Revisiting Anita Desai's Fiction: Tracing Generational Relevance towards a Third Culture/Third Space Spectrum

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to trace the generational relevance of produced fiction by Anita Desai (b. 1937) towards the possibility of locating third culture subjectivity and the scope of the third space spectrum. The association ranges from the character aesthetics to strategic spatial intervention in her fiction, and the scope of extending the same to new pressures of readership pertaining to constantly mobile and restructured locales. The world around shows signs of disintegration of the individual vis-a-vis dislocation, migration, and dynamic forms of locomotion. It is, therefore, imperative that the modern Indian-English novel should seek new techniques to articulate the experienced inner and outer realities, merging textuality, spatiality, and subjectivity. Desai's preoccupation with the individual highlights their psychological motivations, identity constructs, organizational logic of family institutions, disintegration, sense of failure, the absence to offer a clear binary, and her keen awareness of the futility of existence radiates from most of her novels. The paper tries to fathom such possibilities through analyses of her major fiction into a third culture spectrum, which may serve as a major constituent to tackle her oeuvre and accommodate her major themes.

Keywords: Third culture subjectivity, Third Space Spectrum, Spatial Theories, Indian-English Novel, Anita Desai.

Situating Desai's Fiction in A Possible Third Culture Spectrum

Characters and locations in Desai's novels reflect multicultural experiences, crossing, adapting, and assimilating the diverse experiences of culture. In the "Introduction" to Anita Desai: Critical Perspectives, Devendra Kohli and Melanie Maria Just, bring to the fore the preponderance of the conflicts that are emotional and internal, "…at the heart of these conflicts lies her protagonist's pull between his/her cherished solitude and personal space, and the actual or remembered social and familial relationships that also provide an anchor [to her plot] "(13). These conflicts are extended through renderings of "alienation and not-belonging" to the

created space, and at the same time, constructing that space with individualized experiences of memories, directing them at the vicinity of the natural landscape they acquire. The sensory mediums (of sight, symphony, and the culmination of psychotic renderings) comprehend the external geography to suit and situate the advances of internal realities of characters. To understand how the possibility of a third culture is already signaled in her works from the very beginning, Desai's insights on what inspires and empowers her as a writer is immanent. It is at the source of the writer's intent that one finds whether drawing such connections stand concrete or not. I begin my formulation by evincing Desai's response to her produced fiction, the process of writing, and themes with which she associates fictional parameters.

Making the Landscape Come Alive

She admits to trying to balance the internal and external landscapes of the subjects and making them (characters) realize that balance is possible. Characters live inside Desai, and she directs her concerns through the medium of providing a distinct form of subjectivity to the characters she constructs. There is an interweaving of landscape, memory, and question of identity inside the consciousness of Desai's characters (Kohli). The language provisioned to build a particular spatiality is also a potent site here. On the question of employing language, she reflects that she found English as the site of traversing between two cultures. The linguistic employment harbors her impinging encounters with diverse cultures. In "Bicultural, Adrift and Wandering", Desai in retrospect, expresses her surprise over adjusting to life in England, crediting her "uncomplicated multi-cultural background" (14).

In a way, it replicates what Ruth Van Reken in her *Ted Talk* brings into notice while pointing at the benefits of being a TCK; one who adapts and changes quickly in response to the changed cultural context around them. While the complexity lies in adjustment, the scope of flexibility in adapting enhances that adjustment. Although not exactly in line with what Ruth Hill Useem said about her definition of a third culture kid, Desai's fiction does reflect potent sites for readers to situate third culture subjectivity. There is always an act of traversing between modes of belonging, home, and ties to the origin.

In her work, *Clear Light of Day* (1980) for example, the geographical reality of constructed characters has been in contestation with dual modes of attachment and alienation towards their place of origin. The description of places and created space in the said text includes most of the locations that were a part of Desai's developmental years in real. The same experiential

reality navigates the psyche along with adjustment models given to each character; there is Bim, who never goes away and stays at home where she grew up. She is self-made, independent, and never married but succeeds in living the life she wanted, although always configures the alternative had she moved somewhere else. Her sister Tara, on the other hand, settles into a new place, living a new and different lifestyle, adjusting and becoming foreign, yet admiring the model of Bim's adjustment.

