

DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE IN THE WORKS OF ANITA NAIR

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair was born in Kerala. She is a famous poet, short story writer and journalist. The paper takes a holistic view of the word “exile” to encompass a range of displaced existence. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. There is an element of creativity present in the diasporic writings and this creation stands as a compensation for the many losses suffered. This paper seeks to locate the presence of diasporic consciousness in the works of Anita Nair. Nair recurrently comes up a narrative of dislocation and attempts to recreate an identity not just for her characters but for herself too.

KEYWORDS: Sensitive Writer, Diasporic Consciousness, Exile

INTRODUCTION

Writers of the Indian Diaspora have been at the centre stage in the last decade chiefly because of the theoretical formulation being generated by their works. Language and cultures are transformed when they come in contact with the others. These writers are often pre-occupied with the elements of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. They write in relation with the culture of their homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land. However, looking at the diasporic literature in a broader perspective it is seen that such literature helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing the global and even spreading universal peace.

Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories.

Interestingly, the terms ‘diaspora’, ‘exile’, ‘alienation’, ‘expatriation’, are synonymous and possess an ambiguous status of being both a refugee and an ambassador. The two roles being different, the diasporic writers attempt at doing justice to both. As a refugee, he seeks security and protection and as an ambassador projects his own culture and helps to enhance its comprehensibility.

The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. For eg. Naipaul who is in a perpetual quest for his roots turns to India for the same. Rushdie visits India to mythologise its history. Mistry visits and re-visits India for a kind of re-vitalization and to re-energize his aching soul. Bharati Mukherjee’s childhood memories harken her time and again. All the same it is necessary to realise the importance of cultural encounter, the bicultural pulls which finally helps in the emergence of the new culture. The diasporic writings

also known as the 'theory of migrancy' helps generate aesthetic evaluation, negotiate with cultural constructs and aid the emergence of a new hybridity.

There are many other landmarks created by the diasporic literature:

It has helped to understand and form potentials and core competencies. Access made available to educational, social, professional opportunities and political empowerment. It has made possible the removal of all kinds of limitations and barriers- traditional, cultural, linguistic etc.

It ignites and synergies common and shared values in addition to coalition building among the social and political diaspora. In addition to strengthening, it also enhances ties and bonds with others countries. To mention a few are the neighbouring countries including Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and other Asian Countries. Diasporic literature also helps countries to bring about a strategic partnership based on prosperity, security and commitment to freedom and peace.

These are actually a very few features to name. If planned and monitored positively, diasporic literature can also aid to fight larger evils such as terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, combating the spread of contagious disease and actually fighting many other common political and social hurdles. Diasporic literature also helps in creating good will, a cordial relationship and in spreading values, virtues and universal peace.

In the past, the Indians were intellectually fed on the thoughts of Dickens, Scott and the likes. Today, people all over the world are being nourished by the writers of the Indian diaspora namely V.S. Naipaul, Rushdie, Mistry, Vikram Seth, Mukherjee, Vassanji etc. The European voyagers, travelers, traders and the orientalist rediscovered the cosmopolitan culture of India. The writers of the Indian diaspora, through their literary contributions have greatly enriched the English literature. They have been aiming at re-inventing India through the rhythms of ancient legends, the cadences of mythology, the complexities of another civilization, cultural assimilation and nostalgia. They dive deep into the realms of imaginations and the ocean of memory to paint something quite different and distinct from that portrayed by fellow novelists. The writers of the Indian diaspora write about India painting the vastness and the complexities of the home country which contains everything in multitudes – multiple truths, multiple crisis, multiple realities and this diversity is portrayed for the world wide reading public.

This paper tries to locate the presence of diasporic consciousness in the works of Anita Nair. Nair recurrently comes up with a narrative of dislocation and attempts to recreate an identity not just for her characters but for herself too. Etymologically, the term diaspora is derived from two words dia and speirein, which literally means 'to spread' or 'to scatter' or 'to disperse'. It was originally used to refer to the dispersion of Jews after Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. Critic Clifford argues that the peculiar feature of diasporic community is a formation of a double consciousness that enables the individual to transcend disappointments by emphasizing the strengths of self and community.

According to Him

Experience of loss, marginality, and exile are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement. This constitutive suffering coexists with the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension. (312) Anita Nair, the popular Indian English writer has captured quite a few Indian hearts in her 15 years of career as a writer. She goes through myriad roles as a content writer, novelist, essayist, poet all with her unique way of getting into details.

Rural Kerala is much depicted in her novels which she says is her deep connection with her motherland. But she rules out the possibility of a nostalgic writer as she writes on different subjects. The way she shapes her characters each one an absolute blend of emotions and myriad sensitivities, the way she effortlessly structures the metaphorical expression, and the way she weaves meticulous descriptions in her stories stimulates the reader's imagination till the very last paragraph.

