
CULTURAL ISOLATION AS DEPICTED IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE -BYE BLACKBIRD.

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Abstract: Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, published in 1971, is a story mainly concerned with cross cultural human relationships. Dev and Adit and Sarah the British wife of Adit are the three major characters representing two sections of life. Adit, has an kinship to the western ways of life, especially, England, while Dev living in England, shows his revulsion towards the ways of European life and particularly of England. Sarah, Adit's English wife, even though Western and first world by birth, is portrayed by Desai as being weak, meek and docile. Adit, loves and longs to live in England but Dev loves India, while Sarah is caught in-between her natural self and her willing adoption of the foreign ways of life. The title of the novel refers to Adit's final farewell to Asian immigrants in England when he leaves England to India for good.

Since their background is rooted in the class society, which still exists in India and Hinduism in particular, there is an intense struggle; cultural conflict, isolation, immigration, exile etc. are common in twentieth century literature.

Anita Desai has vividly depicted the predicament of expats and their life in a foreign country.

Keywords: Culture, isolation, relationships, conflict, expats.

Introduction: Anita Desai was born Anita Mazumdar in Mussoorie, India to a German mother and a Bengali father. Her first language was German, but she also spoke Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and she learnt English in school, which later became her writing language of choice.

Anita Desai confesses that while she 'feels about India as an Indian,' she thinks about it 'as an outsider'.

Desai probably derived this point of view from her German mother, whom she aptly describes as carrying 'a European core in her which protested against certain Indian things, which always maintained its independence and its separateness.' Her oeuvre has explored the lives of outsiders within Indian society and, more recently, also within the West. Her fiction has covered themes such as women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationship and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism. The Eurocentric and social biases that are sometimes detected in her novels, therefore, may be more productively read as the result of the author's focus on uprooted and marginalized identities.

Though some critics detect a Western disdain for Indian social customs in her fiction, ultimately Desai's literary world is not sharply divided along Western and Eastern segments.

Anita Desai's third novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, was published in 1971. The novel concerns social reality in

the life of Indian immigrants especially in London. The novel explains a story of love in the background of immigration and presents the difficulties of adjustment there and of those who return to the motherland, often complicated by interracial marriages. Dev arrives in England for higher studies, stays with his brother Adit and his English wife, Sarah.

Desai has beautifully depicted the problems faced globally by immigrants as well as the troubles, which are caused by a cross-cultural or inter-racial marriage. Sarah, his English wife, finds by hints and suggestions that she is not liked by her own countrymen for having married an Indian. Adit and Sarah love each other even though their language and culture continue to differ. Sarah cooks Indian curry without developing a taste for it while Adit has none for some British items of food.

Sarah, on the other hand, does not like Indian music nor can she understand and appreciate Indian jokes and conversations, which Adit enjoys a great deal. Initially, Dev is a misfit in England, he finds that he is discriminated everywhere; he can't get accustomed to the silence and emptiness of the city. Towards the end of the novel, things entirely change. Adit begins to be nostalgic for India and gradually gets disenchanted, with England. The outbreak of India-Pakistan war becomes a turning point in his life and he decides to return to India, while Dev who had difficulty in adjusting in England initially, begins to

settle down there for his higher education; where the writer seems to show that after a while, he shows a great deal of flexibility and adaptability.

Dev stays on there. In the novel, Anita Desai is concerned with the problem caused by racial relations and observes: *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is the only book I've written that is truly about the objective world, objectively observed characters - hence the lightness of it.

The *Statesman*, a leading newspaper, puts: "Anita Desai touches on a very real problem, a facet of 'East is east and West is west' which has been hitherto little explored in novel form." A widely praised novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is also regarded as Anita Desai's disguised autobiography. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), is a powerful novel presenting the predicament of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence.

Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is about migrant Indians in the England of 1960s. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah who is presented in the novel as a sensitive and reserved person. Dev is a newly arrived immigrant from India. As Meenakshi Mukherjee comments: The most successful characterisation in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, is not that of an Indian, but of an English woman who has cut herself off from the mainstream of English life by marrying an immigrant Indian. Sarah Sen is a typical Anita Desai's character - complex, supersensitive and well-informed, who can have a family relationship.

The title of the novel is directly connected to the theme and signifies that London has said good-bye to one blackbird (Adit), but has welcomed his brother Dev. In fact, Adit had adapted himself well in the country of his adoption. He has allayed his sense of loneliness by being nonchalant to its various causes. On the other hand, Dev, early on, was critical of Adit's attitude and gets agitated and angry when someone whispers the word "wog" behind his back. Dev has more reasons to be lonely and when he goes to the big city he feels depressed and also isolated, which is portrayed poignantly by Desai.

Anita Desai lays stress on the art of characterization; her characters are neither common and ordinary nor are their problems related to food or lifestyle. Dev's solitude eventually stops haunting him, as he gets a little more accustomed, to the weather, people, isolation and he decides to stay in England.

Meanwhile, Adit suffers from an identity crisis. He starts longing for the land and the people he has left behind; begins to miss the conversations with his folks and thus decides to return to India with Sarah.