 It may seem a less augmented connection for stockpiling the sites of third culture sensibilities, but it helps in questioning the debates surrounding the evolution of TCK theory itself. The characters neither lament their loss of origin nor comply with the fixed dimensions to which an individual belongs. Her works and subsequent plot construction produce specimens to explore the outlet of going beyond binaries. More than the physical land, it is the mental landscape with which a subject aligns his/herself. The actants do not promote a fixed location and pendulate between the two extremes to escape into a third possibility.

For Desai, "English is at best an immigrant in India", which has never taken any root. It may be one of the reasons why it is easy for her to identify with English instead of Bengali or German, both of which stand as a unified entity, each with its cultural baggage. Immediately, this brings into mind how language is affected by a "strong coefficient of deterritorialization", where the subject is trying to decode spheres of the lived cultural space and their act of its dissolution (Deleuze and Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?"). The literature a minority is making in a majority language (or in this case, the global language), is done by substituting a recreation, a reterritorialization of the same place. According to her, "not having traditions to hold onto, the writer depends purely on flashes of individual vision to guide him" (20). The stress on individuality and reliance on a vision is significant entrants to locating Desai's subjectivity. She tries to traverse the psyche along with the traversed locations. The dynamics of crossed space should comply with the complexities of the traversed mental states (of her characters).

Her Close Connection with Characters

In an interview with Corinne Demas, she mentions how her "continuing interest in characters who swim against the current, has changed from her emotional involvement to emotional control over them". The adjustment in her real life to a new cultural space (mostly throughout her life) verifies her need for balance and is bound to be exercised in the process of her writing

as well. Although not in exact correspondence, Reken's chameleon effect is an alternative to this notion of balance; the process of constructing similar contours of the outer and inner landscape of the individual. The late Vasant Shahane points out how "she employs the natural image of sound and color as corresponding to the thoughts and feelings of the characters" (15). The manifestation of space, living through the eyes and imagination of her mother's stories (for example, provision of the German background in Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)). The inner world of the characters relates to the outside world that has a historical significance but also dismantles their notion of belonging. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* brings to the fore the "inside and outside dialectic of division", and the phenomenology of internal consciousness. When Desai talks about the freedom to apply "language of the interior" in her vision, there is a potent scope to trace this dialectic (21). "It is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting (21)". This type of waiting is characteristic of an event where the subject can reconcile to his/her place of dislocation and displacement. She comments on the writer's experience to be able to only connect and that the employment of language should transcend (21). The finitude of this transcendence does not exist but leads towards potent sites to percolate the undercurrents of third culture subjectivity and possible third space.

Language of the 'interior'

This section deals with the employment of language and shaping the journey of a chosen language through tools of intertwined parallel spaces, geographical locale, and constant permeation of a subject's inward and outward movements of thoughts and actions. While the motive behind such an endeavor can be infinite, there are certain parameters to consider while reading her novels. According to Judie Newman, Desai "has always sidestepped any recognition of language as a social fact, disavowing political intent and describing her work in 'universalist' terms." (Anita Desai Critical Perspectives, 195). The terms one finds during negotiating with spaces may appear binary or mutually exclusive. For example, the use of the German language, and the intertextual devices used in this connection in Baumgartner's Bombay. She employs an intermingling of the internal and external landscape. That is to say, the letters, literary references, songs, nursery rhymes, and tales by travelers were all sojourned with an 'internal' German touch (one that she borrows and recollects from her mother's childhood and background). English, on the other hand, works as an external linkage to connect the dots. Hence both employment is inseparable and meaningless without the other. The image extends the emptiness by projecting European letters into the Indian scene. World and text

appear to mirror each other as if interior language and material reality were one indissoluble entity. When the novel opens, the initial impression is of an entry into a tragic interior.

