

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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Abstract

The earlier novels of Anita Desai have seldom been analyzed from a multicultural perspective. This paper aims to understand her novels from a cultural and multicultural perspective. Her earlier novels, which were created from the 1960's to 1980's were remarkable for their multicultural ethos, and the sensibilities of living and surviving in an India which had achieved its independence, not so long ago in 1947. Born of a Bengali father and a German expatriate mother she was educated in India, and married a Gujarati. She spent the first part of her life in India, and now divides her time between India and the United States. She herself brilliantly encapsulates the meaning of multiculturalism, having been born and brought up in a multicultural family and marrying, and having other multicultural homes of her own. Her earlier novels, *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-bye, Blackbird* (1968), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and *The Village by the Sea* (1982) have been analyzed from a multicultural perspective in this paper. The paper also delves deep in to Desai's descriptions of how, the various cultural clashes amongst individuals lead to insecurity, unsuccessful marital relationships, unresolved conflicts, deep depression, illusions of harmony, unhappiness, chaos, insanity and even tragic deaths in the lives of people who only want to be happy.

Desai's first novel *Cry, The Peacock* was first published in 1963. It is the story of Maya and Gautama, who are a dysfunctional couple. Maya is sensitive and lives in her own imaginary world. On the other hand, Gautama is a practical man; a lawyer and is unable to comprehend the pain of his wife. She feels neglected and mocked at. Most of the action in this well known novel takes place in the mind of Maya. She is alone and feels suffocated, as no one is able to understand her. She often thinks of her golden childhood, and her simple and affectionate father. The ominous prophecy of an astrologer who is an albino (symbolic of Maya's colourless, tragic and unexciting married life) haunts her, and in the end it rings true when Maya kills Gautama in an insane fit of rage. Whether she herself commits suicide or not is not clear as the ending of the novel is left vague.

Cry, the Peacock has many autobiographical elements in it. Desai writes about the events and emotions like loneliness and feeling unwanted, as well as her existential dilemmas and innermost concerns. Her allusions to the Hindu philosophy, are also to be noted in this novel. Gautama is the first name of Lord Buddha, and Maya stands for illusion and also the destroyer of wisdom in the Vedanta Philosophy. Gautama practices the philosophy of non-attachment described in the Bhagvad Gita, and oddly enough practices it with his sensitive wife, who is troubled by this alienation and yearns for a real marriage, in the surroundings of her fabulous but loveless old Delhi bungalow, and a luxurious garden where parties are held in the honor of illustrious people. Desai presents a real picture of upper classes in India, although with a feminist perspective, and their absurd culture of segregation of sexes in their social life, and their feudal mentality as far as their women are concerned.

There is a sense of detachment, formality, contempt, violence, selfishness, as well as egoism, that shocks and disillusion the ultra-sensitive Maya, and takes her further towards self-destruction, as she feels like an alien caught in the trap of this whole weird wickedness of her 'own' people. Self-identity to her means keeping her childhood, intact. She considers her husband and his family as insensitive and gross, lacking in the finer nuances of human life. In turn they think of her as a spoilt-brat, who refuses to grow up. Contrary to their view, Maya thinks that she has a uniqueness, which is lacking in a lot of people around her and, it signifies her separate sense of identity and gives a meaning to her life.

Desai paints a perfect picture of a failed marriage and Old Delhi atmosphere of the 1960's. There were too many cultures that existed simultaneously, different centuries co-existed together and crossed each other sometimes. The various cultural settings are also brilliantly captured by her. Maya has a liking for Urdu poetry and her husband Gautama likes The Gita, and like the philosophy contained in The Gita; the Vedanta philosophy, mythological stories of Krishna, and Arjuna he too has a 'yogi' like discipline in his life.

Cry, the Peacock portrays many cultures simultaneously; for instance the women's and men's, as reflected in the attitudes and emotions of Maya and Gautama; their different views on living and conducting their lives lead to a dysfunctional family full of melancholia. Maya's dwelling in the past, in her childhood and memories of her father's love for her, clash with Gautama's arrogant refusals to understand her, as he firmly believes in living in the present. There's a constant cultural clash, as in Maya's refusal to come out of the past and Gautama's refusal to disown the present. The rationality of Gautama's ideas always threat Maya's irrationality. She is sensitive, dreamy, and emotional; and he is practical and insensitive to her

emotional demands. The conscious of Gautama is opposed to the sub-conscious and even the un-conscious of Maya, who remains in a trance like state when she kills her husband Gautama. The mysterious Maya has an ominous feeling of an impending tragedy, she hates being married to practical Gautama (who like The Buddha Himself has left his wife somewhere far behind in the journey of life).

The modernity of Gautama and his westernized ideas about companionship and marriage clash with Maya's traditional views on how a good Indian husband should look after his wife. Desai portrays multiculturalism at various levels, and ultimately Maya overcomes Gautama. There is a clash of worlds and a catastrophe in which tragedy manifests itself starkly, and Maya achieves in death (of Gautama's and possibly her own) what she could not in life.

Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer ?* (1975) is a novel about Sita, a pregnant woman and a mother of four children who escapes a "bored, dull, unhappy and frantic" (4) life to protect her "unborn" child, she comes back to the Manori Islands, where her Gandhian father was well-respected, as he was believed to have possessed magical powers, that cured everyone who came to him for help. She wants to shelter herself and her children from the morbidly perpetual distress that was her constant companion in the frantic city life of Bombay. Sita had lived on the Manori Islands in the winter of 1947, her father was a legend, and was worshipped as some sort of a divine figure, who was fabled for curing the sick and his "magical" qualities that the villagers believed were a blessing in their otherwise miserable life. Sita's conjugal bliss is actually her conjugal tragedy; from the outside she and her husband Raman are a perfect couple but she is very unhappy on the inside, as like all of Desai's protagonists she feels that her husband is too practical and does not understand her emotions, but her marriage is not so bad as that of Maya's in *Cry, The Peacock*.

