

ANITA DESAI'S BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD: A THIRD WORLD IMMIGRANT NOVEL

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Abstract

Anita Desai is a very reputed and prolific Indian women novelist of the post-independence era. Her writing career now spans four decades. Her much-acclaimed novel **Bye-Bye Blackbird** deals with the plight of the Indian immigrants in England, who suffer mixed feelings of love and hatred towards their country of adoption. The theme of loneliness and frustration appears in the novel. In spite of all efforts to adjust to the new world, the immigrants are overtaken by feeling of estrangement and racial hatred. Based on the problematic life of the immigrants, it is a better record of emotions rather than events. The wider canvas of the novel touches issues of nationalism and cosmopolitanism and describes cultural and cross-cultural encounters in the lives of three major characters namely Adit, his British wife Sarah and his newly arrived friend from Calcutta, Dev.

Keywords: Immigrant, love, hatred, loneliness, frustration, estrangement.

Anita Desai's spectacular range of novels certainly establishes her as the pioneer of a new, more radical genre of fiction in India, having conspicuous affinities with international trends and sensibilities. Her astute, intuitive awareness of the psychology of ordinary men, women and children discloses lives intensely lived and passionately felt. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is her third novel published in 1971. The novel is divided into three parts titled: 1. Arrival 2. Discovery 3. Recognition and Departure. Through the main characters (Dev, Adit and Sarah), Anita Desai portrays the conflict in the minds of Indian immigrants who can neither completely sever their cultural roots of the country nor identify themselves completely with the alien culture and acquire new roots. Dev, a twenty-two year-old young man from Calcutta arrives in London and stays with a friend of his college days, Adit and his English wife, Sarah. Dev and Adit are two Bengali youth. The world of Anita Desai's characters is filled with their lonely strivings and their neurotic urges. Most of her characters undergo experiences which lead them towards their split personality. Desai states:

My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating

those depths till they become more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.¹

Desai is a novelist of urban milieu. Adit, the hero in the novel is born in a middle class and he had come to England to enjoy the freedom. Here, he fell in love with an English girl Sarah and got married to her. In the London of the early 1960s, immigrants from India and Pakistan swarmed there in search of jobs. Most of those immigrants had low-paid jobs as mechanics and fitters in factories while the educated few like Adit could manage desk jobs as clerks with doctors like Jasbir and Samar worked in the city hospitals. The novel presents their difficulties of adjustments in a new land and those who return to their native land, often complicated by inter-racial marriages. Adit and Dev basically represent two types of immigrants. To both, England means different things. Adit has an English wife. He leads what he thinks is an English lifestyle:

I am happy here. I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day. I like the Covent Garden opera house – it has a chandelier like a hive of fireflies; when I stand under it, I feel like a millionaire. I like the girls here – I like their nylon stockings and the way their noses tilt upwards, and I used to like dancing with them. I like streamed pudding with treacle. I like – I like thatched cottages and British history and reading the letters in **The Times**. ‘Like being called a wog. Like choosing between three kinds of lavatories...’ ‘I like the pubs. I like the freedom on a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom! (p.20)

The novel shows that there has been no problem in the rehabilitation of Samar, a doctor and his sweet wife Bella, Jasbir, an anaesthetist and his good and solid Punjab wife Mala. They enjoy their weekends. They visit clubs and coffee-houses. Their rehabilitation in Clapham has not created any disturbance or inconvenience to them. The problems arise with the immigrant life of Adit, Sarah and Dev, the new arrivals with the view to studying in the London School of Economics. After coming to England Adit worked in different capacities in a post office, in the sorting office. Then he joined some other business. He also worked as a teacher and finally accepted a little job at Blue Skies. He is happy with his job and expects to be director one day. He also finds himself lucky to have Sarah as his wife. Adit having a flat, a middle-rung job in a travel agency and a white compatible wife, in the early part of the novel seems content with his fascination with the white cultural mores and Desai astutely describes his chauvinistic pride in acquiring a white bride. He says:

These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look – very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week. (p.31)

During his visits to India, Adit finds:

‘Ah, but when I’m there – and I was, you know, for four months, looking for a job before I married Sarah – I take these things for granted again and I only notice the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench – and the boredom, Dev **yar**, the **boredom** of it. Then I’m mad to get back to England and the nice warm pubs and pick up a glass of Guinness and eye the girls and be happy again.’ (p.50)

Adit seems to have adopted himself to England and its racist ways and he has no regrets about the discrimination that is widely practised such as three kinds of lavatories—ladies, gents and Asiatic. This is a kind of insult according to Dev. Asians are called as wogs. Adit's wife Sarah is secretary to the head of a small school with fifteen students. Dev calls him (Adit) a spineless imperialist-lover and foot-licking toady. But Adit does not mind being called in such a way. But inspite of this attraction for England and repulsion for India, somewhere deep down Adit continues attachment for his motherland. This fact is evident when he longs for India:

‘When I have a whole month of leave saved up, I’ll go. My mother will cook **hilsa** fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sisters will dress Sarah in saris and gold ornaments. I’ll lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up half the night listening to the **shehnai** and Sitar.’ (p.49)

Adit loves and admires England, love everything that is English. He appreciates its history and poetry. He feels thrill about Nelson's battles, Waterloo, and Churchill. But he loves India more. Adit fell in love with an English girl Sarah at a party which he attended, where Sarah had also been invited. He fell in love with her at first sight. He says:

‘You are like a Bengali girl’, he told her. ‘Bengali women are like that reserved, quiet. May be you were in your previous life. But you are improving on it—you are so much prettier!’ (p.74)

Dev, the protagonist of the novel comes to London to study at London School of Economics. The novel narrates his experiences in London and his interaction with the people there. He does not like the Indians being called wogs. In brief Adit sees all gold in England, Dev sees all iron. On his arrival in London, Dev stays in the rented flat of Adit in Laurel Lane, Clapham. On the first day Dev notices the difference between India and England. He takes in the sights and scenes of London and feels that he is familiar with them through his reading. The sights and sounds of England generate a morbid dread in Dev. In Clapham Tube Station, Dev feels claustrophobic. The milieu gives rises to a feeling of hollowness. His vision is blurred. The silence of the streets of London appears to Dev horrifyingly disgusting. A foreigner in England he reacts vehemently against English snobbery. The problem of alienation is felt both within and without. Dev's isolated self in the English milieu passes through a series of confrontations which lead to the disintegration of his identity. His weird experiences in a foreign land give him a culture shock. The conflict in him is between the images of the city in the conscious and in the unconscious. He dimly recounts the images he had encountered in his reading of the English books. The hiatus between the anticipated and the instantly received disturbs him. Madhusudan Prasad remarks on Dev:

It creates a terrible sense of claustrophobia in him. It is true but his horror and fright in their journey also reveals his loneliness, sense of insecurity and alienation.²

The absurdities of Dev's existence in England and its drab superficialities have been recorded by the novelist with accuracy and legitimacy but in a poetic language. Dev is particularly unhappy with treatment accorded to immigrants in England. As a novelist, Desai excels in writing psychological novels. She would however, call them surely subjective. Her writings reveal inner realities. Deeply infected by the existential problems of modern industrial age, Desai has created unique characters that are largely eccentric and abnormal in their mental make-up and hence totally unable to conform. B.Rama Chandra Rao says:

Mrs. Desai brings something new to Indo-Anglian novel, instead of portraying character in terms of the environment of defining an individual

in terms of his social or caste function. Mrs. Desai creates character and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character. Moreover the true artist that she is, Mrs. Desai presents each individual as an unsolved mystery.³

In his uncertainty, Dev develops a schizophrenic attitude towards England. A white woman's marriage to an Indian was an act of courage in the 1960s and 70s. By marrying a non white, Sarah has broken the social code and all the more so having married to an Indian, one from the country which was once a British colony. Sarah is mocked, taunted and ridiculed by her colleagues and even small children studying in the school where she is a clerk:

She came to the edge of the Common just as a bus rolled to a halt and out tumbled a load of children in their summer freckles, their crosses of sticking plaster, the remains of their breakfast egg and toast, and aggressive, freshly combed and washed morning cockiness. As she darted through their throng, they pretended not to notice her at all but, once she was across the road, she heard them scream, 'Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry!' and 'Where's the fire, pussy cat?' (p.34)

Adit wants her to cook Indian food for her even though she doesn't like it. Nor does she care much for the Indian music that Adit plays all the time. She goes about her duties at school as well as at home mechanically and laconically. She suffers from cultural alienation. She is alienated in her own country as she marries an Indian. She has to mould her desires according to the whims of her Indian husband, Adit. Sarah surrenders to her husband's whims like other Indian wives:

Once a year, on their wedding anniversary, the Sens splurged on a dinner at an expensive and, therefore, glamorous restaurant. There would be much discussion on the choice of locale, but this year there was none. Adit did not even mention the occasion till Sarah, standing before an open cupboard and wondering what to wear, declared, 'I can't choose a dress till you tell me where we are going.'

