

## Exploring Alienation, Isolation, Cultural And Identity

### Crisis In Anita Desai's "Bye Bye Black Bird"

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#### **Abstract**

The encounter of Indians with the English in their own land (Britain) has become a theme of increasing potential to Indo-Anglian writers. A number of outstanding novelists have tried to capture the immigrant perspective and the problems encountered in the clash with the alien ethos. The experience of the exile begins as a condition of living and intensifies as a condition of the mind. Its sources are cultural displacement and cultural shock. One such novelist is Anita Desai who has dealt with the theme of exile and the immigrants' encounter in her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. The novelist herself is a victim of cultural displacement due to her immigrant status, which is depicted in her works.

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is about alienation and the accommodation of the immigrant in a world which is alluring and appalling at the same time. It does not bring into fictional context the larger social and political aspects of the immigrant status, rather it deals with the self-awareness of the educated Indian immigrants who keep wavering between acceptance and rejection of the world they have been trained to admire but which they find, on actual contact either strange or hostile

**Keywords:** exile, alienation, cultural displacement, immigrant, cultural shock.

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#### **Introduction**

The recent decades have witnessed the emergence of fresh awareness of the situations of women writers which has brought about an unprecedented shift in the appraisal of their works. Women writers have not only made their presence felt but also have won accolades for their account of expatriate status through their protagonists who are uprooted from their moorings and exiled to alien countries. The present paper seeks to explore the problem of cultural conflict, their responses to native country and their adopted countries, their responses to the new abode, their experience of colonialism, feelings about exile and cultural conflicts.

Anita Desai is one of the most eminent modern Indo-Anglian writers, well known for artistic perfection and fidelity to life. She has tackled the theme of love and hate in her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, in which India's encounter with England becomes a matter of East-West concord and discord the novel exposes xenophobia or the dislike for foreigners of all her novels, Anita Desai considers *Bye-Bye Black bird* as

the most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation. A marked change is observed here as compared to her other novels. It is about one big family of men and women both from the East and the West. The sense of loneliness and the self-created atmosphere of isolation present in her earlier novels is absent here.

The story takes place in the England of the sixties rather than her native India. The novelist deals overtly for the first time in her work, with the theme of cultural conflict and cultural imperialism born of colonial encounter between India and Britain. The novel centers round the lives of Indian immigrants in London. The three central characters Adit Sen, his English wife Sarah, and Adit's friend Dev, who had recently arrived in England. It captures the confusions and conflicts of the alienated persons. The thematic and plot patterns in the novel revolve round the characters of Dev and Adit, the two Indians living in England acclimatizing themselves to different social conditions prevailing in England. "The novel involves issues of isolation and possible accommodation that one has to face in an alien world"<sup>1</sup> R.S. Singh believes that it explains "the maladjustment of the Indians in terms of ethnic prejudice."<sup>2</sup>

*Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the problem of acculturation faced by the central protagonists, Adit and Dev, the two immigrants in Britain who suffer many cultural shocks and degradations. The problem arises due to the romantic image, which the Indians have of Britain and vice versa. There is a clash between the romantic image of India and the real image of India in England. Adit, one of the protagonists, is first fascinated by British culture and marries an English girl Sarah who in turn is fascinated by India. Sarah marries Adit without knowing whether the Indian family system would accept her not. The clash between the Indian and English mode is resolved only when Adit returns to India in search of his roots.

The novel opens with the arrival of Dev who has come all the way from Calcutta to England to seek admission in the London School of Economics, where he stays with his friend Adit Sen, who lives with his English wife Sarah. Despite a degree from the British University, Adit couldn't find a decent job back in India as a result, he returns to England and settles down there. Dev on the other hand had come to England with high hopes but on arriving he finds the conditions of Indians reprehensible and raves against England, the English people and their way of life. He feels frustrated and develops a hatred for the city because of its ill treatment towards the colored.

Adit appreciates England because it has given him economic and social freedom. He has married an English girl, taken British citizenship and has developed a passionate attachment for the country that he has adopted. He praises its people and their habits but at the same time realizes that he cannot totally shed his Indianness. He remembers the colorful festivals of his country like Diwali. It takes a weekend at Sarah's place to break the spell for both Dev and Adit. In the process, Sarah's life also changes drastically. Dev's experience of the calm, orderly country-side breaks down his extreme antipathy to things British, so that he ends up working and living in London and quite enjoying this new way of life.