This novel has a provocative natural setting and in this unlikeliest of settings. Sita is the moral, emotional and focal point of the novel. She experiences depression and feels that others have just neglected her till now. The life of the city, which repels Sita, and the somewhat difficult life on the Island are compared and contrasted in this novel. The city is full of poisonous fumes that are not only suffocating but also depressing, and specifically her family life which is miserable. She feels lonely in the dull routine of everyday life. Her fifth pregnancy and its repercussions are catastrophic, she leaves her husband's home with two of her children Karan and Maneka, in a symbolic way leaving her past life behind and crossing all the boundaries that were drawn by the self.

Everyone from her old life scoffed at her (including the servants) rebelliousness, which was not only sudden and brash but also surprising. She has a broken heart and nobody seems to understand her trauma. Sita is depressed by the fact of her dysfunctional family with a husband who could never understand her feelings, her sense of loss and her own father's relationship with his children.

She wants to rest and recover, away from suspicion and selfishness, pettiness and greed that outrage her. She is misunderstood as wild and crazy, but in reality there has been a lot of confusion and pandemonium going on inside her mind. It is a dramatic decision, that she takes at the spur of a moment -very impulsively, of giving up the city life and leaving for a quieter place to escape from it all. When she reaches Manori, she is looked down upon by the persons who served her father, as they consider her a lunatic.

Her children, though, do not agree with her ideas and miss their father terribly, and their former life in Bombay. Her husband (who is the son of one of her father's old 'Chela' Deedar and

married her out of concern and pity after the traumatic death of her father) comes to Manori, to meet his children. He is a simple man who is not able to understand his wife's over-sensitive disposition, and is bewildered at the thought, that she is making his children suffer on a shabby, deserted island. He wants her to return immediately to Bombay with his children, instead of suffering the dangerous monsoons on this island of nightmares, to his mind it is suicidal insanity.

She gives in, and returns with her husband only for the sake of their children, for whom she feels responsible (and a failure as a mother) she tries to rebuild her life and regain some sense of balance again.

Sita comes to the Island, to avoid giving birth and protecting her unborn baby, she desperately expects the miracle of not giving birth as Manori was the place of miracles. She is a supposedly a modern woman, who has a hard time giving up her will to stay in Manori. The culture of Bombay city makes her sick and she wants to escape from its selfishness and consumerism. This cronyism and corruption shocks her intense sensibilities. On the other hand, her husband expects her to be antiquated like other normal ordinary wives, which his friends seem to have. She becomes reclusive and overtly emotional and returns to the Manori Island, where her father talked about setting up an ideal state, a state of 'Swaraj' dreamt of by Mahatma Gandhi. based on the ideals of the Indian culture and civilization.

She returns to nature, to a more simple state of affairs on the Island, where the fishermen, go out into the sea, with their boats and lead their simple lives which to her is like a homecoming. Mental peace is her goal besides not giving birth to her baby, and keeping it safely hidden in her womb for ever! Sita is an extremely sensitive woman like Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* and the cruel cut throat culture of business symbolized by the city of Bombay shakes her soul.

Desai portrays the extreme and hitherto untouched characteristics of, the Indian multicultural tradition in this novel. She describes both the beauty and the ugliness of the world's most ancient Hindu city of Benaras, where Sita's mother disappeared with the other anonymous beings and "cast-a ways" of the Hindu society. She talks about the tragedies of the partition of India and the ensuing violence and bloodshed that was forever etched in the minds and souls of the people who witnessed it. The novel depicts the sub-cultures and contradictions of the Hindu society. With many myriad races, castes, classes, religions and ideologies, and the different cultures of cities like Bombay and Benaras.

The multifarious culture of the vibrant city of Bombay. Has been contrasted with the village culture (with magical charm and innocence) which is so difficult to trace in a corrupt commercial city like Bombay, and this is interwoven with the Indian civilization, modern and ancient and the decaying holy city Benares, to which her mother went to never come back again.

Desai also tells about Sita's Siblings who are too busy with their lives to care either for her or for their father's memories. She tries to foretell about the growing materialism in the Indian Society, where the name of the game is compromise at the cost of one's integrity. The complete lack of emotions and self-respect that has slowly but steadily completely eroded the morals of the whole society and is creating a set of spineless wizards whose self-worth goes up and down with the rise and fall of the sensex in the various stock exchanges of the country! And India which was ones famous for its spirituality and culture is moving towards spiritual decay.

Desai has shown in this novel that how the seeping in of the modern ideas from the West has done more harm than good to the ancient civilization of India where most people have turned

in to something which is definitely not good for them or the country in the long run. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* depicts the dilemmas of a modern woman in a rapidly modernizing world.

Desai's novel *Voices in the City* (1965) is based on the tragic life of the middle class intellectuals of Calcutta. It is a wonderful story of a bohemian, vagabond brother and his two sisters trapped in the cross-currents of a changing society and its values, from traditional to modern.

Voices in the City is one of Desai's extremely tragic novel. The story is about Nirode and his sisters Monisha and Amla, who live in Calcutta. Monisha's marriage to Jiban fails and results in her suicide. Nirode is depressed by this whole scenario. Jit is similarly prone to sadness. Nirode's hates his mother's relationship with Major Chandha as it makes everyone's life more complicated.

The novel is a depiction of Calcutta. Desai depicts it as a decaying city filled with sad people who feel that their life is rapidly decaying as well. It also contrasts the beauty of Kalimpong with the decay of magnificent Calcutta.

This novel reflects the change in the Indian social milieu – a period where the older principles were not completely dead and the new emerging ones, not fully evolved. It is the story about the Indian society, its multicultural existence, and transformation and has the city of Calcutta as a backdrop, and a witness to this awe-inspiring social transition, of a nation struggling to come to terms with all that is going on within and without.

