

East-West Encounter with Special Reference to Anita Deasi's Novel, Bye-Bye Blackbird

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the tortuous emotion of individuals who face abnormal situations living in alien lands. Concerned mainly with the socio-political themes, the novel shows how the native Indians have miserably failed to adjust the heat and dust of the host cultures and been caught in the crisis of contemporary transnational migration. This apart, this article also throws light on how they have been rejected in the foreign soil and 'looked back in anger', frustration and disappointment. Means, the air and water in which they have been born whip them to come back to their motherland. To be precise, the warm love and affection and emotional bond and attachment haunt every moment to return to their original home- birthplace. Moreover, it also highlights the clashes of ideas, traditions and cultures by focusing upon its attraction, repulsion and exploitation by the vested interests. Dev, Adit and Sarah are such rootless ailing aliens who have undergone in an acute existential anguish and are desperately searching for self-identity away from their homeland.

Key Words: Alien, Exile, Identity, Immigrant, Rootless, Tortuous

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is considered to be one of the most important Indian writers in English. She has mastery over presenting ordinary people against a sea of troubles both in their original and adopted homeland in an era of LPG- Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation. Considered in the light of this observation, her third novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), gives an account of ordinary people like Adit Sen, his wife Sarah and Dev, his Bengali friend from India are utterly left in cultural conflicts and complexes as foreigners and yet make untiring effort to identify themselves in overseas and eventually alienated. In this backdrop, the novel begins with the arrival of Dev, a young Bengali student at England. Bubbling with promises, hopes and aspirations, he comes to the London School of Economics to pursue a course. He is, however, confronted with an initial problem of adjustment in a chaotic foreign land. Having been taught about the British history and literature, ways and manners, he comes to quench his cultural and intellectual thirst. To quote Anita Desai, "He was determined to seek, discover and win the England of his dreams and reading, the England he had quickly seen was the most poetic, the most innocent and enduring of England, in a secret campaign. At the end, he believed he did". (168).

But as the novel progresses, the mission of visit of Dev, a promising talent, in search of green pastures, gets disillusioned; he suffers humiliation. He feels isolated in London from both Indians and English. There is lack of sympathy in English men who do not recognize their neighbours and behave with them like strangers. For him, 'Things fall apart'. The silence and hollowness of London disturb Dev and makes him uneasy and alienated. He finds himself suffocated and insulated amidst the loss of credibility, values, standards and disintegrated social set-up. Besides this, he realizes that the Indian immigrants rush to the west and in the process of missing badly their own motherland- the India of familiar faces, familiar sounds and familiar smells. Added to his woes, he feels hurt when he is called "wags" and Macaulay's "bastards" and are not even allowed to share a common lavatory. He considers himself "like a kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison". (Bye-Bye-57).

Thus, standing between two poles-India and England- he is discriminated everywhere; he can not get accustomed to the drab and emptiness of city. To put Kalpana S. Wandrekar, "Dev's experience in England makes him neurotic because he unable to attach meaning to his experience. He is aware of his state of chaos and confusion in him caused by the outside pleasure". (The Ailing Aliens. A Study of the immigrants in six Indian Novels-152).

Though tired of living by an artificial and compartmentalization of life, Dev decides not to return India and lead the ways-"lazy bureaucrats, teeming population and abject poverty, irregular trains and buses, hordes of beggar and swarm of flies"- of the masses there. He, despite variety and multiplicity, slowly adapts to the new environment to colour his lofty dreams. With the unraveling of plot, Dev gradually develops relationships with Adit, who works as a teacher and finally accepted a little job at Blue Skies. He feels a sense of cultural affinity. He (Adit) appreciates England for its lustrous landscape, fertility and luxury. To quote him, "I like the pubs. I like the freedom a man has here. Economic freedom; I like reading posters in the tube. And I like the Thames. I like the feeling. I can nip across the channel for a holiday I Paris. I like

a weekend at the seaside. I even like the BBC”. (Bye Bye ... 180). This closeness, however, does not bring him real joy and happiness. Each and every moment he is disturbed by the sweet smell of the soil of his motherland; a new form of consciousness whips him that he has distanced himself from original home; pricks him about the floating nature of home and fluid identity and shallow intercontinental relationship as well. He even rues: “O England’s green and grisly land, I love you and only a babu can”. (Bye Bye.....130).

