

Original Research Paper

Travel Writing: Identity Transformation in Anita Desai`s Narratives

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ABSTRACT:

This paper aims at examining travel as a popular theme in the contemporary literary both fictional and non fictional works. Technological advancement has made human mobility accessible and cheaper. As a result, travel writing has been one of the most significant discourses in the world literature. The objective of the study is to initiate travel as the rhetorical discourse or search into the self and the Other. Based on the qualitative research as a method of analysis, an Indian female writer in English, Anita Desai and her selected works have been determined as the area of the study. The analysis of travel undertaken by characters presented in her works aptly justify that travel is search more than a destination.

Key words: travel, travel writing, discourse, search, transformation

INTRODUCTION:

The History of travel shows that people have been Travelling for several reasons: namely for recreation, exploration, exercise of imperialism in the host countries, and now for self discovery and so on. Travel writing as an independent genre has been considered as a rhetorical document and an enquiry into knowledge. Critics are divided in their views as where to locate travel and travel writings as mere communication of sensational information or it is a storehouse of knowledge. Travel writings, in its varied forms and formats, have long been implicated with visual practices, seeing, looking, and gazing which are captivated in the majority of travellers narratives. According to Bernard McGrane, "to travel is to see- travel is essentially a way of seeing, a mode of seeing, it is grounded in the eye, in our visual capacity' (116). This view defines travel as a sensational act, and travel writings are the transfer of that sensation into the text whether it is in written or visual form. In travelling, the communication takes place in guest and host language. Traveller is the guest who uses text language, and the host uses the language of image. The traveller becomes foreign in host country. According to Robert Louise Stevenson, " there is no foreign land, it is only the traveller that is foreign'(Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing). It is a relation that in some ways mirrors the cross-cultural encounter between traveller and travellee between the self and the other. In contemporary narratives, travel is taken not only for description, sights, and experience, but it also serves the better purpose for familiarising one

with local customs and cultures. The encounter with locals offers opportunities to make comparison and contrast between guest and host culture. Travel literature provides a platform of creative interaction, and the interaction gives meaning to life. Robert Frost is often recognized as the travel poet who's poems primarily focus on the importance of travelling as the human interaction with the nature. To justify travelling as an inquiry, few lines from the poem "*The Road Not Taken*" are mentioned as:

The road diverged in a wood, and I took the road less travelled by, And that has made all the difference (retrieved from travel and lie sure.com) Travelling is more about critical and creative insights of the traveller into nature, and travel writing is the metaphor of that sensibility. Some critics argue that travel writing is guided by the principles of travellers' cultural dominance over locals. Travel writing contains "critical inquiries into discursive representation of power, difference, and desire in the global using world "(Said). It throws light on how we define ourselves and how we identify others. The debate arises that either travel literature functions as utilitarian or non-utilitarian purpose. Contemporary women writers have subverted a long established notion of travel as male adventure, and travel writings are historical record of their heroism. Travel consciousness of women has been expressed in both travel writings as distinct genre and presentation of characters` journey in fictional narrative. Radical technological innovation has

contributed to the restructuring of the society and to the breakdown of some gender ideologies. As a result, travel has become viable for women of all social classes, background, and their writing has established distinct authoritative new roles as travellers and social critics as well. Like young generation of post colonial writers, women writers tend to reverse traditional patterns more systematically by foregrounding female consciousness. In this regard, French writer, psychoanalyst, and theorist Julia Kristeva argues in the book *About Chinese Women* that there is "no way all to understand China if one is not sensitive to women, to their condition, to their difference" (13). She means that travel is not superficial sensing of outer reality of the host. As a diasporic writer, Bharati Mukherjee writes of the fragility of her Indian identity in Canada, and of her fear about losing her home and country. She remarks as "travel as dual journey across geography and back in home" (170). In fact, travel is intercourse between empathy and sympathy. The perception of traveller/writer about the culture of people/place is important in understanding any travel narrative. Of Documentation of travel narrative in fictional works, impact of travel on fictional characters and the message communicated to the readers need to scrutinize.

Objective of the Study:

The writer and the text selected for the study includes Anita Desai, contemporary female Novelist in English from India and her works: *Bye Bye Blackbird* (2011), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *The Zigzag Way* 2004. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of travel undertaken by characters in these texts with the aim at opening a discourse as travel leading to transformation.

Method and Analysis:

Anita Desai is an eminent contemporary Indian English woman writer of fictional works. Her works are mainly based on themes of women's sufferings, and critique to society. She has used writings as a means to explore women psyche. Understanding and application of that unique women's consciousness can play pivotal role to bring creative transformation in existing social and individual relationship. Most of the novels by Anita Desai communicate the notion that the inner world of sensibility really brings happiness to relationship rather than outer world of action. Dr. V Shreenathacharya compares her writing technique with Virginia Woolf, and he remarks as, "the emphasis is on the impact of sights, sounds, and physical movement on the consciousness of her characters" (57). The instances of travel narrative used in her works suggest that travel is a means to explore inner world of consciousness.