"She opened the door with fumbling, ineffective movements as though she had forgotten its grammar, her fingers numb, tongue-tied as it were. Entering the room, she shut the door behind her heavily … When every lock was in place, she leaned against the door in the theatrical manner that came naturally to her – pressing a packet of letters to her breast as years ago she had pressed a flower against a bosom still plump and warm, …, her mouth open, a tunnel of red from which might issue either a trill or a howl. Pressing the bits of paper to her now shrunken and flabby bosom, she breathed long harsh breaths that rasped her throat." (Baumgartner's Bombay, 1)

The reading process is highlighted by the presence of a fictional reader, mediating between the reader and the letters. As Lotte's co-readers, we become equal partners in the enterprise of decipherment. Lotte is, therefore, the point of entry to both the letters and Desai's text.

Relevance of Bachelard

Gaston Bachelard opens his essay with the following referents, "solemn geographies of human limits" and "For we are, where we are not", one can sense the need for the transcendental urge to understand the actualization of such referents. The case in the previous subsection promises such a congruency (even if in a sparse ratio). Nevertheless, the essay suggests how the dialectic division of inside and outside plays along with the metaphorical domains and associated dichotomies of yes and no, and the terminologies of determiner, decider; positive, and negative. Therefore, the tragic 'interiority' imbibed in actions and subsequent letters received by Lotte, similarly offers the dialectic division of 'exteriority', a contrast of a fortunate/privileged act of reading by the readers of the novel. In one of the letters to Clara Rilke in Bachelard's essay, Rilke questions the necessity and dangers of expressing oneself and putting the language in danger. Bachelard infers how during the act of trying to live a poetic image, one becomes aware of the being's inner disturbance, and the being too sensitive to be upset by a word, he says "this sort of derangement, which is peculiar to us, must go into work" (Bachelard, 221). This risk of derangement is visible and tangential to the purpose of balancing the internal and external landscapes of the subjects in Desai's character construction and making them (characters) realize that balance is possible. There is a constant play of transmuting the external reality of the landscape with internal tides of the subject's psyche.

Act of Depiction - Effects and Sources

The attempt at depiction underscores an effect, a result that is made credible with a convincing source. That is to say, Desai's exploration of stages of awareness in her fiction by the agents (the characters). It is observed that the reconciliation of geographical space with the subject's mental space is one such indicator of a plot climax, but this process also becomes critical of the writer's created format. To put it, one of the offered binaries is the suitability of fabricating these internal and external Space. Minoli Salgado argues that Desai's moments of discovery, and self-awareness that sprang from her fictive characters "is so obsessive that it sometimes violently separates the psyche from the social context." (222). Apart from the concern with subjectivity and a "deliberate escape into the sanctum of the psyche" (Salgado), there is an urge for exploration, an ambitious approach by Desai to cater to the fundamental links between the personal and the spiritual, the aesthetic and the social, the historical and the material. That is to say, the offered link of the contested binary becomes too risky sometimes. When Salgado uses the word "deliberate", it also invites thematic concerns and reveals (perhaps) how Desai's work opens up for scrutiny, the complex relationship between manufactured epiphany on the chosen form (short story or a novel).

Use of Structure/Form - A Skeleton or A Silhouette?

In the preface to *The Complete Stories* by Desai, she reveals that "a part of her believed short stories to be failed novels", and that from an early age she was "always writing at length with the idea of a book, a proper book". She later admits that "a short story is not a failed novel any more than a novella is an extended short story". Whether the structure is a clear skeletal vision as the story advances or the formation of silhouette reveals its original shape at the epiphanic encounter of the constructed characters, it is another venture to stride. The approach is to understand the primacy given to the form and whether the structure is primary or secondary. Quoting Hortense Calisher on the length of a story, "How long should a story be? As long as a piece of string. I mean – to tie up the parcel with" (11). She favors this workmanlike approach with an addition of the element of chance. How "one piece I (she) scribbled ends up a short story, another extend(s), wander, digress and venture onto a path, a road to a further destination – novella, or a novel?" Here, the movement involved in the description of her technique is suggestive and significant. (her description of story-telling matches with a pattern of a person who is traveling, searching for a center, a climax, an apparatus, and meaning-making)

Character Study - Mood, Tension and Conflict

The transition, the crossing of carefully constructed character prototypes, is the subject of my investigation into Desai's fiction. The way characters in her novels respond to the constructed plot enable them to be labeled under a category. The movement is layered with numerous potential sites to work on, but the most evident is the quality of character corresponding to the tone, and the mood of the setting around them. The following flowchart describes how the temperament of an external locale is directly proportional to the traits of a protagonist in the stories, respectively.

