

## EMOTIONAL ALLIANCE IN THE INDIAN IMMIGRANTS AS IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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### Abstract

*This article focuses on the portrayal of the different opportunities that fascinate the Indians who migrate to other countries, the various factors that affect their relationship with the family at their home country, and the new relationships they form in the country that they have adopted.*

*The rupture in the perspectives of the first generation diaspora and the second or third is acutely felt. Due to this gap in the understanding and perspectives of the different generations of the diaspora, their family relationships and social bonds are often under stress. The article argues how the culture of the home country, and the country where they have migrated, exerts a pull from opposite directions on the immigrants.*

**Keywords:** *Indian immigrants, fascination, new relationships, the rupture, gap, social bonds and the pull.*

### Introduction

R. Radhakrishnan in the essay “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora” discusses the question of the identity of the immigrants – are they Indians or Americans? The critic poses the problem, “How could *someone* be both *one* and something *other*? How could the unity of identity have more than one face or home?” (120). Radhakrishnan also questions the relationship of one’s ethnic identity to one’s national identity. He wonders if the national identity is hierarchically superior and subsumes the ethnic identity or does the coalition of the two produce a hyphenated identity – which is often taken to be inauthentic and not legitimate.

The critic discusses the differences in the perspectives of the two generations of diaspora – the parents and the children. He notes that the generational gap that inevitably exists between two generations, becomes more acute in the case of immigrants: “The tensions between the old and new homes create the problem of divided allegiances that the two generations experience differently” (123). The history and memory of the older generation is very different from that of the younger generation which has only experienced the present as the new homeland where they are currently living. In such a case, the unity and organicity of the family is disturbed and the divided allegiances of the two generations become noticeable. The rupture in the perspectives of the first generation diaspora and the second or third is acutely felt. Here, the older generation cannot refer to the Indian value system to solve the problems of the younger generation, neither can the younger generation “indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about ‘where they have come from’” (123). Hence it is necessary for members of both the generations to bridge the gap by empathizing with the other and appreciating the experiences of the other.

Due to this gap in the understanding and perspectives of the different generations of the diaspora, their family relationships and social bonds are often under stress. The culture of the

home country, and the country where they have migrated, exerts a pull from opposite directions on the immigrants. While the older generation falls back on the value system of the home country, and feels secure as it invokes the traditions and beliefs practiced by their countrymen, the younger generation often experiences a conflict in choosing between the two – the value system of the country where they are residing, and that of their homeland upheld by their parents or grandparents. For the younger generation it is not easy to shake off the influence of the culture of their home country since they are also not completely assimilated in the new country where they have settled. The novels of the diaspora writers often focus on this conflict experienced by the diaspora, which affects their personal and social relationships.

The west has always attracted the South Asians due to better opportunities for education and employment available there. Even before the Independence, the Indians migrated to England and America and to other more developed and prosperous countries to seek a better life. During the second half of the twentieth century, the migration of the people for educational and economic reasons took place at a larger level than ever before. This kind of movement brings before the settlers the fear of losing their identity in a new, adopted place of residence. Some migrants move to their own diaspora community, while others accept a more hybridized identity. Thus, there arises the need for the search for the self and the dual vision of the migrants. Shao-ming Kung observes that the second generation migrants struggle with their conflicting realities. They are confused about their identity being “Indian-American, American-Indian, Overseas-Born-Indian, or American-Born-Indian” (127). These issues affect their family relationships largely. The members of the migrant families have different perspectives and experiences of migration. As they settle in a foreign country, they have to maintain their family ties in their home country and establish new social relationships.

The first generation diaspora have different experiences than what their children face in the new culture they are born and brought up in. Both the generations have different experiences of adjusting and accommodating in the foreign land and this difference is clearly noticeable in the relationships with each other. The first generation migrants are seen more closely connected to the family members and relatives in their home country and they desire that their children should also try to maintain this kind of bond. Such conflicts are reflected in the thinking and behaviour pattern of the second and the third generation Diaspora who start acting and deciding independently at an early age, and begin to disregard Indian customs and traditions as they adopt the western lifestyle.

The immigrants can only assume and imagine a loving and caring relationship with their relatives in the home country, but cannot enjoy the same because of their displaced position in the other countries. As a result, in the novels discussed in this article, one observes that the relationship of the protagonists with their family members, whether close or distant, is always disturbed. This article focuses on the portrayal of the different opportunities that fascinate the Indians who migrate to other countries, the various factors that affect their relationship with the family at their home country, and the new relationships they form in the country that they have adopted. Indira Nityanandam believes that most of the second generation migrants suffer from a “constant conflict between the inner and outer worlds” (93). Anita Desai has portrayed characters who though are men of humble origin, as well as ones who are rich and progressive, but are ready to move to new places, and to face the challenges of living in a distant land.

