

Cultural Mongrelization & Disorientation in Anita Desai's Bye-Bye Blackbird: A Review.

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Abstract

The euphoria of an imminent bright future, dollar crazy time we live in, an urge for affluence and better life, often lands modern man at a fix where he/she repents for the eroded cultural narrow lanes. The upbringing and the psychic attachment built on well within oneself on the anvil earlier times spent, in an atmosphere of nativity and sanguine flavors, appear hard to be erased from one's mind, despite all the potential intervention of the world of economy and material gains. A step outside the framework of one's own culture and tradition, faith, belief and practices either by choice or by force results in a dual pull of competing cultures for influence, where the character at the centre of the crisis stay put between choices of to be and not to be, while negotiating an acceptable identity. This process of negotiation often leads to nostalgia, ennui, isolation and suffering. An willingness to get assimilated to the alien culture, efforts and austere moves to get duly oriented into the common fold and the subsequent inability to adapt and be acceptable catapults him/her to look for refuge in one's own culture as a last resort but in the process fails to do either because of prolonged distance adding to the woes to roam in a third space between orientation and disorientation.

Key words: Disorientation, culture, Diaspora, Mongrelization, Nostalgia, Identity

Diaspora as an inevitable condition is not selective rather applicable to one and all commonly all over the world, resulting in, acute experiences, nostalgia and cultural dual pulls. This has been the experience of the Jews in Europe, the Westernized Indian experience in India or the Indians who emigrate to Europe or America, equally experience the same as the Africans are subjects to, all over the world. An Indian longs for the company of another Indian of similar stature to find the familiar connect while staying in India, because of their exposure to the mongrelized cultural aperture. Men or women find themselves in a fix, and often struggle between multiple competing forces of, disorientation, re-orientation, nostalgia and cultural divide that run parallel to each other. The loss of the past is painful so also the hyphenated identity as Diaspora, where nostalgia and cultural divide add to the woes. A sorrowful longing for the conditions of the past and a regretful or wistful memory of earlier times contribute to the feelings of nostalgia as a substitute to assuage the ruffled feathers,

and for gratification, although it carries a stigma along with it in its excess, In this context, it is worthwhile to mention the definition as presented in *Everyman's Encyclopedia*:

“Nostalgia is a return home, or homesickness. It is sometimes an early phase of melancholia, but is usually a psychic manifestation merely. It varies in intensity from a sentimental inclination to think fondly of a homeland to an uncontrollable desire to return and a settled dislike of one's present surroundings.....The cause of the condition is undoubtedly the realization of the change of circumstances and the absence of familiar people and impressions...”[781]

The feelings of nostalgia as a result of cultural uprooting is a common phenomenon, which can be overcome, provided the process of adjustment and accommodation to new conditions are adaptive, sans any bias or suspicion, and the host culture is receptive apart from the compelling factor that one doesn't sacrifice one's distinct identity. A situation where one need not have to abandon his/her familiar sphere of memory that he/she carries along.

This memory we call, is a feeling of belongingness that we carry close to our breast and hold with respect and pride as a mark of distinction. This is precisely the case of three principal characters in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* Dev, Adit and Sarah. We find Dev in good humour and strike a healthy relationship with Emma, and thereby begin to take roots in England and were somewhat on even keel to shake off his loneliness. England changes Dev's earlier Anglophobia into an Anglophile, he too develops an enthusiastic daze for the arts and livings of the people. On the other hand Sarah makes a reasonably difficult decision to leave the world of the known for the unknown; While Adit becomes unhappy and is nostalgic about his childhood memories and longs intensely for his aboriginal and endemic country India. Dev hated the ways of the English life and living earlier, now he is a man of changed perception and has begun to love England and desires to seek his future existence there. These crisscross of attitudinal variations hobnobbing and oscillation between choices airs the idea of disjoin and poor cultural mongrelization or in-betweenness.