As seen above, the characters of Tara and Bim contrast, and it is only Bim who could reconcile in the end. Almost at the end of the novel, Bim experiences her epiphany when, "Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all." (Clear Light of Day, 165). The strong and independent character of Bim directly relates to the peaceful and brighter side of India (her home in old Delhi where she lived since she was born).

The following table shows the context and significant pointers behind the making of Baumgartner's Bombay and Clear Light of Day. They are the operational strands on which I plan to base my observations for her considerable share of novels. The comparison between pairs, or even triads (if the case be) is helpful to situate the organisational logic behind the setting and the scenes.

Clear Light of Day (1980)

●   Autobiographical

●   Spatial Intervention

●   Going back to the origin with adduced subjectivity

●   More focused on and inspired by childhood memories

●   Development Years   Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)

●   Reconstructing her mother's childhood

●   Most distant from experiential reality

●   Employing external gaze with greater objectivity

● Recalling memories admired by an individual (the parent)

● Used culture as a 'currency' in fiction

Discovering new terms and vocabulary

Method   CultureCharacter

InstinctJourney   Self-conscious

Experience   Encounter   Repressed Psyche

Impressions   Dislocated   Alienated

Uncovering   Quality of an outsider Distorted mirror-image

Reconciliation Explore

Transcendence

Some of the keywords and terms I came across repeatedly to interpret the assemblage are stacked above. They are not just based on texts but also include critical inclination and Desai's response, retrospection and review of her work.

Third Space: Shift, Engagement, and Consequential Patterns

There lies a specific treatment with which Desai engages with Space which complies with the complexities of traversed mental states of her characters. Needless to say, her connection as a diaspora writer influences the categorical trends in her reception, but the present paper argues and somewhat throws light on the need to reconstruct the underlined hierarchy of the said category. As is the case with Postmodern novels that moved away from early conventional concepts towards unreliable narrators, paranoia, fragmentation, and self-reflexivity, so did the Postcolonial and Commonwealth Literature where engagement shifted from the quest for identity, cultural dominance, struggle, and oppression toward a re-thinking of a story that does not necessarily perform the role of a tell-tale but also a social function, unrest, and change. One may go on to deduce the aforementioned criteria under the rubric of New Literature. This is

exactly what brings the question of shifting rubrics in the matrix of new and acquired theories from time to time.

Interaction of Space with Time and History

The question of temporality and the need to tackle such engagement with theory requires a disentanglement via basic constraints of Time and Space which play a major role in terms of the literary trend under a confined rubric of theory. This becomes prominent when offered fiction by a specific author can be argued to go beyond the trends of their attributed receptions. To put it simply, while Diaspora becomes an unavoidable appropriation to understand the Indian (Bengali) and German roots of Desai, there is also a clear indication that the application needs to be based on Spatio-temporal parameters which not only negate a clear concept of history and time but, instead, go beyond a space that permeates and perforates binaries in spatial construction, away from the time-bound narratology. More so, a space that accommodates, shifts, and invites the possibility of transition and liminal space. This is not to say, that Diaspora should not be associated with Desai, or that the other scope of theories is irrevocable, but to suggest that the scope of third space (or even third culture, for that matter) might come handier and more fitted in her appropriating the offered fictional spaces. From the early '60s (1963, *Cry, The Peacock*) towards the second decade of the 21st century (2011, The Artist of Disappearance), one cannot ignore the relevance of reception in her novels and the strain of successive fictive variants offered by her. What remains constant though, is the appropriation, engagement, and connection of the subject's psyche and offered Space revolving around them. Although too early and vague a statement due to lack of evidence, the direction of findings deals with how she engages and the degree of her negotiations with space that has more to do with a subject's meaning-making and crossing between the liminal space than with a historically consequential place.