Anita Desai has portrayed family values and the importance of personal and social relationships in their works. Rushdie states for the diaspora writers that they can write “from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society” (19). They are all open towards the growing possibilities of mutual love and friendly relations of Indian immigrants with other Indians and foreign natives. Gayatri Spivak comments that women are not in a better position than men in their diaspora state. She states that diaspora women are “super dominated, super exploited” (249). She believes that women may never get complete satisfaction, nor enjoy the advantages and find it difficult to adjust to the new surroundings as compared to men. She continues that the diaspora women are “never the full subjects of and agents in civil society: in other words, first-class citizens of a state” (249).

The Indian migrants as portrayed in the novels by the three Indian diaspora novelists are seen tied to their roots and family they have left in their home country. They feel a strong sense of love towards their relatives and friends in their home country and at the same time they maintain a good relationship with the local natives. Indian migrants are presented as close-knit families who pass on the traditional values of respecting every member in the family to their children. Parents feel themselves responsible for ensuring that these family values are maintained by their children until they marry and try to maintain family ties closely. The children are portrayed as experiencing an internal conflict. In some novels the second generation immigrants reciprocate love and respect to their parents whereas in other novels, they value a free and independent life, and thus they may not agree with their parents on different issues. They do not like the Indian culture and norms to be forced upon them and rebel against these by adopting a western lifestyle.

Written after *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965), the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) is Anita Desai's third work of fiction. In this novel Desai portrays the psychological conflict of the Indian immigrants in England who are not sure about their ties with the host country and cannot establish a secure relationship with the country where they have settled. Desai brings out the desire of the immigrants to adjust in their new homeland and the problems they face during this process. She portrays the immigrants' suffering due to inner conflict and the relationship crisis that they sometimes experience in an alien country. M.K. Naik observes that if Desai's fiction is “able to advance from the vision of ‘aloneness’ as a psychological state of mind to that of pessimism as a metaphysical enigma – and one hopes it will – Anita Desai may one day achieve an amplified pattern of significant exploration of consciousness comparable to Virginia Woolf at her best” (243).

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the protagonist, Adit Sen is an immigrant from Calcutta who comes to London and works there as a clerk in a small travel agency. He lives in the Clapham flat in Laurel Lane with his Anglo-Saxon wife Sarah. He had met Sarah in a party organized by another Anglo-Saxon friend of his, Christine Langford. Adit was attracted towards Sarah due to her humility and shyness, and her uprightness. Her reserved and quiet nature reminded him of Bengali women and appealed to him. He mentioned before her that her Oriental manners were probably because of her being an Indian in her past incarnation (74). After their marriage he expects Sarah to cook Indian food for him and declares, “No British broths and stews for me” (17). He enjoys teaching Sarah how to make the Indian sweet-dish “carrot halwa” and a typical Bengali dish “charchari” (17).

Adit also expects Sarah to wear a sari on special occasions as on their wedding anniversary or birthdays. Sarah usually cares for her husband's desires and lives the way he wishes. Sometimes,

for fear of the rain ruining the saree's border, Sarah protests mildly in an embarrassed tone. But Adit flares up in anger mentioning the Bengali ladies who manage their saris in all kinds of weather and watches her drape the gold necklace around her neck correctly. Though Adit loves Sarah but he rears chauvinistic notions about English wives. He states, "they look very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week" (31). Otherwise Adit knows that Sarah, herself an immigrant in England, is a considerate and understanding woman.

Sarah adjusts with the temper of Adit which she understands is due to his displaced position from his homeland. Desai presents Sarah as the one who seems to sacrifice her wants and follows her husband only to "maintain order and discipline in her house, in her relationship with him" (195). While discussing the fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya, Usha Pathania comments, "Marital relations are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other" (14). Though Sarah does not mix up easily with Adit's Indian immigrant friends, yet due to his insistence and pleasure, she participates in their conversation. Sarah cooks for them the Indian food that makes her husband happy, although she herself does not care to eat it. She never objects to Adit's going down the lane to see his friends off, leaving her to wash the dishes and go to bed alone.

Meenakshi Mukherjee describes Sarah as, "the most successful and a typical Desai character, complex, hypersensitive and intelligent" (225). Sarah has her reasons to accept Adit's ways as she has no attachment with her parents. She tries her best to avoid visiting her parents even once a year, the probable reason being her mother Mrs Rosecommon James's ill-treatment of her husband and her domineering nature. Sarah had left her mother's house in Hampstead even before her marriage for a job in London.