Dev Reaches England, only for pursuing his education. In the process he observes the basic distinction of social and educational characters between the east and the west. Dev is eager to be an England returned teacher at the same time shows his abomination and loathes the social system of England. As we notice that extreme feelings like: displacement, disorientation, resettlement, reorientation, nostalgia and cultural divide, denials and depravity, exploitation coupled with dehumanization have been the common denominators in the lives of Dev and Adit in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. To begin with Dev it becomes evident that he has not been able to accept the cultural divide as he turns furious at British manners and customs at every turn of events. In the opinion of Ruth Praver Jhabvala:

“A point is reached where one must escape and if one can’t do so physically, then some other way must be found. And I think it is not only Europeans but Indians too who feel themselves compelled to seek refuge from their often unbearable environment. Here perhaps less than anywhere else is it possible to believe that this world, this life, is all there is for us, and the temptation to write it off and substitute something more satisfying becomes overwhelming.”
 [855]

This is cryptically distilled by Anita Desai in the opening paragraph of the fiction, *Bye-Bye-Blackbird* thus: Dev’s reaction at the watch that runs asynchronous to the local time makes it interesting to believe the symbolic asymmetry and dislocation between different time zones as well as cultural differences. “If it had died in the night of an inability to acclimatize itself”[5]. Dev wishes to get admitted in the London School of Economics as early as possible but Adit points out that it’s not that easy to get into London School of Economics, and that Dev cannot bribe his way up for it too. In the meantime Sarah joins them and while sharing a cup of tea along inquires about ‘Bruce’, the cat. Dev in a sense mocks at her and says that- ‘Bruce has jumped through the window and is gone.’ These conversations between them captures the tastes of British people for pets, on the contrary any Indian mind is not usually adaptive to the idea of animals inside their houses, and is usually not comfortable with.

Dev realizes that life in London is assiduously disturbing and dissimilar to the life in the rest, however disagreeable and unpleasant. Adit though from the beginning develops attachment to the western way of life, especially to England; but in due course shows repulsion towards the way of European life and particularly that of England. Anita Desai narrates typical psychological turmoil of Dev as he finds him as an alien to the environment he was in, a stranger to one and all the happenings around. Psychological development of character has always remained as the basic crux of plot development which dominates almost all the works of Desai which makes her characters stand apart in the crowd. Ambitious sentence construction teamed with the unconventional style that comes quite naturally in her writings. Anita Desai as novelist very well harmonizes reality with fantasy around to face the questions with an upright shoulder. Desai thus brings the elements of disorientation through narratives of one of the events in these words:

“But there (in London) surrounded by the easy informal Sunday people, smiling to themselves at the thought of their Sunday roast and amiably talking of horses and dogs, and the Labor Government, he found easy to lose his self consciousness, to think only of what lay outside and around him, ...”[12].

As an outsider in England, Dev realizes the contrastive features of India and Britain at every step. For example, the Mall of a Himalayan hill station stands in sharp contrast to the Mall in the High

Streets of London suburbs. Dev feels intimidation at the unsavory cry of the British boy when he along with Sarah, and Adit were in wait for the bus in a cluster. The boy's insulting language only reflects the racial prejudice of the British towards Indians [*Blackbirds*]. "Wog!" said a damson-checked boy in a brass-buttoned blazer to him, only under his breath but, just before he leapt aboard the bus, 'Wog!' he said again quite loudly...." [14]. Anita Desai's novel 'Bye-Bye Blackbird' captures the confusions and conflicts of another set of alienated persons. Ace critic R.S. Sharma says: "It has rightly been maintained that the tension between the locals and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world." [4]

Dev's existence in England and its artificialities are quietly recorded by the novelist with minute accuracy and detachment. Dev's longing for a life of variety and multiplicity remains unfulfilled in the new atmosphere where "everyone is a stranger and lives in a hiding." It is here in these strange societies people "live silently and invisibly," the situation which makes him feel the immediacy of being nostalgic about India – the land of familiar faces, sounds and smells. Dev is particularly unhappy with the treatment accorded to immigrants in England. They are openly insulted, so much so that they are not allowed to use a lavatory meant for the English: the London docks have three kinds of lavatories-Ladies, Gents and Asiatics. He gives vent to his feelings candidly when he tells Adit:

"I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted. The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London make him uneasy. The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shutof guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues remains incomprehensible to him." [17]

Desai further captures the cultural differences between India and Britain, and how these differences are smeared with racial prejudice: "...with soulful, romantic eyes the blond girls in their short, tight skirts stomp and twist and scribble about the crowded floor, ..., "My religion forbids me to drink, or smoke, or touch a woman. But here in this country, what am I to do?"... [22].

Sarah is identified with everything Indian much to her discomfort. Her friends foresee the day when she will leave England permanently with Adit to India. The point that is highlighted here is that because Sarah has married an Indian [Adit], she is disowned by the other British. This is indicative of the racial mindset nourished by the British against the Asiatic, a sort of pernicious prejudice, as is evident in the narrations by Desai:

“Course you're the adventurous one really. Still waters run deep, eh? You'll desert all on a horrid, foggy day and make off for sunny India, I know”. Sarah put down the tea pot and said, as quietly as she could, “I don't know. Why do you say that?” “Why? Well your husband isn't going to stay here forever, is he?” Julia shouted aggressively...” [34].

The heroine of the novel, Sarah stands between the poles –India and England. Although weak, yet is found to be maintaining a steady voice, despite being a victim of psychic and social alienation, signifying the twentieth century man’s attempt to forget a historical situation, which he did nothing to create and could do little to alter. In a subtle fashion Anita Desai traces the cultural divide through a taste for dress modes and distaste for particular kinds of food thus: “Oh no”, cried Sarah in dismay. She dreaded Indian sweets. She dreaded meeting young Ms. Singh dressed in pink or parrot green ‘salwar kameez’ and always, even in the coldest weather had two half moons or perspiration into this cat-quiet kitchen with a jingle of glass bangles, bearing a plate of rich, silvery sweets, made Sarah shrinks with dread...[41].

It is disturbing to notice that in spite of his Bachelor's Degree from an Indian University Dev is not able to further his studies or get even a menial job. Adit tells Dev that in England one has to learn to adjust to the changing circumstances. Otherwise, the Indian will find himself in dire straits. What Adit ignores and downplays here are- self-respect, honour and dignity. But one thing he truthfully underscores is that- the education in India does not make the individual suit the job requirements, and says: “The truth is we get it neat... We haven't studied for any profession, we want to gate crash into one. We haven't the time, money or patience to acquire one in a school, we want to grab and learn in a week what others take three years to master– executive temperaments linked with worthless qualifications.” [102].

Dev with a deep sense of remorse and nostalgia begins to count contrasts between India and England. He came to England with a spirit of adventure only to be disillusioned and feel helpless in the process for not being able to get a Job, despite efforts. These get highlighted in the following lines: “He was slowly, regretfully letting drop and melt away his dreams of adventure, seeing now quite clearly that he had left the true land of adventure, of the unexpected, the spontaneous, the wild and weird, for a very enclosed part of the world, a pigeon court in which it was necessary to find an empty and warm niche before one was pushed over the ledge into the sea that lapped the island's stony shore. [104].

What Dev disliked most was the immigrant's attitude of compromise on the subjects of self-respect. In one of his remarks to Adit he says: “The trouble with you immigrants is that you go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you wouldn't dream of doing it. You might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. Over here all you do is shut up and look sat upon... [27]. This

shows the deep sense of frustration and the psychological turmoil he is in and the feeling of suffocated existence in an atmosphere of intimidation and indignity.

Anita Desai draws reader's attention on certain subtle elements of religion which plays a potential role in shaping the common thinking and building perceptions. In clear terms she highlights the fundamental difference between the oriental and occidental and the grey areas of cultural clash when one is denied his or her rightful claims and privileges simply because one is not a catholic or by birth a Hindu. Which is prominently expressed in this conversation when Dev finds himself in the receiving end of being an outcast because of his religious beliefs: "Ahh!" beamed the little man, growing more and more jovial as Dev shrank and shriveled.