But this sense of belongingness in the cultural dislocation considers him as ‘other’ in an unknown country. The hybrid or dual identity fades. He observes the disparity between the home and host cultures. Nostalgic, he longs for ethnic Indian cuisine, sonorous music and friends. He frankly admits to be a “stranger, a non-belonger” in England. He takes a boat back to india with his wife. He says, “This time I’ ll go by air with a bag full of luxury goods. When I have a whole month of leave saved up. I’ ll go. My mother will cook hilsa fish wrapped in banana leves for me. My sister will dress in saries and gold ornaments. I’ ll lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up half the night listening to the shenai and sitar”. (Bye Bye ... 48).

On Adit’s “U” turn, Sumitra Kurketi comments, “Ironically, notwithstanding his entire appraisal.... He realizes that England can provide him neither of these (liberty, individualism) whether he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and is constantly regarded as ... a second grade citizen... an intruder. (Love Hate relationship of Expatriates in Anita Desai’s Bye Bye, Blackbird, The novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study-45-50)

Sarah, too, is entangled in the tensions of East-West clash. By marrying a brown Asian, she breaks the social code of Western cultures. Hence, she is always subject to taunts and jibes of not only her colleagues but even of young pupils of the schools where she works as a clerk. She avoids any questions regarding her husband and family. Once she heard pupil criticizing her,

“Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry”. And “Where is the fire, pussy cat?” Worse, the strains of interracial marriage are so much on her that they affect her day-to-day life. While shopping she avoids going to the stores of Laurel Lane, where she lives. For her, shopping would easily betray her link with India. So she prefers shopping to the big departmental store where she would remain an anonymous buyer, none knowing her Asian connection.

But in spite of all her precautions she can not escape the puzzle which is made part of her life. The tension between pretension and actuality, appearance and reality is always there which tells upon her, resulting in schizophrenia. She does not know to where she belongs. She wants genuineness and that would come only when she leaves England for good at the end of the novel. In England, she is not at peace. She is always haunted by the question who she is.

“Who was she- Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari. One burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen the Head’s secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency? Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters...she felt an imposter but equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit’s records...she had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning...Where was Sarah? Where was Sarah?...she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all and then she wondered with great sadness, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth”. (Bye, Bye 34-35).

In spite of “progress” and “modernity”, old prejudices die hard. Sarah is homeless in her own native country which is the biggest irony. Sandwiched between the interracial and intercultural marriage, she finds it very difficult to adjust and overcome. She lives in a dual world, the two social worlds that do not meet the two incompatible cultures that spilt her. She

gets herself alienated from her society through her marriage. She remains an outsider in the Indian community because she is English. She does not belong anywhere. For example, Adit's Bengali music is all dissonance to Sarah's ears. She has problem of wearing saree and jewellery.

In yet another instance of East-West tussle, Sarah can not enjoy the freedom of West as she has been dominated by her typical Indian husband. Even though Sarah belongs to the advanced West, she is basically a woman easily object to manipulation and control. Besides this, she wants to keep pets but her love for pets is condemned by her husband. She is acceptable, this is obvious from Adit's remark:

"... Wash up, Sarah, dear and go to bed and do not mind me when I fall over the cat...unable to part with the warmth of shared experience and shared humour, leaving Sarah to pick up empty cups and glasses and full ash trays and yawn her to bed..."(Bye Bye-27).

At the end of the novel, Adit decides to return his native. In this backdrop, he may advocate Rudyard Kipling who said "East is East, West is West and the twin shall never meet". Adit feels nostalgic for his motherland. He feels that he has been pretending all the time. It is a falsehood and fallacy to live in England. As part of his decision, he wants his child to be born in India. He cherishes the golden memories of home town and accepts reality. When Adit informs Sarah about his desire to go back to India, Sarah also agrees to go with him. Sarah's loss of identity and alienation among her own people leads her to the conclusion that going back to India with her husband is the best solution to her problem.

CONCLUSION

Thus Anita Desai has focused on the torrid heat and ugliness of eastern-western civilizations through Adit, Sarah and Dev. These uprooted individuals constantly suffer from

identity crisis and socio-cultural disharmony throughout the novel. It is an authentic study of human relationship disheveled by the oppressor and oppressed; the colonizer and colonized. To quote R. S. Sharma, “it has rightly been maintained that the tension between the local and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world”. This apart, Desai also seeks to explore the complexities of dilemma of alienated immigration by focusing upon its attractions as well as repulsion.

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