Sarah nurtures some very beautiful memories of her father. She recalls her childhood days when her father was an energetic and loving person, bringing her muffins and other surprises. She respected her father as others too regarded him for his good name in his profession of a lawyer. But after his retirement his wife's ill-treatment has confined him to the maintenance of the garden. Sarah is pained to see her mother treating him as a dog calling "To-mmy," instructing him to bathe properly and clean his nails before giving him food to eat alone in the kitchen (141). Mr Rosecommon James distances himself from Sarah too and does not bother to come and meet her during her visits home. Gradually Sarah accepts it as a sign of his old age and starts taking interest in the letters of Adit's parents from India and in their life. D.H. Lawrence points out, "The greatest relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary" (130). Perhaps because of her shattered relationship with her own parents Sarah becomes very docile and fills her life with what Adit brings for her – relatives, stories and legends of India.

Dev is Adit's college-time friend in Calcutta and has come to London to study in the London School of Economics. Both the friends are very frank in their conversation, not hesitating even to slap each other in a friendly manner. They even use abusive words sometimes for each other as a gesture of intimacy. In spite of Dev's complaining and demanding nature, Adit always supports him and encourages him to pursue his degree. He shows Adit the way in which Indians have to mould

themselves to survive in the alien country. Adit lets Dev live in his home as long as he wishes and takes him along to the home of Sarah's parents in Hampstead for a week-long holiday.

Dev, however feels slightly jealous for Adit's satisfactory job in an office and his settled married life with Sarah. Dev has experienced the hardships immigrants have to face in England. Dev is also envious of Adit, when the latter acquires a flat in the "black and white" storey of the "three-in-one-cake" building in Laurel Lane, London (115). In an interview with Atma Ram, Desai states for *Bye-Bye Blackbird* that, "of all my novels it is the most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation." In this novel through the characters of Adit, Dev and Sarah, Desai has focused on the crisis of relationships the immigrants face amongst themselves and with the people of the host country.

Adit has a good relationship with most of the people he knows in London but not with the residents in the upper and the lower storey of the Clapham building. He does not like the too big Sikh family in the "black" ground floor flat and their informal ways to call him for casual talks. He dislikes their noisy ways – the singing and quarrelling of the children, and above all their keenness to make friends with all neighbours. He calls them "the authentic stuff" of Ludhiana (30).

Adit also hates his landlady Miss Emma Moffit who lives comfortably in the upper storey which he calls the "white" layer of the cake. He calls her a "Dirty old bag" for her untidy looks whereas Sarah admires her ways and wants to be just like her (42). Miss Moffit has an obsession with India, and due to this she is happy to give her flat on rent to Adit. Miss Moffit still remembers her lover who had worked in India. Since then the lady had a fascination for India. But her lover died during service. Even after his death Miss Moffit loved him and did not marry. She has always wished to go to India at least once in her lifetime where her lover had spent a few years of his life and was buried. She considers Englishmen as "lesser beings" and Indians as the ones who "help us to expand, to set our sights on farther, on Eastern horizons" (44).

Desai focuses on the East-West relationship in her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, and portrays the complexities of the relationship of the Indian diaspora with the British. In Rudyard Kipling's opinion, "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet." But Desai, herself a diaspora, has witnessed the assimilation of east into west and the new values the immigrants acquire while living in the host country. Desai believes that this novel projects her own experiences as a diaspora. She states in her article "The Book I Enjoyed Writing Most": "*Bye-Bye Blackbird* is the closest of all my books to actuality – practically everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London" (31).

Desai's novels are generally the study of human relationships and the assimilation of immigrants in diaspora settings. Most of her fiction deals with the solitude and the alienation of the diaspora that affects their relationship with family and friends. While Desai sets her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* in the United Kingdom, she sets part of her novel *Fasting, Feasting* in the United States of America, for USA is also a dreamland for young, aspiring Indians like the protagonist Arun, who migrate there for academic and economic gains.

Desai's ninth novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), was nominated for the prestigious Booker prize. The binaries in the title of the novel are a reflection of the bipolar world of India and America as represented in Desai's novel, and the life and culture in these two countries. Desai focuses on

themes like overpowering patriarchal forces, gender discrimination, the failure of marriage, isolation and loneliness due to the constricting norms of society in both India and America.

