics and cultural inequalities. She emphasizes on multicultural reunion of composite cultures amidst the global class-wars and the qualitative decline of democracy. Her novels are also exposition of a Diasporas' culture sometimes suppressed and underground. She talks of hybrid humanity, multilingualism, location, that is primarily the basis of a comparative culture. Her novels enhance understanding across cultures along with the trans-cultural, transnational, self-styling and exiled displacement and all the multi-dimensional aspects related to it. With all the agonies and ecstasies of displacement.

Her novels seem to portray the imperfections of the various 'worlds' that we live in, and how multiculturalism is in a constant state of change while evolving in to something entirely different. Her novels seem to resonate Salman Rushdie's words in his book *Identity and Homeland*:

“ Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles....One of the things I liked and still like, about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment; I do not consider Hindu culture to be alien from me or more important than the Islamic heritage. I believe this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience. Saleem Sinai makes use eclectically, of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses. It may have been easier for his author to do this from outside modern India than inside it. ” (15-16).

Desai herself has started the life of adventure in her sixties that she always dreamt of as a young lady. She shares her time between India, Cambridge, Cornwall, Mexico and New York State. Her creative works portray that all human societies are fundamentally similar. She has dealt with the trauma of exile, bewilderment, rage, security, power, commitment to homeland, the multiple cultures, and tensions of living in them, or rather becoming a person who is in-between homes.

Anita Desai's novels have never been explored from a multicultural perspective before in this university, and as such this research work will prove to be a pioneering one. It will add an entirely new dimension to Desai's creative writings. It is an attempt to analyze her work entirely from a multicultural perspective. She has created multicultural writings as an Indian, as a world citizen and later as an 'outsider' in India and has based her work on the bedrock of multicultural inter-connectedness in India, within the Indian Diaspora and throughout the whole world.

Her novels reveal that multiculturalism is multi-factorial in origin, and is constantly changing in the globalized, post-national, post-colonial, temperate secular world of today, that is largely desired by the mainstream. She writes about the superficiality of religions and how all countries are like many different countries at the same time, as human nature is identical all over the world, and how shared habits, pluralism, cultural spaces affect individuals. 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 writings 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, and 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. The critics opined that a dangerous fragmentation was taking place within the society and multiculturalism itself was threatened as a result as it was always too fragile to withstand such strains. They blamed the forced "social engineering" and multicultural "indoctrination" for fostering disharmony and disregarding the feelings and opinions of the majority. On closer scrutiny it appears that all is not destroyed as these vicious attacks seem to be carried out by a waylaid minority of fanatics who are not supported by the mainstream who want to have normal lives like the others in a liberal democratic world.

It is universally accepted that in this precarious and volatile world; which is ever vulnerable to violence, corruption by unscrupulous politicians (bloodsuckers and robbers of the masses) lack of transparency, bigotry and constant dangers of war due to misunderstandings; a mature reconciliation between religions is urgently required. At present, the conflicts amongst religions and cultures in many parts of the world are taking a toll on the well-being of the common man, and there are problems of global warming as a result of too much military activity. Nuclear wars are a distant but frightening possibility, because violence has been used time and again to solve mutual intolerance and conflicts since historical times.

The prophetic speech of Robert Francis "Bobby" Kennedy on April 5, 1968 "On Mindless Menace of Violence" rings true even today:

"Too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of other human beings....Its not the concern of any one race. The victims of violence are black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown, they are most important of all human beings whom other human beings loved and needed, no one no matter where he lives, and what he does can be certain who next will suffer from some senseless act of bloodshed and yet it goes on and on and on... what has violence ever accomplished, what has it ever created ...whenever we tear the fabric of our lives, which another man has painfully and clumsily

woven for himself and his children...the whole nation is degraded, yet we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claim to civilization alike.... Too often we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force. Too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams, of other human beings, but this much is clear, violence breeds violence, repression breeds retaliation, and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls. But when you teach a man to hate and to fear his brother, when you teach, that he is a lesser man because of his color, or his beliefs or the policies that he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you, threaten your freedom or your job, or your home or your family, then you also learn to confront others, not as fellow citizens but as enemies... to be subjugated and to be mastered. We learn at the last to look at our brothers as aliens... with whom we share a city but not a community. Men bound to us in common dwelling but not in a common effort, we learn to share only a common fear, only a common desire to retreat from each other, only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force. Our lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too great to let this spirit flourish any longer....Those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life, that they seek, as do we; nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness...surely this bond of common goals can begin to teach us some things... to look around... at our fellowmen, surely we can work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us... and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again.”

There is an urgent need for reform, a harmonious inter-cultural understanding and peace. It is not far-fetched to say that acceptance of multiculturalism and world peace through magnificent works of literature are effective means to conflict resolution in the modern world along with inter-faith understanding and dialogue. As Malcolm X, the famous African – American, Muslim human rights activist opines on maintaining one’s own cultural identity:

“...It’s just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong. What do you do? you integrate it with cream. You make it weak. But if you pore too much cream in it, you won’t even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep.”

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, Diasporas’ self-fashioning, exiled emplacement, merger, happy hybridity, racism, an outlandish “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*: "...For God's sake, open the universe a little more." (21).

What seems to be urgently required is a new world order, way beyond the divisions of East and West, North and South, a fusion that could be described as a "third civilization" and for 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 is manifested in the present and the future. The formidable powers of multiculturalism are yet to be 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 many communities including the religious faith" but "nothing is more satisfying than the feeling of belonging to a group who are dedicated to helping each other..." and "quite how important sport and games were to become in promoting harmony and common interest." She also recognized the importance of "comradeship", "co-operation between players", and a "sense of belonging to a wider family."

The diverse cultural ethics in a global society come in to constant contact with one another and challenge stereotypes by overthrowing cultural hegemony. They have been making use of new ways of trans-cultural explorations and expressions, and compassion, dialogue, responsibility and mutual respect create a conducive environment for sustaining this peace and goodwill attained after a long battle with fundamentalist manner of thought and behavior.

In religions and philosophy both Indian and Western, right from Adi Shankracharya's approach of 'all inclusiveness' to Bhagvad Gita's 'Nirvana Upnishads'; from Krishna's message to Buddha's sermons; from Tagore and Khalil Gibran's *The Prophets* to Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' as well as the Sufi tradition of Islam have advocated a common bond and a humanitarian concern. Cross-cultural understanding and an instant intermingling of the local with global is the reality of an increasingly inter-dependent world today. Multiculturalism has evolved as a reaction against the idealization of hegemony of the dominant ethnic groups, and as the advocates of multiculturalism believe that the human race has started from Africa and so the whole world is an ethnic minority!

At present the international society comprises of various Diasporas that co-exist with each other, maintaining their distinguished identities at the same time. Multiculturalism has been codified in various countries and gives an equal opportunity to persons of different ethnic minorities. There are dangers of cultural relativism as well but with determination, national and international laws, co-operation and courage various cultures 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 at large. The ancient Indian philosophies of "Sarva Dharma Sambhava" or all religions are equal and "Vishwa Maitri" or universal friendships are optimistic messages for true integration of various cultural groups, because one of the major strengths of the world today is its diversity.

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