Robin Cohen in conversation with Alan Gamlen at one of the oxford lectures on Diaspora talks about the degree of attenuation associated with the usage of a concept like Diaspora. The excessive networking, movement, and hybridity have led the association of diaspora to fall under a wider branch. But at the very same time, he also points to the phenomena where mobilizing is seen as subjective and a collective enterprise. That is to say, the point of this attenuation in the field of humanities has led to the experience and performance of creating a diaspora. The 'axes of similarities' become central to one's identity and thereby the mobilization is initiated. My scope of connecting Desai has a lot to do with this type of

mobilization which ultimately falls back to the question of identity and propinquity in a restructured locale. The experience of her characters vis-à-vis the offered location where adjustment models are always negotiable.

Why Third- Space or 'Space'?

The primary grounds through which I intend to mark her within the third space spectrum is the unique set of spatial affinities that defines and identifies a psyche/subject within their occupied space and the nature of significance these subjectivities hold towards the arranged spatiality. While space may be social, political, temporal, historical, and more importantly, fixed, it is not an end or a means in itself. Her construction of spatial reality, viewed through the spectrum of a third space, facilitates the claim of 'going beyond'. This is not to suggest that there is a complete negation of history. What seems apparent is that there lies primacy of spatial reality where history and time are centripetal to space. While most fictions bracketed under a specific timespan, mark history and time as centripetal, their engagement with space comes as a centrifugal departure. Desai's pattern shows a difference and treats this liminal threshold of Space as a centripetal force. Desai's context is not predicated on the factor of time, especially when gauging her works through pre-and post-literary trends of her time. Her return to the past is based on space, a space that acts as a centripetal force for time, history, and memory of the character, individual (and even, reader). This becomes clearer via her offered reconciliations with spaces around the constructed characters as well as plot build-up and plot climax. The linkages and connections build to sustain a progression (not just of the plot, story, or the activity of reading but the faculty of imagination), or more so, the involuntary imaginative instruction dealt with by the author when she offers a continuous chain of liminal spaces, an attended call for traversing realms, as though time and history are just the bent of mind that needs the anchor of a Space.

Authorial Representation and Shifting Grounds of 'Perception'

Coming back to the question of traversing, or transitioning, the shift is also visible through the praxis of time, space, and interpretations over such progress. That is to say, while "Indian Diaspora" has a valid attribution of "Indian Roots", akin to a Distant Diaspora, is it justifiable to shift the entire basis on a geopolitical extension of space indentured by authentic history, origin and time while negating all the other constructed liminal spaces of the individual/subject/psyche? It would be redundant to entirely bracket Diaspora as specific to

time and history as new diasporas are also emerging and disintegrating. However, tackling Desai through the lens of Diaspora becomes deficient when her representation is projected as a Diaspora writer vis-à-vis her roots, origin, time, and history. It becomes problematic, especially when the question of Space as a centripetal force factor into her works. The roots with which she is identified and interpreted as a writer of the Indian Diaspora should equally be linked with routes of spatial interstices that compose her canvas of fictional places, characters, subjectivities, and psyche. They hold the potential to transcend the temporal fixity with ever-changing times and dynamics of spatial investigations in a procured fiction.

There is a need to question the validity of conventional parameters (especially, in the Indian context for a writer in Indian-English fiction who is apprehended under different labels of a Diaspora, Transnational, Cosmopolitan or Cross-cultural writer, etc.) Not only is the 'question on history and time' seen as a marker of specific trends in literary readership but is also seen as a significant term to define the concept/theory attached to it. For example, cosmopolitanism alludes to a "nation-state" with a "time/space/history" (again, similar to the rubric of Diaspora). So, my engagement can also be seen as a non-diaspora or antithetical to cosmopolitan traces with emphasis on "Spaces" and "Third-space" identities. The processes and mediations of reality through space indeed entangle history and time. But, instead of being limited to temporal perspectives, it should be extended towards the spatial dynamics as they are a matter of concern and will continue to be so. Likewise, its connection to space theorists and contemporary trends emanated from the shifting paradigms of meaning-making through spaces.

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