Desai writes about the tragic predicament of various artists searching for a vision in this unforgiving city, which could also be brutal at times. Calcutta is some times cruel and destroys as it creates, thus symbolic of Goddess Mahakali. It is difficult for these artists to have a conducive relationship with the decadent society, especially the corrupt money mongers whom they meet and intensely dislike.

Nirode is a sensitive young artist who is ultra emotional at times, and which is why he avoids his mother and the city; they are for him the symbol of disintegration and decay. He is vulnerable and cannot stand the onslaught of wicked people, who constantly torture him by their insensitiveness. Nirode wants to escape from this moroseness, as he feels that the society and the city will one day sap all his individually and drive him insane. He shuns and abhors the vary prospect of being branded "with the family name, family money, family honor", which could be quite intimidating at times, even for the boldest of the bold. Nirode is a misfit and the real world overwhelms him, as his life constantly revolves between hope and delusions.

The culture of the majestic city of Calcutta is Desai's backdrop in *Voices in the City* and the city is the most important character in the novel. It has two identities: one the shiny, happy city on one hand and on the other, dismal and diseased, it reminds one of the Woody Allen movies in which New York City is more often than not, the most important character, and has the power to transform the lives and destinies of the people who call it their home, or rather a place where they have come to challenge their destinies. Calcutta for an idealistic artist is the 'city of death', because it continuously crushes the spirit of people who inhabit it. It is the city of the Goddess Mahakali and like Her seems to have, both constructive and destructive powers over its worshippers and inhabitants.

The novel portrays the plight of an idealistic Nirode in a hostile culture. There is an angry neurosis within him, as his work as an artist is not appreciated by the society that values materialism more than art. The novels also underlines the Indian dysfunctional family, where the

family members do not even talk to each other and the older members of the family cannot understand the reason for various depressions of their progeny.

Aunt Lila (her name symbolizes the meaningless farce that the world really is) says: "You are a morbid lot ...I don't know what it is that has deceased your generation – the very freedom we fought and gave you, perhaps?" (179).

This novel portrays that culture, as far as Calcutta is concerned, has been in a constant decay after a valuable rise, as the charm which surrounded it has diminished, as nobody loves the city anymore, and they are all out to make money at its expense. The values and principles which characterized it, have failed to take deep roots in the hearts and minds of the young people, who call it home. This could be culture in transition, which is not only tragic but also deeply disturbing.

Nirode and his mother do not talk to each other, due to their irreconcilable differences, which is a disturbing reality in many homes across India. His older brother Arun and his wife are almost strangers to the whole family and happy in their own world. His sister Monisha, like him is an over sensitive girl, destined to a failed marriage, in which she feels a severe sense of claustrophobia and ultimately commits suicide, like so many other Indian girls, she has nothing to fall back on. The family in to which she is married and condemned to unhappiness and death. Again the city of Calcutta stands true to its reputation as 'the city of death'.

Nirode's mother in sheer frustration falls in 'love' with a retired military officer, but she realizes that it was nothing but a fool's paradise, that lasted for a moment and vanished like the illusive sand dunes. Her younger daughter Amla, is an extrovert and lives life to the hilt, with passion. Unlike her older brother and sister she decides to live a happy life with her partner Dharma. But this passion is short lived and she finally comes face to face with the emptiness of her life.

This, tragically, becomes the destiny of Amla, a curse perhaps, that rubbed off on her as well, along with her whole family. They all are the products of a similar culture, tradition and social milieu. It seems as if it was their misfortune to be born and brought up in Calcutta and lead a tragic life full of misery, without any sense of real human relationships. Desai has delved deep in to the culture and social ethos that her characters find difficult to comprehend and accept. Their cultural encounters leave them shocked and saddened and especially the young people who have nothing to look forward to, no heroes to admire and follow.

The concept of death is also symbolic in the novel as it signifies decay and death of culture, renunciation of religious faith and antiquated beliefs, and the cross roads at which people find themselves. The novel symbolizes the city of Calcutta as that of Goddess Mahakali and unravels the complicated relationship of a mother with her children. Some other dominating themes of this novel are the clash of cultures, hypocritical ideals of society, reconciliation, hybridity, post-colonialism and harmonious co-existence of various cultural ideas and ideals.

Desai has quoted Camus again and again in this novel, as to underline the dilemmas, that one has to face being the product of not one specific culture, influence and inheritance, there is a sense of unease, loneliness, displacement, betrayal, emptiness and dislocation. The various problems of living in a big city have also been highlighted by Desai. There is an enormous anxiety of feeling like an alien in one's own surroundings.

Desai has captured the essence, the pathos which engulfs the life of these characters. In spite of living in the vibrant but slowly dying culture and consciousness, of that magnificent city of the British Raj in India; the mighty Calcutta, with all its deep sense of history, culture, fine

arts, language, education and music. The concepts of cultural heritage, feverish anxiety, and burden of the past, grave responsibilities and a feeling of getting trapped in them have been underlined by Desai. It is the novel of the times that were not only chaotic but also held a mighty sway over the lives, and thoughts of young men and women, who were inheritors of a great cultural tradition and civilization, and the newly acquired freedom of their country. But they were too burdened by their own confusions and tragedies, to carry it all to the next level, in their own lives and times.

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is based on a real incident of forest fire that engulfed Kasauli on the foothills of the Himalayas. Desai has written this novel in a subtle “stream of consciousness” manner. The fire incident took place when Desai was holidaying with her friend and mentor Ruth Prawyer Jhabvala. The summer fire took a massive toll. It is the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award of 1978. It is also a novel about life in small towns and the British legacy of “cantonment revelry”. Like Desai, Nanda Kaul the main protagonist of the novel is also worried about the increasing population, forest fires and water shortages in Kasauli.