The first part of *Fasting, Feasting* concerns the family relationship of the parents MamaPapa with their two daughters Uma and Aruna and their son Arun as they are living in India. Desai does not mention the names of MamaPapa and what town they live in except that Mama was brought up in Kanpur and Papa belongs to Patna. MamaPapa are two parts of one entity. The joint name reflects that they are united in body and soul and also that they have similar thoughts and perspectives about most issues. Uma and Aruna know the fact that if either of their parents has forbidden them something, it would be pointless to approach their mother or father privately, as the other parent would never question the partner's decision and relax it on the plea of the children.

Mama is a traditional woman and enjoys her status as a housewife. She wants her daughters Uma and Aruna to be perfect in household work and lead a secure life. There is an unsaid silence and distance between the parents and the children, and very little conversation between them. Most of the time the parents sit talking together on the swing or in the veranda. Thus while the parents share a close relationship with each other, their children are deprived of the emotional support that they need from their parents.

Mama does not reveal her pregnancy to her daughters, she tells it to her older relatives instead. Uma does not feel happy either to know about it through their maid. Mama does not even share the details of her illness with her daughters. Uma comes to know from Dr. Dutt that hysterectomy tests need to be conducted to find out the cause of Mama's discomfort (144). Desai projects the suffering of the young generation through Uma due to the adverse conditions created by the patriarchal forces. In this context, Jasbir Jain in *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* observes, "*Fasting, Feasting* is about cultural attitudes rather surface exuberance for or imitation of the others, more than that Desai is interested in family relationships, how freedom remains an abstract idea and identity, an elusive concept" (191). Gradually this distancing brings Uma closer to a distant cousin of Mama, Mira-masi, a pilgrim who spends time with Uma telling her stories of Lord Krishna.

When Uma is sixteen Mama gives birth to a son, Arun, a name which had been decided at the time of Aruna's birth in the anticipation of a son. Neither Uma nor Aruna is pleased to have a brother. Possibly, the large age gap between the youngest sibling and the two elder sisters, creates this lack of bonding between them. MamaPapa's desperation to have a son is reflected in the fact that their elder daughter is sixteen years old when their son is born. The first expression of Aruna who is thirteen years old when she sees the fragile body of her brother is, "So red – so ugly!" (16). The three siblings have no attachment or involvement in one another's lives till the end of the novel. Uma has to restrict her study in order to nurse her little brother Arun with, "Proper attention" (30). Uma wished to continue her studies, but her Mama would keep asking her to perform household chores one after the other. As T. Ravichandaran explains, "Reduced thus to a baby-sitter at her earlier days and an unpaid servant for her self-centered parents for the rest of her life, Uma finds no escape from her entrapment" (83). Uma is supposed to act according to her parents' will and not according to her own desires.

Uma has no other choice but to follow her mother's instructions – writing letters, spreading woollens in the sun, or preparing meals. Uma feels frustrated as she has no freedom; she wants space

for herself, but feels helpless. Uma learns to compromise since her childhood. Krishna Murthy remarks, "Life is relationship. From the day we are born, we are in relationship until we die, and we must discover what is right way to relate so that in life there is harmony in relationship" (68). Uma wants to express her need for motherly affection from Mama but she becomes more depressed when she realizes that there is no one with whom she can share her thoughts.

After a long wait, giving birth to a son is an achievement for MamaPapa. Mama feels that being the mother of a son has improved her status at home as that of her husband who works as a lawyer. Amar Nath Prasad remarks on this gender-based attitude of the parents which is somehow unnatural, "Most probably, the reason of their frustration and step-motherly treatment can be sought in the psychology of the parents – such parents who are more interested in a boy child than in a girl child" (40). Arun's birth acts as glue to the attachment of MamaPapa and they stay together even more as inseparable entities. Even after having given birth to a son after so many years, MamaPapa do not take interest in the rearing of their son Arun. They distance themselves from him as they had done with their daughters.

Papa does not directly involve himself in Arun's upbringing, he gets an idea of his son's well-being and academic progress by the description that Mama offers to him. He just asks about Arun's food and studies daily and thus fulfils his duties as a father while Mama fulfils hers by providing Papa the information with all minute details. She scarcely feeds Arun out of pleasure or considering his choices, instead she does it nervously so as to present this task as a successful performance before her husband in the evening. Andrew Robinson comments that through MamaPapa, the Indian parents, Anita Desai creates, "two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudices and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town" (39).

Mama feels nervous on the issue of Arun's proper feeding as she knows that after completion of each meal "she still had to face Papa's interrogation regarding the whole occasion" (32). Arun is severely affected by this duty of Mama to feed him somehow a proper portion of the prescribed diet. He does not like being forced to eat, and usually spits out whatever is put into his mouth. He tries to keep himself occupied in some or the other game so as to avoid forced feeding. Only his sister Uma observes his slow and weak physical growth and draws her parents' attention towards it, "And have you seen the Joshis' son? He is already playing cricket!" (32).