Adit, on the other hand, undergoes an identity crisis and comes to feel that he has been living an inauthentic life in England, and resolves to return to India, with his pregnant English wife Sarah. He starts feeling out of place in England and admits to Sarah that he has been betraying his self so far and decides to face the reality by going back to India. 'All our records and lamb curries and sing songs, it's all so unreal. It has no reality at all we just pretend all the time. I am twenty-seven now. I have got to go home and start living a real life.'<sup>3</sup>

A peculiar change comes over Dev in due course of time. His Anglophobia changes to Anglophilia. He develops a great fascination for English people and its countryside. Dev's newly developed attraction for England creates a dilemma for him. As a result, he cannot decide whether to stay in England or to go back to India. He suffers from what R.S. Singh calls the Caliban Complex, 'now adoring, now loathing, the sensibility he had imbibed from the colonial rule. Like Caliban, he is trapped within the colonizers conceptual and operational mode of existence.'<sup>4</sup> At last he decides 'All I want is a good time. Not to return to India.....but to know a little freedom, to indulge in little adventure'<sup>5</sup> He is intoxicated by the charms of the country. Adit, on the other hand starts feeling homesick and starts to dislike England. He feels disgusted and disillusioned with his mode of existence and finally resolves to return home. He has a feeling that he can no longer live in 'little India' in London, a life of pretensions and desires to live in real India.

The last chapter of the novel depicts the return of the "blackbird", Adit to its nest. The novel ends on a note of stark realism. The student Dev decides to stay on in England to become another settler on the shores of the unwilling land. It is strange that Dev who was most sensitive to the humiliation directed at Asians and who entered England as an idealist is metamorphosed when he takes Adit's job and decides to stay back in England. Adit who felt that England was good enough for him now feels that it will not do for his unborn son, he and Sarah wave off the shores of England among cheers and dire warnings. Dev who once felt irked on being looked upon as a blackbird starts dreaming of having a home the moment he gets a job. He murmurs a parting salute to his friends Adit and Sarah and prays for himself 'Make my bed and light the light I will arrive late tonight'. His prayer at the end of the novel appears ironical. It is a farewell to the blackbird, the Indian immigrant, Adit to its own nest. Like the indelible blackness of the black bird, Adit cannot shed the Indianness, despite staying in a foreign country. In the parting salute to Adit and Sarah there is a suggestion of acceptance of his real self, that Dev, another blackbird, will also feel obliged to its permanent nest in future. This ironical reversal of roles appears to be a never-ceasing process as long as the two countries do not shake off their complexes and accept each other. But this seems a distant possibility because it is difficult to choose between life in England and that in India.

Thematically the novel is similar to *The Nowhere Man*, Timeri Murari's *The Marriage* and V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and structurally it follows the pattern of Anatole France's work *Thais*. This

is a courtesan, who leads a sinful life in Alexandria where Paphnuce, a good man, lives in a desert. When the two characters meet, they change places. After the meeting Paphnuce Thais goes to a monastery and seeks salvation whereas Paphnuce is damned. Just as the characters in the novel change in inverse proportion similarly the two characters Dev and Adit converge and cross in Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. In the beginning there is Anglophobia in Dev whereas Adit has a deep-rooted liking for England but in the later part of the novel their notions interchange. R.S. Sharma calls this novel a "dramatic poem as it employs the metaphor of voyage or quest to suggest a pattern of action where each soul, after initial shock, puzzlement and anguish, discovers its natural conditions. The trisection plan of the novel 'Arrival', 'Discovery, Recognition' and 'Departure' also seems to suggest this pattern"<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* the interaction between the immigrants and the Britishers acquires a new dimension. It involves issues of alienation, accommodation, crisis of identity that an immigrant has to face in an alien yet familiar world. The migratory bird is at times, drawn to and other times repelled by white England and its habitat.