This is also a novel about childhood and complex interpersonal relationship between Raka and Nanda Kaul. Raka is a reclusive child (her name could also be symbolic for ‘rakh’ or ash) who likes to experience and explore the culture of the mountains and the town, all by herself. She talks very little. The reason for it is that, Raka is lonely, sad and distressed because she comes from a broken home, and also from within the glamour and glitz of the diplomatic society of Madrid, New York City, New Delhi and other big cities (which in her case proves that happiness has nothing to do with any place big or small, unless there is harmony in people's lives on the inside).

Amidst this, she watches the New Year dance held at the kasauli club, when she comes to live with her great-grandmother Nanda Kaul, who is spending her old age all by herself. The novel also contrasts cultures of the fashionable societies of New York, Madrid and New Delhi, (where Raka's father is posted during his diplomatic assignments) with that of Kasauli. The novel has a tragic end, when Raka sets the forest on fire, and Nanda Kaul dies in shock at the sad news of her friend Ila Das's untimely and preventable death, for which she holds herself accountable.

Desai describes beautifully the fascinating town of kasauli, and its North Indian cantonment culture, which still has a lot of British influence and traditions. Mournfulness and sorrow form the backdrop of this novel. At first Nanda Kaul cannot stand or understand Raka and she seems like an “intruder”, “outsider”, “a mosquito from the plains to tease and worry” (40). Nanda Kaul has her own grief to take care of; she has come to terms with her own lonely existence, the follies of her husband and his extra-marital affairs. Her life in Carignano (her home) is miserable but bearable. She is aloof from everyone and lives with her own ghosts. Multiculturalism is subtle but all pervasive in this novel. The novel ends with pain, remorse and tragedy: “Here was a scratching at the window that turned to a tapping... ‘Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire...’Tapping, then drumming she raised her voice, then raised her head to look in and saw Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging...” (145).

There is a feeling that multicultural ethos and nuances are superior to personal trials and tragedies

The Village by the Sea : An Indian Family Story is a novel written for young people by Anita Desai, in which the city of Bombay finds resonance. The novel is based in Thul, Alibagh and the city of Bombay, and highlights the ordeals of children, who are destined to a life of

poverty and despair, and their sheer hard work and wisdom, they turn their own destinies around and ultimately emerge as winners. The protagonist of the novel is Hari and his sister Lila whose mother is always ill, and their father drunk almost all the time. They have to take care of their two younger sisters Bela and Kamal. Hari leaves his native village Thul, and goes to Alibagh and eventually to Bombay. He starts working in Bombay, its a tough world, and Hari a child has to pretend to be an adult and meets all kinds of people of all castes, religions and creeds.

The novel originated when Desai was vacationing in a seaside bungalow of her family friends. Thul being a real village on the West Coast of India, the characters in this novel are not fictitious, only their original names have been altered to protect their privacy. The novel also talks about the plight of the poor farmers and fishermen whose lands in the nearby villages of Bombay are being snatched by unscrupulous administrators and politicians.

Hari's life in Bombay is full of hard work and struggle and he also meets some good persons who help him and are kind to him. He becomes mature and learns how to survive in a hostile environment, and adapts himself in all situations. Desai appreciates the fact that inspite of living in such difficulty, the Indian people have so much patience and determination to rise above their misery and a life of despair. One pictures the city of Bombay through the eyes of the migrant Hari and all the people there who help him out of a humanitarian concern. It is well portrayed in the novel, and in the end they are rewarded with wisdom and money, to start their own little family enterprise. There are thematic likenesses between this novel and other novels and short stories written by Desai, as they all portray the psychological, social and economic struggles of men and women and their attempts, successful and unsuccessful to rise above their problems.

This is a novel that talks about the problems of migrants and their miserable existence in the Indian cities, multilingualism, marginalization of the subalterns, and economic cultural destruction of India due to over industrialization, and the difference between the ancient Indian village culture and metropolitan cities like Bombay. Also about how wide-spread migration from all over the country has been destroying, the geographical and cultural landscape of Bombay and other metropolitan cities of India. The novel also deals with poverty at a very basic and real manner.

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, was her first novel set away from India. In this novel she portrays xenophobia and racism in England during the convergence of the commonwealth immigration in the 1950's and 1960's. The novel shows the life and experiences of Dev, a young man from Calcutta, who arrives in England to attend the London School of Economics. He is invited to move in with two friends, Adit and Sarah, a multicultural married couple. As Dev is more and more attracted to the English way of life, Adit wants to leave everything and go back to his native land and culture. He is absolutely disgusted with the vileness of the white people (apart from his wife) who treat him with abject disdain and hurt his feelings. The mental trauma of all the characters in this novel gains prominence. On the other hand Desai also highlights the plight of the Briton Sarah, who is married to Adit and deeply loves him but also her country. There is a very elaborate description and discussion here on the positive and negative sides of immigration. Adit does not want to keep on living in a country at the cost of his honor and self-worth. He is tired of the insults meted out to him almost regularly.

Bye-Bye, Blackbird, shifts out of India, and underlines broader issues that relate to postcolonial matters of racism, displacement, marginalization and suppression. It is also about

boycott of Sarah, an English-woman, who is humiliated in her own country, on account of her marriage to an Indian. This makes her a pariah and she suffers on account of this alienation.

Dev starts to appreciate and admire the culture of Britain and especially London, but some or the other incidents force him to reconsider his decisions and opinions. It also highlights the social and ghettoized alienation of the Indian immigrants to Britain. A sense of loss is all too palpable and pervasive. Although, both Dev and Adit agree that Britain is a magnificent country, a land where everything is preserved immaculately just as it was, since centuries and its glory and greatness is incomparable.

But Adit has had it, with this country, as the white people have made it all too clear to him time and again, that this is not his own country. He is an alien and a foreigner, a second class citizen who is not welcome and is only a gate-crasher in their country. There is an arrogant display of pomposity, at the cost of demeaning the Indians and their culture, and Adit cannot tolerate this any more. He wants to move back to his own country where he is not treated with so much contempt.