Although Arun is an object of pride for MamaPapa, yet they converse very little with him and with their daughters. Mama is so little interested in knowing his tastes that it takes her many years to understand that he dislikes meat and prefers vegetarian food. It baffles Papa who retains the colonial concept in his mind that meat, cricket and the English language bring progress and success. He forces Arun to take tuitions in all subjects and afterwards play cricket or badminton believing in the maxim "healthy mind, healthy body" (119). This is the reason Arun feels no bond of affection with his parents. The choices and tastes of the children are monitored by parents. In spite of being raised under calculated observation, Arun suffers from many diseases and remains an undernourished boy. He does not share an emotional relationship with his sisters who are much older than him and have been married before he was grown up.

Arun likes to be alone and unnoticed. Keen to escape his family and home, Arun does not give a second thought to the idea of going abroad when he gets the acceptance letter to pursue his degree in Massachusetts. Once he has gone to the USA, his letters from Massachusetts are very formal, and express no longing to meet his parents or sisters or for coming back. In the introduction to Desai's novel, Rana Dasgupta comments that it "recounts human relationships in the language not only of fasting and feasting but of greed, craving, taboo, denial and disgust" (viii).

Mrs Patton, Arun's landlady in Massachusetts grows fond of him preparing meals according to his tastes, and gradually turns a vegetarian herself. She likes Arun's company while shopping for grocery and all other eatables, but Arun shows no interest in going with her. He has never been in this kind of close proximity with his mother, so he cannot accept his landlady's excessive involvement in his day-to-day life. Arun feels frustrated at the excess show of concern by Mrs Patton and wishes to point out to Mrs Patton that, "he is not her family" (197). In his home he has been suffering due to his preference for vegetarian food, and here when his landlady Mrs Patton provides him all that he likes to eat, he wishes that she should not interfere in his life.

Uma has ordinary looks, due to which it was not very easy for her father to find a good match for her. Aruna, her younger sister is more beautiful and modern than her, and attracts more suitors. Uma marries twice but neither of the marriages succeeds. Her marriages create an economical pressure upon her father who had to suffer the financial loss of managing two dowries and this affects her relationship with her family members. She is considered ill-fated by all. Mama's early sympathetic attitude changes into "mockery and goading" (86). Papa, having paid for two dowries, does not have the financial resources to marry her off again. Uma wonders "if she had never actually married or if she was now divorced" (95). Arun, though quite too young to comprehend the happenings, senses some tension and stops teasing her. Uma feels that her sister Aruna too is no longer sympathetic towards her and notices the mockery in her tone. Uma's position is that of a marginalized woman in her own house. According to R.S. Pathak the marginalized should speak, "It has to speak, voice, not hide its tears, fears and angst and wrath in as many forms as possible. Tongue, if unused, is a fleshy burden, tantamounting to its own detonguing" (15)

Desai portrays Uma as a sad young girl who surrenders her life in silence and loneliness and her dreams remain only a mirage for her. Desai brings out significant issues like gender bias, strained relationships among family members, and the lack of concern of parents for their daughters in the novel. Amar Nath Prasad states that Anita Desai, "aptly shows the constant urge for woman's freedom in *Fasting, Feasting*. She seems to give a good retort to the dictum prevalent in society that woman should be judged and perceived as object and not as subject" (44)

The diaspora, as portrayed by Desai in her novels, forge deep and lasting emotional bonds with their family members and friends from the host country. Conflict is inevitable, especially in the immigrant situation, where, as R. Radhakrishnan avers, the older and younger generations of immigrants nurture different memories of the past, and have different values in life. First generation diaspora are more rooted in the culture and tradition of their home country, while the second and later generations of diaspora gradually break away from the value system upheld by their parents or grandparents, and adopt the cultural practices of the country where they reside.

In such circumstances too, in the fiction of the diaspora writers, one observes close ties between family members – between spouses as Adit and Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Immigrants are found to form friendly bonds with people of the host country which provide them emotional and moral support. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Adit and Dev have English friends whose companionship they value and enjoy.

The emotional bonding between immigrants becomes stronger despite several odds in novel like *Bye-Bye Blackbird* where Adit and Dev remain good friends till the end of the novel. The emotional bonds of immigrants as portrayed in these novels, provide them with the moral strength and support necessary for them to be able to survive even in difficult circumstances in a foreign country.

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