

Inner Conflicts and Racial Prejudices-An Analyses of Expatriates in 'Bye Bye Blackbird'

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Abstract

At present many women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Anita Desai have worked on the issues of expatriation and the complexities in the life of diasporas. Anita Desai dives deep into the unconscious and subconscious psyche of the expatriates and their nausea, nostalgia and longings to their native land. Expatriation appears as a recurrent motif in post-colonial literature across the world because it constitutes not only the commonly shared experience of the migrant people but also the creative sensibility of their writers. Desai highlights the physical and psychological problems of Indian immigrants and explores the adjustment difficulties that they face in England.

The irony of the novel is that Adit, an Indian with comfortable job, English wife, fully feels at home in his adopted country. By the end of the novel Adit decides to leave England for good to India with his English wife, and Dev who has been critical of English and England, decides to stay back in England. The novel touches the racial problems and feeling

in England. It is not simply white man's burden but also the feeling of superiority by virtue of their being ruled over us. The psychological issue in her character's life affairs the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the existential loneliness and corrodes her being and makes it possible for her to find meaning in an arid existence.

Indian Literature in English has journeyed a long way to achieve its present glory and grandeur. Beginning with the trio of Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand to Anita Desai, Bhabani Bhattacharya and host of others are trying their art of fiction with unlimited and unrestricted themes. In the present age, the novel has been developed by the rapid changes in social conditions. The novelists were interested in exploring the sub-conscious of human mind. During the last two centuries many writers followed the psychological theory of Freud and Jung. At present it is enriched by a sizable number of women writers read and acclaimed all over the world. Their works offer penetrative insight into the complex issues of life. The fictional concerns of these women writers are not limited to the world of women and their sufferings as victims of male hegemony; they also express social, economic and political upheavals in Indian society.

Expatriation and the problems and complexities in the life of expatriates have merged as a major theme in the novels of 20th century authors, crossing the barriers of caste, creed and nationality. The authors have been articulate enough in narrating the complexities of life of immigrants. In this series of authors, Anita Desai is a name who dives deep into the unconscious and sub-conscious psyche of the expatriates and their nausea, nostalgia and longingness to their native land. Her depiction of characters and situation is not one-sided and her protagonists seem to be cherishing a strange love-hate relationship with the end of their adoption with great precision and brilliance.

In 'Bye Bye Blackbird', Anita Desai deals with the east-west encounter. 'Blackbird' used in the title is none other than the immigrant, whom London says goodbye. Desai

highlights the physical and psychological problems of Indian immigrants and explores the adjustment difficulties that they face in England. The author gives beautiful descriptions of the busy London and the quiet retired life in country-side, which is totally opposite to one-another. The characters are not so real, but their inner conflicts and crisis remain the same that every immigrant undergoes. In an interview to Atma Ram, Desai told that, “of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation.”¹ She avowed: “Bye Bye Blackbird is the closest of all my books to actuality—practically everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London.”²

‘Bye Bye Blackbird’ examines the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The book is divided into three parts e. g. Arrival, Discovery and Recognition, and Departure. Dev arrives England for higher education, he stays with Adit Sen and his English wife, Sarah. Dev gives up the idea of continuing his studies and starts looking for a job. Unable to get any, he thinks of going back to India. But it is well settled Adit who leaves London. Meanwhile, Dev manages to find a job and stays back in London. In this novel the common problem of ‘Racism’ has shown widely the treatment meted out to Indians disturb Dev. When Dev enters England he is shown that his state of mind is in an extreme end. He has ferocious hatred towards England because once England has powered motherland and ill-treated his countrymen. He shows hatred towards England and its people. He hates Indians who support western culture.

Adit’s decision to return to India is guided as much by circumstances as by long term memory of Bengali folk music and Bengali feast prepared by his mother. Dev, too, when reaches England remembers his own country and food. Rising early in the morning, Dev becomes painfully conscious of “the cup of tea that would have been brought to him if he were at home in India now by a mother, fresh from her morning prayer, or by a servant boy scorched and sooty from a newly made fire. By no stretch of imagination were his hosts Adit

Sen or his wife Sarah likely to do this for him.....It was the first lesson his first day in London taught him; he who wants tea must get up and make it.”³

When Dev gazing at the shops on Portobella Road filled with antiques wonders at ‘the young English people’s obsession with the past’(10) it becomes clear that the past plays a vital role in the creation of identity. Dennis Walder points out that ‘the past figures importantly in people’s self representations in general, because it is through memories of the past that we represent ourselves to ourselves.’⁴ Such is the obsession with the past that often people employ techniques to assist them to remember their past or aid in their memory. Anita Desai “.....uses the memories of the past as a method of evaluating the individual’s relationship with the present, and nostalgia becomes a narrative technique. The movement backwards is both a medium of self knowledge and of confrontation with the reality.”⁵

Expatriation appears as a recurrent motif in post-colonial literature across the world because it constitutes not only the commonly shared experience of the migrant people but also the creative sensibility of their writers.