Though Anita Nair is classified as stay-at-home writer by the literary circles and academic institutions, Nair's fiction strongly exhibits the diasporic consciousness. Born in Kerala, a state which boasts 100 per cent literacy, Nair spent her early years in Chennai. Her deep acquaintance and association with South India is depicted in her stories which are set in the region and richly flavoured with the local elements. She was born at Mundakottakurissi, near Shornur in Kerala State and was educated in Chennai (Madras) before returning to Kerala, where she gained a BA in English Language and Literature.

But her heart holds a fond longing for her native home-state, Kerala. This longing is evident in her narrative. In her Introduction to the anthology *Where the Rain is born: writings about Kerala* (2002) Kerala looks and feels like paradise on earth:

"Nowhere else in the world have I seen so many hues of green. The velvety green of the moss on the wall. The deep green of the hibiscus bush. The dapple green of the jackfruit. The jade green of the paddy. . . Leaves. Parakeet's wing. The frogs. The opaque green of silence." (i)

Anita Nair's Kerala is an imagined space, recreated from memory, nostalgia and the oral narratives of the people she loves. Kerala, its villages, art forms, ayurveda, dance-drama, monsoons, snake-shrines, coconuts, elephants, jackfruits all form the backdrop of her novels and that is the source of her inspiration. But unfortunately, for the people who reside within the territorial borders, a migrant remains as an outsider in spite of the latter's attachment to the land or the local customs. The obsession with Kerala gives her work its concrete specificity; it also limits the scope of her narrative and her range as a creative writer. Ironically, Anita Nair, who is not an exile, does not choose to settle down in the land of her dreams in spite of its excellent topography. The reason behind this is the economic gains the host state provides and the fact that social reality of Kerala is quite depressing.

The *Better man* was her first novel published in 2000 was rich in local colour and was a real hit among her readers which also has been published in Europe and the United States and won her many accolades. 'The better man' a warm and imaginative creation tells the story of a middle aged man, 'Mukundan' which is the central character and the writer sets the plot for the story in rural Kerala.

Another novel from Anita, *Ladies Coupe* (2001) depicts a women's journey in search of strength and independence. This novel proved the writer's strength in bringing alive everyday situations, desires and dreams. *Ladies Coupe* is described as "what must be one of the most important feminist novels to come out of South Asia," by *The Telegraph*, UK. *Ladies Coupe* as a novel depicts the tales of many women interwoven in the experience of one. Ever since *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair has been referred to as a feminist writer but she always vehemently opposed such comments. Anita Nair says that she isn't in the writing arena for a social change or revolution. It is just some thoughts that comes to her, may be a spark which she expands to a story. She just holds a mirror of the society she lives in but does not hope to

make a change through her writings. Her writings clearly state that Anita Nair as a writer is not bound to a particular ideology which would limit her boundaries of thoughts and writing.

Her novels like *Mistress* (2005) and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) also were widely accepted with her unique style of describing things. *Lessons in Forgetting* is a heartwarming story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances.

Apart from novels and short stories, this Indian writer is also very much into poetry and children's writing. Her first poetry collection, *Malabar Mind* (1997) depicts the real and corporeal, landscapes and mindscapes are explored with a rare fluid ease. From the quirky symbol of toddy shops in Malabar - a full bottle of toddy crowned with a red hibiscus - to the stressed drone of television newscasters during war time; from the apathy of non-stick frying pans to the quiet content of cows chewing cud, Anita Nair rakes through the everyday, seizing an unusual moment. From marmalade mornings, sun dried memories, cow-like grey clouds to the shy raindrop - her new medium of thought takes you to another plane, where words paint pictures and fantasy takes wing.

She also has written a sparkling collection of literary essays, *Goodnight and God Bless* is about books, writers, book events, mice, mothers, airport hotels, the wind and other such unexpectedly thought-provoking subjects, snugly interwoven with a warmly personal and anecdotal history of the author and her assorted family members Ms Nair also loves to write for children and has written *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2007). She also finds cooking her passion and has tried on food writing as well.

Counted among the prominent writers in the Indian literary circle, she has the honour of having her novels published in different languages. Her novel *Ladies Coup* was rated as one of the five best novels in India in 2001. Her novel, *Mistress*, was a finalist in 2007 for the PEN/Beyond Margins Award in the US and, in the same year, was nominated as a finalist for the *Liberatupreis* (award) in Germany.