The portrayal of the migrant life and diasporic condition has been one of the most discussed issues of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Like India, the United Kingdom is also an example of the "melting pot", the cross-cultural interactions are very well portrayed by Desai in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. The relevance of issues like color, gender, race, class and ethnicity is shown in the perspective of the British xenophobic mindset common in the 1970's Britain. The cultural conflict is of unprecedented proportions, the environment which is at the least unfriendly, prejudicial and hostile. There is a definite distance between the British mainstream society and the marginalized Indian immigrants. This is one of Desai's darkest and most novels, that deal with the emotional traumas of the Indian immigrants, who face racism frequently but have to put up with it, in order to live and survive in the country, which they have decided to call their home.

The novel is divided in to three parts : the Introduction to the novel is called ARRIVAL which is the first part; Part II is called DISCOVERY AND RECOGNITION and Part III is described as DEPARTURE. There are profound feelings of nostalgia amongst these immigrants and Desai has shown that how symbolically, blackbird is the immigrant to whom London waves goodbye, forever.

There is a deeply distressing emotional depth and vision in this novel. The different cultures that are brought together and described by Desai, present a sort of sanity amidst all the chaos and madness. This is a novel about the East-West encounter and the identity crises of Indian immigrants with emphasis on heightened emotions and the love-hate relationship that the immigrants have with their adopted countries. The English countryside, landscapes and social settings like the pubs, are described in detail by Desai. She manages to enchant her readers with beautiful imagery, symbolism and style. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* also highlights the fact that a person's roots are an important component of his or her personality. No matter how much a person tries to ignore them, they are always there, drawing them back where they belong.

Racial bias and prejudice is portrayed in this novel in a realistic manner. The title *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* makes it crystal clear that the acceptance and warmth which Indians have for foreigners is one of their most likeable characteristics, and are not found everywhere in the world, and this attitude is particularly missing in many countries of the Western world. This and other stark contrasts make it aptly clear that even the citizens of the so called 'commonwealth' nations were looked down upon and discouraged from entering the West.

They were offered menial jobs in places like the airports, restaurants, offices and shops. For instance, even at present, the second generation Indians who have been born and brought up in countries like Canada, United States and Britain are offered jobs that mock their qualifications. There is violence against them and they are sometimes arrested and imprisoned without warrants, their citizenship status can be revoked any time.

Their basic human rights are violated and the law of the land does not provide them with adequate protection. With the passage of time, the fundamental attitudes have remained the same and there is widespread violence, racism and incidents of serious crimes against the colored immigrant in most of the Western countries. It is quite apparent that the intermingling of cultures has its limitations and it's not quite successful all the time, with time the perceptions have changed but the fundamental attitudes remain the same, in spite of the fact, that human nature and requirements are same all over the world.

It also suggests that multiculturalism which has thrived in Britain, has taken its own time and the process has been gradual and difficult. Apart from London, racism is still widespread in the small towns and the country-sides of Britain. Political correctness apart, it is difficult for the Indian immigrants to expect that all Britons would equally understand or respect the Indian culture and civilization. It is deeply shocking and disturbing for them, for instance Dev is disturbed by the way Indians are treated in England. He hates being called a 'wog'. He now has a new found respect for his homeland and has a profound feeling of homesickness, he feels that he is an "unwanted immigrant" who wants to go back home – a place of recognition, security, unlimited freedom, respect and status but most of all the sun ! On the other hand, some Indian immigrants hate England but like the money which they earn there.

The Indians who live in Britain also adopt a lot of British attitudes, practices and lifestyles but they think that their colour is a major problem. The incidents of xenophobia in Britain and the United States in 2008 aptly prove that even now the racial bias and prejudice has not subsided and colored people pretty much are living like second class citizens. The feelings of utter sadness, despair and frustration at being an Asian is clearly reflected in this novel.

The first generation Indian immigrants in Britain faced a lot of prejudice, harassment and mental torture, writes Desai, "...if they'd caught an Indian doing it, they would have gone on and on about immigrants in London, and how would you have felt, getting a bad name for your people ?" (187).

A foreign land is ultimately foreign, and different from one's own, this is quite evident when Adit is hurt, and says, ".....why does everything have to come to this – that we're Indians and you're English and we're living in your country and therefore we've all got to behave in a special way, different from normal people ?" (188).

The world has not changed much, the strains of racism and bigotry are evident, clearly by one, or the other incident that showcases a world which is full of hatred and fear and a constant search for personal identity, in which a person is almost on the verge of nervous breakdown apart from nursing split sensibilities.

Desai highlights how Adit suffers from feelings of loss and nostalgia, his experiences resonate largely in the background throughout *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. There is also another aspect of the realignment of identities, with an overwhelming cultural shock and perplexing issues like identity, culture, nation state, minority status, psychological and social adjustments with a cultural crisis, and complex universal as well as personal conflicts. Writes Desai, :

"...a memory of Calcutta in 1947 when Muslims and Hindus who had learnt, through the reign of Moghuls to regard each other as one people, now learnt, at the end of the British reign, to slaughter each other, burn each other's houses, rape each other's wives and toss the children aside like broken twigs. He remembered going up to the terrace at night with his father and seeing the sky livid with innumerable fires all over the city. He remembered the steady, surreptitious pacing of the men of the family who patrolled the compound by night....his mother placing his shoes by his bed at night, in case they had to rise and flee...It was happening again-in India. No riot, but war. War in India. What was going on? (197).

Desai portrays the collective transformation of these immigrants, their multicultural experiences, and ordeals of surviving in a world which is vastly different from their own. Portraying the migrants' paradoxical stance and their divided self is her forte, along with issues of identity, relocation, dislocation, disrespect, bigotry, ethno-centricity, superior attitude, relocation, racism, opinionated attitudes that nurture tyranny, contempt and hatred towards the migrant minorities. This novel has a very deep and vivid multicultural element from the Indian perspective as well as the diasporic.