In the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai presents an intense identity crisis of the central character, Sita. Unable to live in the strife-torn present, she moves to an island, Manori from Bombay where she spent her childhood. Visiting to Manori, she feels as if she has got new strength. As a result, she leaves her husband, children, and urbanized life of Bombay. Her story moves from Bombay to Manori, an island where Sita goes to get relief from the tedium of life. Desai seems to foreground travel as epiphany in characters. The trip of Manori becomes for Sita a trip of self-discovery and recognition of reality.

The narrator observes:

knowing that, accepting that, she knows it was because ordinary lie, the every day world had grown so insufferable to her that she could think of the magic island again as of release. If reality was not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative' (74). Her return to Manori allows her to see the form of reality in this world of illusion. In fact, travel allows a debate among levels of consciousness and to refine it too. Sita emerges from the storm of her sensibility with a new found awareness that gets her back into her familial life. As mentions, "it's all over and then a warm expansion of relief, of pleasure, of surprise on happy surprise. She began to laugh" (118). Finally, Manori transcends her inner sensibility to self-adjustment and self-deception. The presentation of travel as the root of immigration, perspectives of immigrants, and their encounters with cultural differences, and the attempt they make to explore the identity are shown in *Bye Bye Black Bird*. Anita Desai's views on travel as the first entrance to march on the body of knowledge is expressed in this novel. The novel is set in England. It tells a story about an Indian, Adit who moves to England for better opportunities. Being married to an English, Sarah, the couple begins to realize differences each other. As an immigrant, Adit is pushed to live in dual world: outer (England) and inner (India). The crisis of identity, as most immigrants are experiencing, motivates him to evaluate his existence in foreign land. Nasarullah Mamborel remarks that "... his stay in England though suffers from humiliation, inwardly identifies himself with an Indian" (Literariness.com). The inward realization might be a turning point for Adit to be connected again with India. Adit, Dev, and Sarah are dissatisfied with their present existence of life, but still they are struggling to search meaning of life. Though explicitly unexpressed, Anita Desai has used travel as a chemistry to resolve conflicting mentality of characters. The title, *Bye Bye Black Bird* suggests itself that travel transforms the existing condition of life, and it also brings life to new environment. Journey is more

important than destination theorizes travel as the quest. In *Journey to Ithaca*, Anita Desai has presented her characters as travellers. The story revolves around the search of three Europeans in India. Metto is in the quest of the mystery in India, Sophie for identity, and Laila for Blue god. To attain self- fulfillment, self-discovery, and understanding the self, characters carry out various travels in the novel. Metto wants to immerse himself into the world of India as he sees it, the wisdom he finds from The Mother (Laila). Sophie, wife of Metto, is the victim of alienation in India. She wants to win love from Metto but he wants to leave his familial life in the pursuit of self- fulfillment. She feels India as a horrible cage. She said to Metto, "I can't- I can't here, in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be ourselves" (qtd. from bolji.com) At the end, Sophie's inner self is awakened. So she decides to follow the path of her husband. Sophie and Metto realize and stresses on the journey within- know the self. Metto and Sophie attained their Ithaka. As Greek poet, Constantine Cavafy, spoke of the importance of enjoying the trip, any trip, and not only longing for a journey's end. *Journey to Ithaca* might also symbolise the act of transitioning through life, from beginning to end, and to returning to one's self and origin. *The Zigzag Way* published in 2004 by Anita Desai aims at probing into the areas of experiences of colonization, migration, and nostalgic way of identifying the past. Set in Mexico, the novel tells about the journey of a young American would be writer, Eric who discovers his past root. Colonization allowed people of the countries like Mexico to visit or to settle there. In this context, Eric's grandfather made the journey from India to England to Mexico to work in the mines. Travel to Mexico has helped Eric to discover his past root. It is found that Desai has used travel, not to understand, but to graph its conflicting parts, and history of colonization. The title metaphorises Eric's treads to discover his past. He knows his past from reading tales of mining available in the library of Dona Vera. In Eric's travel, he felt as though he had been starving throughout his, "northern existence, and now reborn a traveller" (28).

CONCLUSION:

From the critical observation of social, psychological, artistic, and most recently, quest for identity condition of emergence of travel writing, it can be said that travel has become a fascinating issue in contemporary literature. Travel is not directionless mobility of human senses. It is an act of the journey of consciousness transformation. In the novel *where Shall We Go this Summer, where Shall We Go this Summer*, Sita's identity transformation is rooted in her journey from Bombay to Manori. The journey has transformed the existing condition of life of Adit, Dev, and Sarah in *Bye*

Bye Blackbird. The different quests of characters have been fulfilled by their mobility in *Journey to Ithaca*. The sacred book of the east Rig Veda highlights significance of travel in the following verse: The feet of the wanderer are Like flowers, His soul is growing and reaping Thee fruit: And all his sins are destroyed By his fatigue in wandering. Therefore, wanderer! (qtd from boloji.com) The study concluded that travel is a means to transform one's sensibility from imperfection to perfection as Anita Desai's protagonists consciousness passage to self- perception, self- discovery, self-fulfillment, and renewal to ancestry. The use of travel in her four novels as analysed in this study engraves Anita Desai as a gifted artist of opening up a closed world and making it clearly visible. Thus Desai has deliberately brought out the proposal that travel gives a new sense to one's life.

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