Bye-Bye, Blackbird presents "a heroic, although unsuccessful, effort to show the whole gamut of Indian immigrants in England, of course this has been a setting, which cannot be imagined today, as there are a lot of wealthy Indians, who own huge mansions and properties in London. In fact, they are welcomed with open arms, as a gold mine and it is the Indian community, which has been instrumental in stimulating the construction boom, in a rather tepid economy, with the global crisis.

The migratory blackbird, is drawn to and repelled by the white England as its new habitat. Anita Desai captures this conflict in fictional terms through Dev. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, sarcasm can be seen among both the Indian and English characters. The Indians show it in their n their jeers, jokes, irony, giggles, taunts, with which they hit at each other's accents, languages, customs, religions, myths, and intellectual and social violence in the form of jeers and derisions of her countrymen for having married an Indian is also seen and experienced by Sarah, as it was unimaginable then, for an Indian to marry an Englishman or woman.

Anita Desai uses witty and satirical language which keeps reader's mood light. Just description of characters and small incidences enhance characterization but Anita Desai uses her words perfectly to convey exactly what she feels. She uses words commonly used, nothing flashy, to keep the reader engrossed in her characters, makes one turn page after page.

The protagonist of the novel, Sarah stands between the poles -India and England. She is weak but possess a steady voice, as she becomes a victim of cultural and social isolation, yet signifying the twentieth century man's attempt to forget a historical situation, which he did nothing to create and could do little to alter. This novel portrays Indians and Englishmen in England with their problems, going back to the British Raj in colonial India.

Sarah loves Adit, but she hides her relationship from her own English people. Here we find that Sarah, even though born and raised in an advanced country, is still weak and submissive. She expresses her love openly for Adit, later.

The setting of this novel is in London. The city has a strong impact on sensibilities of the main characters Dev, Adit and Sarah. Sarah lives a life of a cultural exile in her own country. She feels displaced in England by marrying an Indian in the sense she is victim of values, system i.e. culture. Sarah faces the problem of aloneness. Married to an Indian she tries her best to adjust the loose of identity in her own society. When people discuss about India, she deliberately avoids the discussion. She is ruffled, by the anguish of having to hide her true identity; the following paragraph, says it clearly, where Desai, seems to take off on her attitude to the English towards Indians, then as she explains how Sarah, suffers a great deal on account of the crisis of identity: if Sarah had any existence at all and then she wandered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step out of the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real weather English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only sincerity, its truth On the occasion of their wedding anniversary when Adit asked Sarah to wear a saree and a golden necklace referring to heavy change of golden mangoes sent by his mother as a wedding present and she contradicts his view by comparing herself to a Christmas tree. Adit gets upset and says: You feel like a Christmas tree! I suppose all Indian women look like Christmas trees to you—or perhaps liker clowns, because they wear sarees and jewellery you--you—English people and your xenophobia! You'll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your, boring ways; anything else also clownish to you, laughable?

The matter becomes still worse when Adit is unable to apprehend the real reason of her anguish and loneliness; this is probably because of a lack of understanding of both culture as well as the behavior of the English women, which is in stark contrast to that of a traditional Indian woman.

As Desai herself admits, her novels are not populated by heroic characters, whether male or female, at least in the traditional sense. Her protagonists are marked by a certain level passivity, as has also been depicted by her portrayal of Sarah, in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*; for which she has been criticized, by many as being swept away by historical and social forces rather than being able to face and control them. Yet, Desai claims that 'my characters who appear like losers, victims show a kind of heroism, of survival. I think if you can come through the experience of life with the heart

and mind intact, without compromising yourself; that to me is a heroic act that needs to be celebrated.

Adit and Sarah have totally different cultural backgrounds. Adit even though living in a foreign country, is still having the typically dominant Indian male attitude and therefore has a command and control tone in the novel, which is much against what Sarah has seen in her country and culture.. She has a longing to keep pets but her love for pets is condemned by her husband Adit, who hates her pet cat so much and throws abuses at it, when she feels really suppressed and angry at herself for losing her own self, not in India but even in her own country. Even though Sarah belongs to the advanced West, she is, basically a woman easily subject to manipulation and control; a Fact which she resents later as realization dawns on her.

She boldly accepts the consequences of her choice without any regret or remorse, does her domestic as well as official duties with great patience and perseverance.

Conclusions and opinions.

The title signifies that London has said good-bye to one blackbird (Indian, Adit), but Dev, has adapted well. Earlier Adit had adjusted himself in the country of his adoption well, but Dev was very critical of him. How time does change a person's ways, thoughts, approach to life and living!

In today's context, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, will not be significant, as we see millions of expats from around the world have embraced well and adapted themselves well in a foreign country. It is never easy, but having lived the life of an expat in Thailand, for almost two decades, facing cultural isolation discrimination for being an Indian, still makes me see this country as great example of globalization, with a huge expat population and plenty of cross-cultural marriages, thanks to globalisation.

To conclude, I disagree with Anita Desai, yes, it was true fifty years back, but today, we see a plethora of cross-cultural marriages. There would be problems, mostly related to food, language and culture; but then "Love is Blind". Flexibility and adaptability are the keys to overcome cross-cultural problems when you are in a foreign country. Tolerance, is needed too, as we see marriages are no longer institutions; they are more temporary arrangements, as we see a plethora of divorces today, even in same language and culture marriages today, as there is less tolerance and more

independence; the good thing is that Sarah, was good fifty years back!
willing to pull the marriage along, but then it was a

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