Human relationships have also been explored in this novel in a multicultural context, each of the main protagonist is afflicted with a kind of ironic and melancholic identity crisis, which is symbolic of the East-West encounter and the blackbird symbolically represents the immigrant, whom England does not welcome. The escalating conflict in the minds and hearts of migrants, is portrayed in a simple but striking manner. There is a revolutionary exploration of the peculiarities of the conscious, unconscious and subconscious psyches of the first generation immigrant mindset, who pretend to be very happy amongst their friends and families in India, but in reality suffer from nostalgia, home sickness and a love-hate relationship, with their adopted countries, as a result of which they are victims of many schizophrenic complexities and tough choices.

There are questions in Adit's mind, his love and admiration for multiculturalism in London on one hand and the scary and intimidating aloofness and prejudice of the British on the other, which is difficult to comprehend for him. Desai has also portrayed a feeling of insecurity in living life as an immigrant, its good and bad experiences, yearnings, sadness, too little happiness and how it squeezes out room for any other kind of emotion – good or bad.

Adit and Dev's perspectives have been expressed in rich and powerful words. Gradually Dev adjusts to the behavior of the prejudiced and racist persons, and learns to ignore it, contrasted to his earlier attitude, when he felt hurt and depressed at being called names and could not accept his humiliation in Britain. Desai has portrayed Adit's mindset, his self esteem, sense of belonging, in a subtle style. It is a classical novel in which the profound nuances of living away and moving back again, in to the country of one's birth have been dealt with. The manifestations of the mind of the protagonists Adit, Dev and Sarah unfold along with the narrative and cleverly merge with their ordeals, defining the moments of their lives.

Desai's novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* explores the all consuming questions of race, creed, color and a sense of identity, that is depressing as well as enigmatic and ever-new, and is as relevant today as it was about fifty or hundred years back.

Desai has not only revealed her extraordinary story-telling prowess in this novel, but also her personal empathy for her protagonists, there is no doubt that they are a reflection of her own

vivid multicultural experiences not only in India but that of living in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Mexico. She portrays the pain of people in an alien land and an unknown society that is oblivious to their traumas and unfathomable struggles. Adit, Dev, Sarah, Emma Moffit and Christine Langford are Desai's mouth pieces on the issues of East-West encounters and discords. This novel explores the multi-dimensional struggles of the migrants seeking to create an all-new identity in an unknown country.

The cultural diversity, different attitudes of the Indian immigrants in London, constant turmoil and their emotional and mental collapse, trauma, longing for one's own country, freedom and a final end to a confusing and destabilizing predicament and finally the comfort and courage on reaching a final decision about living their life has been portrayed by Desai, with elegance. Multiculturalism has been revealed and highlighted in an enlightening manner. The fusion or collaboration of these ideas and ideals are not only personal but also that of an entire generation and have been shown by her with an all consuming realism. Desai has portrayed that how the constant coming and going of immigrants almost never stops, in spite of everything and everyone. She writes;

“ . . . England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realized that he had done with her and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev.” (228 – 229).

Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* tells the story of the Das family, a Hindu clan, residents of old Delhi. The Das siblings: Bim, a professor of History in a woman's college is unmarried, her younger sister Tara, who is married to a diplomat. Bakul, and lives in America with their two teenage daughters, their older brother Raja, who wanted to be a poet but now lives the life of an aristocratic businessman in Hyderabad with his Muslim – heiress wife Benazir and their five children, Baba their spastic brother who lives with Bim, and is cared for by her.

Desai has interwoven many stories in this novel. Tara comes to visit her family in India from abroad with her diplomat husband Bakul. She stays in her ancestral home, where her sister Bim lives with their spastic brother Baba. The visit brings back old wounds and emotions, and also the memory of their beloved brother Raja, who married a Muslim heiress Benazir and moved away to Hyderabad. Bim was especially, attached to Raja. He was her favorite, and she could not meet him since a number of years.

The two sisters remember their past together and recall their parents, their aunt Mira; an alcoholic, and all the good and bad memories associated with their family. Both sisters do not understand each other's attitude and think that the other is wrong. Bim thinks that Tara had it easy and left her family in a lurch, and Tara thinks that Bim is losing grip on her life. Tara has everything but feels guilty, for leaving her brother and sister alone to cope up with all the tragedies. There is also a kind of cross story-telling and Desai is a superb teller of stories. There are other important characters like the Mishra siblings, who are lovers of music and have been deserted by their respective spouses! There is Dr. Biswas who is selfless and gentle and his love for Western Music and Germany have been highlighted in the novel.

Bim feels frustrated and isolated as she is unable to come to terms, with the changing realities around her, and cannot fathom her past or present in a self-fulfilling, productive way. She is a bundle of contradictions and feels that she, the ancestral home she lives in, and old Delhi are all dying and decaying. She dislikes Bakul's diplomatic romanticism of India and asks him to face the real everyday problems, of survival in India. Bim's sense of identity is vague and there

is an emotional thunderstorm inside her heart. Desai has created in the last scene of the novel, a kind of reintegration amongst Bim and the rest of her family and society. It completes the process of her matured reintegration in to the world and recovery from her self-imposed exile.

Desai said in an interview that *Clear Light of Day* is her most auto-biographical novel till date. On the one hand it highlights the meaninglessness of existence and on the other, the absolute uselessness of dividing an entire nation on the basis of religion, language and culture. The novel also portrays the fusion of various cultures of old Delhi, which is a world in itself, and a multicultural heritage which was brutally fractured and fragmented by the British and too many persons were shockingly divided, their lives transformed almost overnight. This segregation was not accidental, it was the culmination of a significant government policy of the British, who walked out of history, after that fatal decision as well as some Indian politicians and leaders who consented rather ignorantly or naively to the unfortunate partition of India.

