

Impasse of Alienation in Selected Novel of Anita Desai: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to spatio-temporal dimensions of diasporic subjectivity by making use of Foucauldian heterotopia, heterochrony, power and self-technologies. This study analyses diasporic subjectification in 'Bye-Bye Blackbird' by Anita Desai. In consideration of the roots of diaspora, heterotopic diaspora space, subjectivity, self and power technologies are put into practice in the analysis of this novel. Anita Desai's 'Bye-Bye Blackbird' is from different generation of writer whose parent has root in India, and his either immigrated to or been brought up in Britain. The creative work select for this paper is representation of the generation concern of the south Asian Diaspora in Britain. This novel uncover authentic apprehension about diasporic subjectification, and quests for individuality in addition to depicting the major issues in the real lives of south Indian Diasporians. The work examines in this paper include characters from different generations whose understanding of homeland, trauma of dislocation, perception of the major culture, sense of belonging, cross-cultural experience and assimilation into western metropolitan centre are different. In 'Bye-Bye Blackbird', the first generation diasporian identity crisis, causes by displacement and separation from their homeland and discussed in relation to Adit and Dev.

Keywords: Spatio-temporal, heterotopias, dislocation, crisis, separation

Introduction

The post-independence period of South Asian writing in English presents a consistent picture of colonial and post-colonial encounters with a new variety of challenges and problems. During the post-independence era, like all the countries that have had ‘the misfortune of being colonized’, South Asian countries “have to experience the traumatic searing of the self’. Three centuries of British rule and the impact of Western culture on these countries have changed the conventional social and cultural value systems of these Commonwealth countries. When Britain opened its doors to the people of the ex-colonial lands, many subcontinental immigrants moved to Britain to start a new life there. The complexities of border crossing prevalent in the life of the early diasporians, and the cultural displacement of these people have had impacts on the consciousness of a number of diaspora writers from South Asia. Thus, the diasporic novels of the early decades, while highlighting realities of the colonial past, deal also with the present harshness of being an immigrant in an alien milieu.

Anita Desai is one of the early post-independence novelist of South Asian Diaspora who adds a new dimension to immigrant fiction by shifting the focus from the outer to the inner part of existence, and to the mental and spiritual developments of the characters in relation to racism, rootlessness, alienation and nostalgia for their homeland. In her novels, a modern psychological vein runs through the themes of alienation, relationships between men and women, and the East and West encounter, including intimate themes such as those of marriage and woman's sensibility. The experience of diaspora is both physical and psychological since “cultural roots go deep into the consciousness and are difficult to break or get exchanges do add a certain rootlessness and lack of authenticity” . Anita Desai “is the most sensitive to the spirit of the place and the way it affects the individual sensibility, morally and spiritually” (Sharma 31).

Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird (BB)* is one of her major works, and it dwells upon the lives of the coloured immigrants from India the Madrasi, the Bengali, and the Punjabi who settle in England and where they are treated as “black birds”. Although the novel is

written in the post-independence era, the residue of colonial history and imperial power continues to shape both the psyches and the spatial practices of its characters. Of all her novels, as Desai uttered in one of her interviews, *BB* is most intimately “rooted in experience and least literary in derivation” and it “is the closets of all her books to actuality practically everything in it is drawn directly from her experience of living with Indian immigrants in London” . By examining the human relationship bedeviled by cultural encounters, Desai’s *BB* depicts the time of cultural and racist discrimination against South Asians during and after the mass migration to England. *BB* reveals both realistically and psychologically the complexities of the lives of diasporians together with the “social, cultural and racial displacement which is inherent in the situation/condition of Indian immigrants in England”. The novel, at the same time, delineates the nature of the diasporic experience with the sense of alienation. The major themes, the love and hate relationship of the characters with their adopted land and their frustrations, are spiced with some other themes such as cross-cultural contacts, cultural prejudices, adjustment, rejection, hopes, fears, otherness and longings. *BB*, while diving deep in the unconscious psyche of the expatriates, reveals the diasporians' nausea, nostalgia and sense of belonging to their native land. Desai herself refers to the novel as a circular journey of a soul searching for a perfect life” in which “all the immigrants are prone to a schizophrenia and predicament to live or not to live in England”.