'There's only one place to go,' Adit said shortly. 'Veeraswamy's'

This was the usual place for Indians in London to choose for any major celebration, but formerly Adit had roved happily amidst a more liberal choice of eating places. Now he did not even ask for Sarah's suggestion and, after deliberating a bit she silently took down a blue wool dress from its hanger, when Adit marched across to her cupboard and said belligerently. 'No, wear a sari tonight.' (pp.187-188)

Sarah's pangs seem to be more severe than that of Adit. She is much more Indian than her husband. She respects the feelings and emotions of her in-laws, where as Adit blames and gets irritated at the behaviour of Sarah's parents and their treatment to him and his friends. Sarah never thinks of suicide or death to get over her psychological problems. She is balanced and composed in her nature. And this attitude helps her to come out of her psychic turmoil and come to normalcy. Her husband, ironically, notwithstanding his entire appraisal, his worship and this land of liberty, eccentricity, and individualism, Adit realises that England can provide him neither of these. Wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and his constantly regarded not only a second grade citizen but also an intruder. The process of his inner disintegration has begun long ago though Adit is not aware of it. He is horrified to see his sense of belonging to England. Having settled in England for quite some years, Adit is still a

misfit. He comes to regard himself as a non-belonged. The portraits of exile, identity crisis and loneliness, are drawn from Desai's personal experience. She says in an interview:

Of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in deviation.... 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. ⁴

Adit finds in his wife, Anglo-Saxon identity and her oriental submissiveness. In his sight it is only a masquerade. He shows no sympathy and tenderness for his pregnant wife. Sarah is struck with despair at her husband's callousness, at a time when she needed his company the most. He failed to understand her feminine sensibility. This results in his alienation from Sarah. The Indo-Pak war of 1965 acts as the final trigger. Adit starts feeling all the more nostalgic about India and the Indian way of life. He asks Sarah to accompany him to India and she agrees despite the prospect of a better-paying job in a bigger school. He paints a realistic picture of India and the living conditions to Sarah in place of the romantic picture that he has painted earlier. Sarah's conflict of playing two roles torments her and tears her apart. She is an introvert. She accommodates her husband's Indian identity in the teeth of occasional clashes. Unlike many other English girls, Sarah has qualities of Indian housewife. With her humble, serene, submissive and obedient nature she will have no problems in adjusting herself to the social topography of India. Adit and Sarah are seen off at the Waterloo Station as they leave for India. She feels like a creature in Alice in Wonderland as is leaving for an alien land. She wonders about the kind of life she would have in India. She refuses to go to Hampshire for one last visit to her parents when Mrs. Roscommon-James invites her even though Adit insists. She has no sentiments. The black bird (Adit) is abruptly transformed into a homing bird, nostalgically longing for his homeland. He is glad that his son will be born in India and will take after the Indian identity of his father. It also unravels the decision of Dev to stay back when he finally finds employment in London. Dev has no a well defined destination. Even at Hampshire initially he finds everything dull, uninteresting and uninspiring. But then he takes a long walk in the countryside. He sees the beauty of the small church, the light, the colours, and the calmness of the surroundings. And all this moves him. He experiences himself closer to this new land. Later he gets as a salesman in Foyle's Bookshop. He also gets a room in a kind of youth hostel at Bettersea. Finally he goes to the railway station to say goodbye to Adit and Sarah. Though in the beginning, he was fully determined that he would not stay in England where he has to bear all the insults. He tells Adit:

'I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted', he said grandly. (p.19)

Later on there was show but blatant change in Dev's attitude:

There are days in which the life of an alien appears enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then he hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision and drawing himself together, he feels he can never bear to be the unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land however abject or dull, where he has, at least, a place in the sun, security, status and freedom. (p.86)

The fire brand, bitter, critical and at times cynical Dev who feels himself in no way inferior to the British intellectually, by the end of the novel, is termed and all his outrage and criticism peters out. The bird imagery points to the bird-like identity of the individuals who are ever ready to take wings. Their escape is a socio-psychic release from the enslavement and etiolating of

their beleaguered self. The novel delves deep into the psychological ups and downs of immigrant Indian minds and highlights the truth behind Indian's vulnerable psyche to England as it is explicit in Dev's admiration. Bye-Bye Blackbird is the most accomplished of Anita Desai's early novels. The novelist has denoted Indians as 'Blackbirds'. And she exposed the social disparity and discrimination that prevails in England. The novel highlights the susceptibility of Indian minds to English culture. English culture has enchanted Indians by its magical grace. It also enthralls them by its abundance and sophistication. Many immigrants are entangled, enslaved and disdained by it with its authority and disapproval for being 'coloured' or 'black' Indians. The blackbird symbolises a migratory bird. The colour of the bird is a symbol of coloured immigrants in England who lead an insecure life. The theme of rootlessness and the question of identity are woven into the texture of the novel Bye-Bye Blackbird.

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