"...Mission College eh?, does that mean you are a Catholic?" "No", said Dev, deciding to leave, "Hindu". "Oh dear, oh dear", lamented the little man. "Not Catholic? Not even Christian?"... I am sorry. Dear me, I ought to have mentioned it at once, oughtn't I? We simply must have a Catholic, or at least a High Church man. It's public relations, you see? It wouldn't do, no. I'm afraid it wouldn't do to have a Hindu gentleman in this job.... [108].

On his arrival in England, Dev expresses his feelings anguish and utter disgust, to Adit and Sarah, at the Western ways of living, which are beyond any sensible comprehension and almost strange to him. Nothing interests him. He hates everything – English food and food habits, the love of the English for pets, English dress modes, and in fine English conservation traditions, and customs. Ironically, Adit hates everything that is of India and Indian. He is in great love with everything English. He pours out his feelings of disgust at the thoughts that stream across his mid concerning India. Sarah and Dev listen to his long diatribe against India, which is quoted in extensively; this shows the mind of the Indian who is ashamed to call himself an India and one who suffers from Anglo-Phobia, Adit says:

"One would travel from Bombay to Calcutta and from Kashmir to Cap Comorin and not find two consecutive miles as rich and even as all the land here". [127]

"There would be miles and miles of desert instead. There would be trees without fruit or even leaves. The cattle would be starved, their skeletons lying around the rocks. Values wheeling in the sky And sun, sun, sun"... [127]

"There is famine or flood; there is drought or epidemic, always. Here, the rain falls so softly and evenly, never too much, never too short. The sun is mild. The earth is fertile. The rivers are full. The birds are plump. The beasts are fat; everything so wealthy, so luxuriant – so fortunate" [129].

Adit soon loses his interest in everything that is English disappears with the outbreak of the Indo-Pakistan riots, and the partition engineered by the British to keep the sub-continent divided always. He turns furious against England for their Pro-Pakistan attitudes. The text reads thus: “Always partisan, always prejudiced. These British! They always sided with the Muslims, now it's out in the open- you can see it quite clearly” [183]. This passage clearly captures the Indian ethnic emotions and it is understandable. It is a natural connection and inclination toward the nation, the very sense of Indianness that remains alive amongst the Indians wherever they are, they are not to give up their separate Indian identity, but embrace the mainstream culture of the place where they have domiciled.

Adit expresses his nostalgia thus: The ferocity of his growing nostalgia almost shook him to the core that was silenced for so long, and he began to tell Sarah of this nostalgia had become an illness, an ache. She listened intently, gravely, his tales of “... buffaloes in the yard, of the pigeons that were kept on the rooftop, of the puja season in Calcutta when prayers were conducted in the house every evening and visits were made from one private to community altar to the other, everyone dressed in the newest clothes and fed on the richest of sweets...” [184].

Anita Desai projects Adit and Dev as the wandering characters experiencing, disorientation, and reorientation as well as nostalgia and suffering from racial or class prejudice along with the acute experiences of and sharp cultural divide. Desai represents therefore “a set of new attitudes and themes. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novel. Desai in one of the interviews with Yashodhara Dalmia, reveals that : “ I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, and it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No,” who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are, and what it costs to meet them.”[1979:13]

Anita Desai in a very brilliant way has brought to focus the elements of exile and self-alienation of three characters in *Bye-Bye Black Bird*. The uprooted individuals i.e.: Adit, Dev and Sarah have commonly been subjects to nagging identity crises and suffer from exile, cultural and social alienation. They do take much strain and put in sincere efforts to orient and reorient resulting in falling apart in the process. Above all amid the nightmarish prejudices, racial attacks and intimidation throughout the novel they miserably remain forever as defaced, disjointed and as a mongrelized creature sans self-respect or dignity in a wonderland of unidentified space.

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