Adit and Dev figure in the major part of the novel. Their character delineation supports the thematic pattern of the novel. Anita Desai's major preoccupation, as a novelist, has been the delineation of characters. She confesses in a reply to a questionnaire in *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, that 'characters rather than the story are her central concern': "Story, action and drama mean little to me except in so far as they emanate directly from the characters I am writing about, born of their dreams, will and action". the novel's "enchantment with England is epitomized through Adit and Dev. Their character delineation supports the thematic, emotional structure of the novel and is functionary to the theme"<sup>7</sup> Dev represents a totally different philosophy; he appears to be an iconoclast, a critic of everything that is English. He continuously ridicules Adit for being a British adorer to which the latter has developed a sound digestion. Dev considers himself to be a cultural ambassador to England who wishes to reverse the historical facts of the colonization of India by the British. He wants a reversal of it by the colonization of England by Indians. When Adit finally decides to leave England and go back to his motherland the rush of Adit's emotion for his motherland does not unbalance him. Adit on the other hand feels that instead of living as a stranger in England it is better to live in real India to unite himself with his own cultural values. In Adit's final musing the novelist strikes a balance between the East and the West, the colonial past and the democratic present who wants to carry the message of England to the East, not the old message of the colonist, the tradesman or the missionary, but the new message of a free convert, the international citizen, a message of progress, cheer and good will. The memory of India makes his eyes wet and he thinks of his mother and home. He may speak against India but he looks forward to returning home. "I may rave against India but I cannot disown, it is in my blood. I should like to have the feel of the Indian air on my skin again"<sup>8</sup>

Dev on the other hand “Inhabits the myth of the wronged native par excellence, in that he wishes initially to refute all things British (even though he is subconsciously attracted to them) and to play the righteous role of an Indian who will return to his native India to impart the wealth of knowledge accumulated as a student in England turning the tables of the colonizers as it were; whereas Adit is almost a caricature of the Indian who is more British than the British, one who cannot, or will face up to the multiple ironies of his life in England or deal with the obvious racism that exists there.”<sup>9</sup> Dev can be called a ‘little fugitive’ who is not sentimental but partly cold and intellectual; he can be termed a skeptic. He is a disillusioned man who is not romantic either about India or the West He is acquainted with the realistic condition of the East and the West, and doesn’t yield to the fascination of England. He rebels against humiliations hurled by English boys, ladies and peddlers. “Dev sees the darker side of the Whiteman’s civilization, their colonialism, exploration abroad planned engravings imperialistic power and threat”<sup>10</sup> However, Dev’s character does not catch up the dilemma of alienation or the identity crisis of Srinivas in the *No-Where Man*. Dev’s dilemma seems to emanate from emotional and instinctive response to the city of London. His alienation and spiritual agony as the result of his hellish experience in a London tube. caught between acceptance and rejection, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism Dev feels confused and emotionally tortured. Kajali Sharma analyses his character and draws this conclusion “Dev in his unconscious mind is a great admirer of London right from his childhood. Just to save himself from being rejected by London, his conscious mind envelops his awe in a kind of cynical coldness. But when he comes in close contact with the beauty and the greatness of the city, the cover slips away.”<sup>11</sup> At the point when Adit decides to leave England, there is a dramatic change in Dev’s situation because earlier it was, he wanted to return to India. At the close of the novel ironically enough, the eternally discontented fault-finding Dev is reconciled to his lot in England for whom England was only a cold wasteland of brick and tiles gets trapped by its enchanting beauty and finds London to be land of golden opportunities. Although Dev has changed his place with Adit but the return of Adit convinces the readers that Dev, too, sooner or later will meet Adit’s fate and return.

The character of Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is perhaps the strongest woman character in Desai’s fiction”<sup>12</sup>. She accepts challenges of reality and through silent suffering proves herself as the boldest of all other characters in Desai’s novels. Whereas other heroines like Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul are afraid of reality and fail to adjust themselves to their present conditions.

Ironically, it is not Adit but Sarah who suffers most by marrying brown Asian. She incurs the wrath of the white society for she has broken the social code of her society. She has to bear the taunts and jibes not only of her colleagues but even of young pupils of the school where she works as a clerk. She feels culturally alienated and her marriage with Adit obliges her to walk ‘drawing across her face a Mask of secrecy’ which results in her identity crisis. She avoids questions regarding Adit and family life, but her

peers take a perverse delight in asking critical and satirical questions. By marrying an Indian, Sarah becomes a cultural exile in her own land. Her predicament becomes more acute when her colleagues blow a volley of questions regarding her identity. She is worried about the loss of identity in her own society. The younger ones emulate their elders and taunt her, even her pupils do not spare her, they scream at her, “Hurry hurry Mrs. Curry”? and “Where’s the fire, pussy cat?”” The strains of interracial marriage affect her day-to-day life. In spite of all the precautions she cannot escape the charade which has become a part of her life. She feels that she has become a nameless person without any identity or ancestry by marrying an Indian. The tension between the pretension and actuality, appearance and reality weigh heavily, upon her and she is not at peace in England and faces an identity crisis. Even Adit notices in Sarah anguish and loneliness and the disappearance of her former ‘cheerfulness, vividness, the sure quick quality of humor that he had known when he fell in love with her.