As the title of the novel suggests, the people of Asian countries are regarded as blackbirds in the land of the white society. The identity crises of the characters, caused by displacement and separation from their homeland and their rejection in the hostland, are the basic reality of the crisis heterotopias in the *BB*. Especially the different phases that the diasporic characters undergo involve tensions between ‘the white locale and the immigrant blackbird’, home and rootedlessness, love and hate for the new land as well as the belonging and non- belonging that the immigrants experience in “an alien yet familiar world” (Sharma 31).

Spaces of New Technologies

The three-section structure of the novel, “Arrival”, “Discovery and Recognition”, and “Departure”, reveals different cross-cultural and psychological phases that the characters go through during their subjectification. In *BB* the two immigrants Dev and Adit suffer from cultural

alienation and racial prejudice. Adit's wife, English Sarah, also joins them and faces the problems of alienation, adjustment and loneliness in her own white society. *BB* opens with a poetic introduction announcing Dev's "arrival" in England, progresses through both Dev's (Bengali student) and Adit's (Bengali Babu) "discovery and recognition" of the true nature of their immigrant existence in a new space, their experience of being the other, and ends with Dev's decision to stay in London, and Adit's and Sarah's "departure" for India. Structurally, the novel reveals the fragmented identity formation of the immigrant blackbirds Dev and Adit who are trapped in an alien space, and also of Sarah, who tries to cope with the problem of adjustment and alienation as well.

In the "Arrival" part, the portrayal of Dev is an example proving the impact of British legacy which shows itself in both ironical and pathetic ways in the form of education, language and architecture. In his subjectification, from being a Macaulay's Minuteman to being a postcolonial subject, Dev confronts the taken for granted binary of colonizer and colonized all the time. Searching for an English education in the former colonial centre, Dev constantly dislocates and relocates himself both physically and symbolically. As Dev underlines in the novel, a number of people in India "have been brought up in a language and literature completely alien" and for these people there is no way out of being called "Macaulay's bastards" (*BB* 122).

Since the novel is about Indian immigrants living in England and their interaction with or reaction against their environment, England, as the major heterotopias plays a crucial role in the subjectification of these characters. This heterotopic space is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). Heterotopic sites are always in the process of being made, so these spaces have the capacity to create themselves as new kinds of places.

Whenever Dev feels unsatisfied with the realities of London, "a tumult inside him, a growing bewilderment, a kind of schizophrenia wakes him in the middle of the night and shows him day by day, driving him along on endless tramps in all weathers while he wonders whether he should stay or go back" (86); he re-covers his racial and cultural identity through images of his past: his native land and his attachment to the memories of the past. In Dev's case, due to the restlessness of the present, a feeling of loss passing through various shades of nostalgia

culminates in schizophrenia.

In her revelation of human psyche, Desai fuses clock time with psychological time, and thus, her characters' subjectification is heterochronic. For the characters in the novel 'the process of memory has therefore drawn the resistant outside world into subjectivity, Dev's back and forth movement in space is also heterochronic. Dev revives his past in the present and recovers his identity in the present through his memories. When the harsh realities of his new environment torture Dev emotionally, he tries to make a connection with his homeland through his memories. Like a child who finds comfort in his mother, mother India and its memories soothe Dev. When he loses this contact, he feels totally alienated and entrapped. Readers can get a glimpse of Dev's cultural and emotional alienation in his highly symbolic hellish experience of the London tube scene.

Dev's psychological alienation results in questioning his existence in England. At every turn Dev finds himself engulfed in the process of self-consciousness thinking that "I would not live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted" (BB 17). In each identity crisis, Dev compares the past with the present and tries to comfort himself with the idea of "return". However, there is no stable place of origin to return to for Dev. The place that Dev has left has also changed and is not the same as he remembers it to be. The original India is no longer there. He creates an other India through his imagination and recollections of it. Regardless of his acquisition of a heterotopia, Dev tries to recollect the fixed location of his past home, in remembrance of the love he once experienced there.

In the first section of the novel, Dev's sense of belonging to India is in line with Anderson's "imagined community" (BB 6). Dev, like his friend Adit, feels himself as a part of a shared nationality which is created through an act of imagination. This heterotopic site is an attempt to "freeze the fleeting time" or to revive a "celebration" (Foucault 26). The small group in the novel heightens sociability, transparency, and self-discovery allowing diasporians to form a unique social space of acceptance and community, and it further heightens the members' awareness of the agency they possess in managing and creating their own intimate spaces, where they can openly develop individually.