She is now involved in translating the all time Malayalam classic novel, *Chemmen* by Thakazhi Shivashankaranpillai which she looks forward with great expectations She currently lives in Bangalore with her husband and son. Diasporic literature could be examined using several key features. First, it is based on the idea of a homeland; a place from where the displacement occurs. Secondly, diasporic literature provides narratives of harsh journeys undertaken for various reasons. Thirdly, diaspora provides accounts of another "sense of place" away from home land. Fourthly, one could read how "homeland-made" protagonists behave in a far of land either adopting or rejecting new cultural codes of their new "sense of place". Therefore, when reading diasporic literature, we can learn why and how some people choose to migrate to another country either voluntarily or due to other reasons, and how they get used to living perhaps, "peacefully" elsewhere, but losing home and homeland. Diasporic literature may also represent and delve with concepts such as nostalgia, memory and even lamentation of losing one's native language, homeland and friends and so on.

Her books like *The Better Man*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting* show how the experience of displacement and migration can be both emancipatory as well as a harrowing experience. The migrant, on returning back to his village, becomes alien to the culture and customs of that particular village. Migrant is treated as 'an outsider' which gives him/her the feeling of non-belonging and a no-where-ness. In *The Better Man* we find Mukundan trapped in a similar situation. In a letter to his friend Anand in Madras we find him describing his retired life in his village Kaikurussi thus:

As for me, I'm pulling on in this place. I'm slowly getting used to village life. Believe me; it is nothing like what you see in all those Malayalam movies you like to watch on the video. I can understand your curiosity as to what I do all

day. Actually, come to think of it, there isn't any fixed pattern to my day here... It is very different, and very often I wish I could return to an office routine. It gave a structure to my existence. (121)

In *The Better Man* painter Bhasi, who is forcibly evicted by the local big-wigs of Kaikurrussi for the construction of community hall project faces a similar predicament. The natives of Kaikurrussi find it most suitable to deprive Bhasi from his land to build a community hall because he is not a native of the village. The pain and anguish he suffers on being told to leave the land he loves is unbearable for him. The villagers feel that as Bhasi is a settler he would have no qualms over leaving the land of Kaikurrusi. To which Bhasi retorts:

So is that what it has been reduced to? That as a native you have certain rights, and as a settler I don't. I love this village, this land, more than anyone else in the village does. I love it as if it were a living being. But because I am not a native I'm dispensable. How am I going to make you or anyone else understand what Kaikurrussi means to me? What can I say to you who see this land merely as mud, grass and trees, of the bonding the land and I share? (311)

Nair's migrant consciousness is evident from the continuous evocation of the motif of return to the homeland in almost all her major novels. And this motif is manifested in her characters like Sethu and Mukundan in *The Better Man*, Koman and Sethu in *Mistress* and Jak in *Lessons in Forgetting*.

In *Lessons in Forgetting*, Prof. Jak, living in the U.S, refuses to repair the leaky tap in the garden because he wants to hear it drip, which reminds him of the kitchen tap in the house he grew up in. Furthermore he even disallows his wife to clean up the bird shit in the patio because it reminds him of the backyard of his house in Mylapore. (151)

Nair demonstrates how migrancy can be both emancipatory as well as painful. Thus throughout Anita Nair's novels we can trace a double consciousness pervading her writings or a like/dislike relationship which can be construed as a byproduct of the ideological construct fashioned by external stimuli and inner consciousness. One of the major endeavors of many migrant and diasporic writers is their search for roots and identity. Anita Nair is no exception to this. It is one of her pre-occupations, evident from her fictional works. Nair's works are shaped by the active engagement with the dominant cultural forms to establish a space for oneself. Occasionally her creative endeavors are devoted in settling her crisis within her own self to ascertain the cultural space which she wants to call her home which perhaps is the dilemma of every kid whose parents have left their home state for better employment opportunities. It is the same need to reclaim her identity in Kerala which is depicted in Anita Nair's fiction through characters like Mukundan and Koman. And perhaps it is the same longing for one's own land that has compelled Nair to stay back in India rather than chose any other foreign location to comfortably emigrate to like most of the Indian English writers do so.

On the one hand she adores her native land Kerala, but on the other she seems to be disturbed by the inherent politics of the place. Within the parameters of her own hometown, she is an outsider who makes a few sporadic visits. And it seems very likely that the cottage built by her in Mundukottukurrussi is to battle this deep insecurity within the recesses of her heart and perhaps reinforce this link to her roots and foster a sense of belongingness. It is the impending diasporic consciousness and insecurity of being thrown out of the host state that makes a person invest in one handful of soil in the land of their forefathers.

Anita Nair's unique socio-historic location, her versatility with different cultures, delineation of themes, her representation of women all make her fiction an interesting document on the Kerala reality, the caste gender dynamics of contemporary Kerala in particular.

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