
THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD

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Abstract: Individuals experience different forms of alienation such as “sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social, cultural or self estrangement brought on by the lack of fit between individual needs or expectations and the social order.” This alienation could be universal and common to people all over the world. The present paper makes an attempt to study the cultural alienation that is caused by the problems of rootlessness, a sense of not-belonging and the issues involved in the conflicting cultures with reference to Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird*.

Keywords: alienation, assimilation, consciousness, immigrant

Alienation caused by the change of location and experienced by an individual who feels alien on a foreign land is a common theme in post-world war II fiction. The theme of conflict between east and west and the resultant feeling of rootlessness and sense of not-belonging leading to an individual’s alienation has been dealt with even by many Indian novelists in English. For example, Kamala Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man*, Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner* and Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and Baumgartner’s *Bombay* belong to the same category.

The problems of estrangement and the consequent despair, frustration and loneliness of Anita Desai’s characters portrayed in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* are mainly governed by the change of place, which resulted change in social and cultural milieu. Displacement leads to a sense of rootlessness and a sense of non-belonging. This becomes an important factor in human life, because it leads an individual towards frustration and alienation. It also causes doubt, fear, anguish and frustration. The contrast between two value systems – those of the Indian and the British in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is so acute that foreigner’s first reaction is that of resistance. This is natural because it is a contrast between communal consciousness and individual consciousness. The social determinants of the two different cultures- the Indian and the British is so different that the characters are prohibited from an interactive reciprocity, free communication, mutual love and understanding which are essential to obtain satisfaction and fulfillment in human life. The encounter with another culture brings the process of individual development to a standstill. The foreigner experiences social and cultural alienation. Cultural alienation springs out of a sense of not-belonging in an alien land. Every culture has its own origin, tradition and customs. An individual born and brought up in a particular culture finds it difficult to adjust with the traditions and customs of an alien culture. Naturally, in such situations an individual does not feel at home. The adjustment demands assimilation and rejection on the part of the concerned men and women. This adjustment has to

be threefold – social, cultural and psychological. It creates fear, anguish and loneliness in their minds. The process of assimilation of a new cultural tradition and custom and an old identity affect an individual psyche. It puts a strain on individual mind. In some cases, it results in psychic aberrations and mental disability, the cause of which is rooted in the lack of social adjustment and a lack of belonging. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* one feels that Anita Desai has represented a different experience of the immigrant as she shows the experience of not one immigrant but of the Indian immigrant community in England. The special focus is laid on the problems of emotional and cultural alienation of her three major characters Adit, Dev and Sarah. Adit and Dev can be called as two different types of immigrants who have different feelings towards England. Adit enjoys very much to live in England and he thinks he is leading an English lifestyle. 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 the freedom a man has here economic freedom! Social freedom! (Desai 1991) He is of the opinion that India is known for its poverty and squalor. He also thinks that there is a slow development in his own country and

“makes use of every opportunity to breathe the Indian mentality as provincial and narrow.” (Dhawan 1993) Yet he asks his wife to cook Indian food, goes to Indian restaurants, listens to Indian music and has more Indian friends than English, which generally retains his Indian identity. In the second section “Departures” we find a drastic change in Adit’s feeling regarding English. After being insulted in his mother-in-law’s house, he is filled with depression. Adit no longer feels comfortable in England and for the first time feels that his position as a coloured immigrant is founded on illusions and false hopes. This feeling leads him for the quest of his true identity. This mood had begun to enter him, circulate with him and alter him during the drive out of London, through the Hampshire fields, had

accompanied him through the dismal dinner and the night when Sarah had shut him out, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and jigsaw puzzles. (Desai 1991) On the other hand the same section "Departures" also brings the transformation of other immigrant Dev, who has just arrived in England. Dev is very sensitive when compared to Adit in his relationships with the English. He is very much aware of his alienness and his inability to imbibe the English culture. Dev loves England, the feeling which he got after reading the literature but could not find what he read in books. Only when he accompanied Sarah and Adit to Hampshire, he enjoys the nature and rediscovers everything, the things that he has imagined while reading the poetry of Tennyson and Milton. This, he thought, swaying from side to side as drunkenly as a bumblebee, this was the England her poets had celebrated so well that he, a foreigner, found every little wildflower, every mood and aspect of it easily families. It was something he was visiting for the first time in his life, yet he had known it all along – in his reading, his day dreams – and now he found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirror – like reflection of reality. English Literature! English Poetry! He wanted to shout. (Desai 1991). In this way he finds the peace in England and this gives him strength and zeal to continue to live there. Sarah, wife of Adit is another character who suffers the most from alienation. By marrying an Indian, she has lowered her position among her countrymen and remains as an outsider in Indian community as she is English. She has to confront her identity as an English woman and her role as an Indian wife. And from this confront rises the crisis of her identity. The important characteristic feature of self-alienation is loss of identity. The person feels confused about his or her self-image and what social role or roles should be played in life. She feels trapped between these two selves and desires to get out of them. The discovery of the falseness of her situation is a positive state towards establishing a contact with her real self. She wishes to discard the masks, and be her true and sincere self. She does not

mind which identity she adopts – British or Indian – she wants it to be genuine, she wonders

... if, she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter a real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth. (Desai 1991) She practically and rationally thinks that she will have to sacrifice her cultural identity in order to adopt a new culture and undergo a completely new experience. Even though, it is painful to say good-bye to her "English self" there is a firm hope that she will "come to life"

In India. Alienation is not treated as mental disorder in Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology. It is just labeled as antisocial personality disorder, due to lack of interest in the rights and feelings of others. Alienation is the result of the loss of and quest for one's identity. The characters will be searching for their identity. It is really a dreadful feeling of being cut off from one's being and doubting one's identity.

Anita Desai goes deeper into the minds of her characters and reveals their mental situations and reactions in critical moments. Despite inconsistency, meaninglessness and absurdity in the world around, Anita Desai makes her characters respect "human will." Like Kierkegaard, she believes in an exercise of "human will" which is unique and specific of human being. She also believes in the supremacy of man's existence in a goalless universe. This is something remarkable and worth considering point in Anita Desai's personality. She does not merely present the problems such as rootlessness, a sense of not-belonging, adjustment with alien, social and cultural milieu, but also suggests some solutions to these problems. She suggests comprehensiveness of mind, rationalistic approach to life, mental willingness to make compromise and adjustment with an alien social and cultural milieu, love and compassion for others as solutions to solve the problems of emotional and cultural alienation. Anita Desai believes. "A woman novelist has something new to bring" (Choudhury 1995) and she has brought it by concentrating on the individual, his inner world of sensibility and his urges and conflicts.

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