This extraordinary event redefined the Indian history almost overnight. The destinies of millions of people were altered in an unprecedented manner. It was virtually impossible to visualize any kind of multiculturalism then, but sixty two years later it can be safely said that multiculturalism has been deeply established in India. Fortunately, the various divisive theories that plagued India in the initial years of the its independence have been dismissed, not only in theory, but also along with the gradual establishment of a secular democratic republic, and freedom of speech provided by the Indian constitution, as well as the liberalization of the economy.

The present India tries to be in harmony not only with its own multicultural lineage but also with the whole world, which it views now with a new perspective and an absolutely renewed confidence and vigor to responsibly further its interests, and a unique constitutional culture that has played a great role in preserving India's multicultural heritage, unlike many other countries in its neighborhood, where real democracy could never actually take firm roots.

In *Clear Light of Day* there is a striking sense of disintegration, not only within the hearts and minds of Desai's characters but also the world around them. The disintegration and breakdown of the mutual relationship amongst Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba, who are siblings, coincides with the devastation and division of the world around them in the form of the partition of India. The ordeal of maintaining the unity of multicultural India, during the most suspicious and difficult times, have been well portrayed in this novel. The atmosphere just before independence reeks of revenge, disillusionment, chaos, misguided courage and an unparalleled disappointment with leaders. Those dangerous days, when the country was bleeding and there were widespread clashes between Hindus and Muslims, the multi-religious and cultural fabric of India was torn apart by mutual hatred.

The fanaticism and discord completely dominated the poisonous atmosphere of those times, the moderate voices like that of people like Raja were completely shunned, quieted or ignored. The sense of balance was transformed in to mutual suspicion, disbelief and hatred and the violence was unfathomable. Bands of looters and criminals were violating the society. It was the first time after decades, when the peaceful multicultural character of India was transformed into one of bigotry and hatred for each other's faiths. The existence, and dangers to the concept of multiculturalism, have been presented by Desai. This is an autobiographical novel. She has also expressed that no matter what, India would always remain a truly multicultural land of co-existence, despite all the dangers to its survival, by fanatical extremists of any creed.

The outstanding quality of Desai is her portrayal of the psychological effects of multiculturalism, not only from a diasporic perspective but also from the Indian inter-cultural perspective, which has been aptly used in *Clear Light of Day*. The plurality of attitudes and principles is very well expressed with absolute ease. The values of multiculturalism have been vividly shown with the wisdom and analysis of a critic and an admirer. A very effective use of imagination has been made in this novel, beyond all illusions, delusions, dilemmas and misconceptions about multiculturalism. She feels and expresses the destructive and creative lives that are closely intertwined in India, like Mexico, which stems out of poverty, powerlessness and a sense of extreme vulnerability and frustration. She opines that multiculturalism is not just a myth or a wish but a reality in India, because it is not make-believe but rather an ongoing tradition, which has been passed down many centuries; from one generation to another, irrespective of religion, caste, color or beliefs. It is precarious no doubt, but still very much alive and relevant.

This dual discord and its subtle nuances find an expression in this novel, interwoven with the inner consciousness, memories and experiences of Bim and the other characters. Desai also voices the social pressure of adhering to boundaries and an individual's own distinguished will and characteristics. Bim, Raja and Tara have their own characteristic natures, combined with a free spirit and an independent mind. Collaboratively, they make one unique family, despite all the issues and situations, due to which they fell apart initially. Desai has celebrated the idea of multiculturalism in her novels, and implied that in India multiculturalism is the whole-hearted acceptance of all the religions, and not their disapproval or repudiation. Historically, even the Mughal rulers of Delhi observed Diwali and Navroz (the New Year celebration of the Parsis) and the Hindus customarily participated (and still do) in the Mohurram celebrations. Most of the great nationalist leaders had made it absolutely necessary to remember the holy teachings of all the religions before their prayer meetings, despite being practicing Hindus themselves. The Indian gentleness, tolerance and acceptance have made it easier for the various different cultures, that have assimilated and evolved throughout the centuries.

Tara's husband Bakul, a diplomat describes his feelings for his country and says:

“What I feel is my duty, my vocation, when I am abroad, is to be my country's ambassador. All of us abroad are, in varying degrees, ambassadors. I refuse to talk about famine or drought or caste wars or – or political disputes. I refuse – I refuse to discuss such things.”(35).

India is romanticized in *Clear Light of Day* its complete multicultural beauty is expressed by Desai and Bim's brother-in-law Bakul, when he describes India as follows :

“The Taj Mahal – the Bhagavad Gita – Indian Philosophy – music – art – the great, immortal values of ancient India. But why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices, Nehru, his daughter, his grandson – such matters will soon pass in to oblivion ? These aren't important when compared with India, eternal India —” (35).

For Bim it is very difficult to handle this one sided praise of India, and she replies;

“... Then it is definitely important to live abroad. In all the comfort and luxury of the embassy, it must be much easier, very easy to concentrate on the Taj, or the Emperor Akbar. Over here I'm afraid you would be too busy queuing up for your rations and juggling with your budget, making ends meet—” (36).

Desai has wonderfully presented the two sides of the story of India and not just romanticized it. In *Clear Light of Day*, she has shown the romanticism, idealism and to an extent the misconceptions of Indians who stay abroad, as they have no real idea about what is going on in the country on a daily basis. Bim berates Bakul's ideas that to her are no more than hyperbole. Desai has shown how the Diaspora majority and elites are out of tune with the realities of daily survival in a country, which somehow works with all its unpredictability ! inspite of almost everything going against it !