Her Identity crisis has been described more than once, in the novel. the novel depicts Sarah’s identity crisis, her interracial and intercultural marriage causes adjustment problems, which are not easy to overcome. Sarah’s problem becomes more complicated for she marries a man whose race was once ruled by her own, in spite of “progress” and “modernity”, old prejudices don’t seem to die. Sarah is homeless in her own country is the biggest irony

Though Sarah is almost an exile in her own land, but unlike others, she never withdraws. She faces the challenges of life, and triumphs over her sufferings and dilemmas. Jasbir Jain says that “Sarah’s sense of loneliness... is very different from her other heroines because she chooses it deliberately whereas for her other characters it is a part of their nature”<sup>13</sup> Others feel that Sarah is a “silent volcano, not dead yet not bursting”<sup>14</sup>she is like an existentialist who tries to know her real identity

Sarah represents a more critically responsible position in this difficult issue of cultural crisis as faced by Adit and Dev. Throughout the novel, she plays a morally role of a genuinely caring wife. She could tell what effect the smallest refusal or contradiction might have on him. Sarah surrenders unconditionally to the decision of her husband, Adit. while Adit and Dev have the choice to opt for their “natural conditions” and their circumstances, she has none.” In seeking his own self, Adit is totally unaware of the loss of self this decision implies for Sarah. In the end she agrees to accompany her husband back to India even though in her private moments she has doubts about the major step she is taking. Yet, it is her over all spirit of openness of entering a different culture, acquiring a different self – which she sees as an adventure mixed with some regret that marks her as a realist rather than a creature imprisoned by colonial myth as Dev and Adit

Seema Jena feels that Anita Desai draws the attention of the reader to “annihilation of self that marriage involves for a female, is the theme subsequently found in her novels”<sup>15</sup> When Sarah agrees to do the whatever Adit likes she doesn’t want chaos to reflect on her marriage and would sacrifice everything to preserve it. Sarah has real love and understanding for Adit, which in turn Adit lacks. Her character



therefore has more power, real spirit. Adit is too pre-occupied with himself to delve into her thoughts. Thus, people like Sarah and Dev are born and brought up under the spell of rootlessness. They cannot really belong to a world. It is their nature and destiny to hang between two worlds, Indian and European, to be torn by their conflicting loyalties.

Apart from the major characters like Adit, Dev and Sarah, Emma Moffit's minor character is central to the East-West reconciliation theme. She is the chief proponent of the ideal of Indian wisdom-philosophical spiritual and yogic. This ideal appears to be efficacious to the Britishers with limited horizons. Emma shares with Sarah the 'wonder and fame' for India. she is a sort of spiritual sister to Sarah sharing the same fascination, with Dev as Secretary. The Millers, on the other hand are typically British characters who love their privacy and reserve

Many details from everyday life are thrown in by Anita Desai to bring home the way in which a culture makes itself felt through the trivialities of life which pile up and become insurmountable bastion between partners in a marriage. However, in the Adit and Sarah's relationship, Sarah does not side with the English. She is hurt by rudeness of her countrymen and exclaims that when she thinks of all the Millers of England, she could leave at once. Adit finally decides to leave England when he realizes that the 'basic disharmony of the situation' is the attitude of Sarah's parent. The placidity, munificence and the ease of England becomes so detestable to him and that he cannot tolerate any more British expressionless face and feels like hitting them if he comes across any.

### Conclusion

The novel concludes with the Idea that whatever may be the allurements and charms of a foreign country, real peace is always to be found at home. Adit has success, money, romance in England but somehow, he discovers he cannot live forever. Even the skeptic Dev, who is momentarily elated by a job in England, will someday follow Adit's example. In a certain form Kipling's conclusion "The East is East and West is West. And never the twain shall meet" is confirmed in the novel. The import of the title is same. Yet the possibility of reconciliation between the East and the West is envisaged in the novel. The romance between the spiritual East and the material West is not ruled out. There are immense possibilities of its fulfillment as envisaged by the the Indian Club of Clapham. Hence the novel shows the existential dilemma the Indian and the English confront when they face different situations.

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