In this part of the novel, the subjectification of Adit, the other blackbird of the novel, is

different from the one that Dev goes through. What disillusion Dev seems quite ordinary for Adit. Since the representation and meaning of images and signs associated with spaces are in a flux, it enables a rethinking of certain spaces, which Adit employs to his advantage. Dev grows increasingly angry with Adit's and his friends' docile behaviour, and shouts at them "you would sell your soul, and your passport too, for a glimpse, at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home" (BB 21).

Adit has an English wife who cooks Indian food for him and respects his Indian origins. The heterotopic home space of Adit and Sarah, a home in the margins where different cultural traits meet and form alternative spatial and temporal arrangements, connects the space of the displaced with the space of temporary safety zone, and is a kind of crisis heterotopia like a refuge in a foreign space. In this home space both Adit and Sarah make personal arrangements. While Sarah does not care for the food that should be protected from the cat Adit is irritated by eating such unclean food. For Sarah, Bengali music is like a dissonance to her ear, but Adit likes listening to it all the time. In the small diasporic community all the jokes, beliefs, customs, and manners are alien to Sarah. She does "not hear their laughter or understand their language"; Nevertheless, Adit and Sarah lead a harmonious life in a third space they produce. This heterotopic space which encompasses various real and unreal borders between Indian and English cultures and which is a critique of these two cultures offers an other space for both Adit and Sarah. The space created by Adit and Sarah is not fixed and is most unpredictable when they become socially intimate. For instance, when Sarah and Adit pay a visit to the Millers Sarah realises the racist implications of the family and tries to protect Adit with her English prudence. The most intimate moments include vulnerability, exposure, and physical affection, all resulting in a new kind of experience and self.

Although the novel revolves around the diasporic Adit and Dev and their estrangements in times and spaces, the predicament of rootlessness is best illustrated in Sarah. At school she creates a heterotopia for herself and stays away from all references to India. Her colleagues and a group of school children never miss any chance of teasing her. Sarah, like Dev and Adit, experiences "an unsettling wave of that intermittent schizophrenia that Adit said was a result of her having been an Indian in a past incarnation and that sometimes allowed her to feel herself

into an Indian mood while still able to observe herself undergoing this curious transformation with her normal Saxon detachment” (*BB* 137).

De-Centered Subjectivities

In the “Discovery and Recognition” part of the novel, characters depart from their initial self-positions. The characters of heterotopic subjectification shifts from the present to the past or to the future involving spatial associations. In this part of the novel, the natural and cultural space of rural England leads Dev, Adit and Sarah to a range of convulsive quests for new self-technologies. This physical journey turns into a metaphoric and symbolic journey for the major characters marking a turning point for them and for the course of the novel. The house of the Roscommon- Jameses in Hampshire turns into a crisis heterotopia having “ the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 24). This heterotopic space “seemed a strange, an incredible twist of fortune that had brought this band of Indians, in their heavy overcoats, on a summer's day to a drawing room so totally, so irrevocably English and conservative and country house” (*BB* 129).

The visit to her parents also deepens the disharmony prevailing in Sarah. She is the product of a happy, traditional English family with its set habits, traditions and principles. She is the only daughter of a middle class English family and is shaped by and sensitive to English prudence; as much, her marriage does not measure up to the expectations of her traditional English family. Besides her mother's explicit bitterness, her father displays a conspicuous dislike towards Adit and his Asian friends. In this part of the novel, it is more obvious that Sarah is happy neither with her countrymen nor with Adit's friends. All these dualities cause a disintegration in Sarah, and she tries to withdraw from her social roles to re- discover her individuality.

Conclusion

To conclude, a deeper sense of consciousness about the inferiority of the coloured people' and the blaming of the immigrants for spreading dirt shaped the attitudes of the inhabitants of the host country. Thus, racial conflicts and humiliation were the outcomes that the diasporians of this time had to face in England. The contesting sites of the two opposing cultures, social

systems, and traditions construct and deconstruct boundaries of identity in such spaces. Then self-awareness creates heterotopic spaces where critical thinking over power is available. Adit, Dev and Sarah strive hard to find the means to survive through creating such marginal spaces. In the characters' identity formation a multitude of power relations operating on the heterotopic subjectification decentre the fixed understanding of the self. England and India as the major heterotopias offer new orderings pointing to new self-possibilities. In the case of Dev, Adit and Sarah, all the conflicting forces are in perfect harmony with the nature of the characters' alienation. The novel delineates how characters handle their sense of displacement and otherness making several amendments to integrate themselves into their new habitat, but realise the impossibility of total assimilation.

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