Desai has also clearly highlighted the issues that are most relevant in the present world. These multi-dimensional issues of multi-ethnicism, religion, class, caste, creed and gender are profoundly highlighted from a social and feminist perspective. On one hand, Bim is a liberated college lecturer, who smokes openly and flirts with men; on the other hand she is equally vulnerable and prone to emotional catastrophes and mental traumas, sometimes of her own making! Desai has highlighted the complications of multiculturalism, through Bim's brother Raja, who loves Urdu poetry and 'Tehzeeb' He has a liking for a culture, drastically different from his own, even to the extent of attracting unwanted, negative attention from Hindu fanatic groups of his college and inviting unimaginable scorn and humiliation on himself and his family. His love for Benazir, could be compared to that of Lata and Kabir, the iconic protagonists of Vikram Seth's debut novel *A Suitable Boy*.

It only strengthens the belief that multiculturalism makes us better as human beings and humanitarians, and religion or ethnicity can never stand in the way of true love. The novel also reflects, Hyder Ali's (who is the father of Benazir and Raja's mentor) noble spirit and secular character, because instead of opposing this cross-cultural union, he rather paves the way, for their marriage. This liaison is indeed blessed by him and his family. There had been many such romances and weddings which were cross-cultural, and took place as a result of the multicultural environment of old Delhi, despite many oppositions and honor killings. These forbidden liaisons find a prominent place in many of Desai's novels and are indeed her multicultural memoirs, as she knew many of such star-crossed lovers.

Desai portrays the saddest chapters of Indian history infusing it with personal memories. It is a tragic account of partition: not only of India, but also that of a family. The cruelty, betrayal, idealistic enthusiasm, and the strange political and cultural landscape of those difficult and suspicious times have been revealed by Desai. The novel has a prominent multicultural element fused with the story of Raja and his mentor and father-in-law Hyder Ali, and reveals the state of politics in India, its effect on people and politics, apart from the detailed descriptions of landscapes, birds, homes, gardens and nature, which is the unique stylistic characteristic of her novels.

The intriguing cultural fabric of the multicultural Indian cities, has been presented by Desai remarkably in her novels, *Clear Light of Day* being one of the closest to her heart. The multicultural facets of the multi-religious, multi-ethnic and culturally diverse old world charm of Delhi have been fused along with an enthralling tragedy. She manages to locate the concept and the ever-changing definition of multiculturalism in the Indian sub-continental context, which is like shifting sand, it is commendable as there cannot be one concrete definition of the complex concept of multiculturalism, because India is such a vast country and houses a number of ethnic groups. She tells stories about an India that a lot of people do not know about. Her instinctive style is a dream of imagination and idealism, about a perfect multicultural society as well as its multifaceted realities.

A truly multicultural society according to Desai, appears like India, where diverse languages are spoken by millions of people, belonging to different cultures, where generation after generation, various religions practice their faith and convictions beyond any force; they do not get along cordially all the time, but multicultural tolerance has worked in India unlike even the West, where there is much more prejudice and bigotry, (and even religious evangelical institutionalized fanaticism) compared to India. For instance the United States has a lot more radical dissonance where Christianity is concerned (specially the mid-west region). Unlike the West, India, has eradicated fear of a uni-cultural dominance and is definitely ahead of the West as far as tolerating and understanding other cultures is concerned

Clear Light of Day also marks a watershed in Desai's own writings and especially where women's identity issues are concerned. A division of a family against the backdrop of a divided nation is one of the major themes of this novel, and has been beautifully unfolded. Bim's own interpretation of her existence has been expressed as follows :

" . . . With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences – not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her." (182).

At the core of the novel is the self-realization that comes after intense sadness. Desai talks about the ridiculous division, of nations as well as hearts and the superficial lines, that divide people in an ever changing landscape. Desai offers hope, inspite of the belief that happiness is momentary; like sunshine on the mountains and peaks, but it is also enchanting and beautiful. And definitely the short lived glimpses of truth that it offers for a while is enough to impact and alter lives.

Clear Light of Day offers wisdom and reflects many contemporary themes, that are still relevant in this day and age, as they were many decades back. Desai has explored Indian multiculturalism intensely with fine craftsmanship. There are moments, when the reader is transported, to a whole new world of emotions, history and beauty, captivated by the cultural diversity and richness and an old world charm which is impossible to define in words.

The novel also marks the ultimate victory of tolerance, rule of law and universal acceptance. The vibrancy of Indian multiculturalism is unparalleled. The romantic notions of diplomatic officials, like Bakul who live abroad collide with real world experience holders like Bim, and the result is the meeting of two very different concepts of India as well as two different mindsets : both true and very special. Desai has tried to tell in Clear Light of Day that the failure of politics and proper governance in this country cannot be taken as the failure of multiculturalism.

India survives not because of its mostly corrupt and disgusting class of appalling rulers and civil servants (barring a few admirable exceptions) but because of the courage and unbroken spirit of some of them along with the seemingly ordinary people, with extraordinary spirits who are ready to take on any challenge that they come across. Desai has also stressed on the idea of

acceptance of an apparently ‘alien’ culture, language or music different from one’s own. The assimilation of diverse philosophies and cultures into any life enriches it and creates better human beings. The multiple poly-angular perspectives in this novel make it unique as a literary experience which is worth savoring.

The multicultural ethos that forms the foundation of *Clear Light of Day* also enlightens the readers, about many cultural and political concerns, that color the world, and influence lives in more ways than one. Desai has presented various facets of multiculturalism in her novels. Multiculturalism in India is portrayed with knowledge. Multiculturalism outside the Indian subcontinent is also presented brilliantly. Desai’s multicultural inheritance and legacy helped her in creating characters that are lifelike. True to her extraordinary reputation she creates moments that touch hearts. Her criss-cross cultural writings have left a formidable impression on her readers. She has portrayed multiculturalism without too much of an effort, because it exudes from her own identity, subconscious mind, experiences, intellect and most importantly, her multicultural legacy which helped her in evolving in to the person she is, and creating great works of art and an everlasting multicultural consciousness, through them.

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