Adit from the beginning of the novel develops attachment to the Western way of life, especially to England; but while living in England he shows his repulsion towards the way of European life and particularly of England. Dev comes to England only for his education. As a matter of fact Dev observes the basic distinction of social and educational factors between the east and the west. Dev becomes eager to be an England returned teacher, at the same time shows his abhorrence hate to the social system of England. He considers London a ‘jungly city’ and has no wish to live in a country, where one has chance of being ‘insulted and unwanted’(17).he is ‘amused’ to find his friend Adit, the descendent of a rich Calcutta family, working in a city office like a commoner. What he dislikes most is the “immigrants’ sheepishness and abject loss of self-respect.”⁶ He says to Adit :

“The trouble with you immigrants.....is that you go soft. If anyone

in India told you to turn off your radio, you would not dream of doing it.....here all you do is shut up and look sat upon.”(24)

Dev is not happy by the manner in which the immigrants are subjected to racial discrimination. He also finds himself uneasy to adjust with the “English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut.....of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues.”(63)

Anita Desai “depicts the psycho-emotional and socio-psycho states of the protagonists living in alien and cloistered world of existential problems and passions. Alienation in her novels is presented in the form of tension between self and society.”⁷

A prominent theme running through her novels is the aloneness of the human being in the isolated island of human destiny. The burden of existence hangs heavy on most of her characters. As K.R.Srinivas Iyenger puts it, “is the exploration of sensibility--- the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is all to ease among barbarians and the Philistines, the anarchists and the amolarists.”⁸

Desai holds this problem repeatedly. Her father was a Bengali and her mother a German. Hence she says, “This has brought two separate strands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and European culture which I inherited from my mother.”⁹

Dev, in whom the nationalist feelings are yet strong, is puzzled by his friend’s adoration of a country which hardly belongs to him. He calls him a spineless imperialist-lover, and tells him sharply:

“You would sell your soul, and your passport too, for a glimpse, at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home. You’d probably vote for the Tory Government if you could, and for the Imagination laws.”(21)

Dev finds that his immigrant friends away from their home and country have developed an excessive liking for special dishes of their native land and it has developed into a type of complex. He tells Adit, “At home you would just take carrot ‘halwa’ for granted and here you go ga-ga over it. You get your proportions all wrong, you immigrants.”(17)

It is now a general opinion that colonizers consciously worked to break the spirit of rebellion in the natives by “educating”¹⁰ them well and building into them feelings of inferiority and hatred for their own culture and values.¹¹ The spiritual and moral maiming of the native people’s consciousness was so intense that the natives began to praise the Whiteman for everything and undervalue their own tradition. Even as free nations these societies have not been able to solve their basic problems like poverty, unemployment, over-population, hunger, illiteracy, health care etc. On the contrary, the west with its steady economic prosperity got projected as a model of all round achievement. Unable to find adjustment with the shattered economy in their own countries and pressed by joblessness and poverty, many of the natives decided to migrate to Britain, France or America, the ideal countries,¹² in an attempt to get there ‘steady, remunerative job’.

Dev also feels that the streets of London have to give an education which one can hardly overlook. He thinks of finding employment in London which seems to slam door on him: “Because London would not be conquered. why? Willingly England had conquered his own country, then why-he sighed incoherently, feverishly-would she give nothing in return?”(136). He feels undaunted for all the discriminations which Britishers have against him and his people, and in a mood of protest he reflects:

“I am here as an ambassador. I am showing these damn imperialists with their lost colonies complex that we are free people now, with our own personalities that this veneer of an English education has not obscured, and not afraid to

match ours with theirs. I am here, he proselytized, to interpret my country to them, to conquer England as they once conquered India.”(139-40)

What exasperates him most is the routine pattern of life of the Britishers following a set course without any variation or novelty in it. His sense of propriety and modesty is outraged on seeing lovers sprawling in Hyde Park grass in summer dusk totally oblivious of the world around them. Dev felt disgusted to see a couple hugging each-other under a lamp-post and remarked about the obscenity of these people as a bunch of exhibitionists. Dev is critical of the educational system also introduced by Macaulay, but he is not devoid of its impact upon himself. While seeing different landmarks of the British society and culture he thinks:

“He had known them all, he had met them before in the pages of Dickens and Lamb, Addison and Boswell, Dryden and Jerome K. Jerome.....the past introduction.....imprinted to imperially on his mind.....books that had formed at least one half of his conscious existence.”(10-11)

Gradually a slow change occurs in the attitude of Dev. When once he is refused to be told the price of a painting in Greenwich park of London and is looked down by the shopkeeper, he takes it as a challenge and looks for a job to maintain his standard of living. He works hard and when he is paid handsome salary, he begins to think of England as “the land of golden opportunities”(103).

This novel presents “a heroic, although unsuccessful, effort to show the whole gamut of Indian immigrants in England.”¹³ Again Rao remarks that:

“The characters are unreal, the conflicts are rather theatrical, and the clashes and the crisis in the novel leave one unmoved.”¹⁴

Desai feels that these immigrants are prone to live in England. Adit leaves England for good and Dev remains behind once. Adit’s part of fascination for his foreign land to everything about London is fascinating and express unreservedly. “I love England, I admire England, I can appreciate her history and poetry as much any Englishman.”

He has molded and transformed himself entirely up to the expectations of England. He has usually adopted the life style of Britishers. He keeps comparing England with his own native land, criticize India for its traditionally and backwardness. He regards England as a “land of golden opportunities”⁽¹⁰³⁾ and material prosperity. He says to Dev who has just arrived there as an immigrant:

“You just do not want to admit this is the land of opportunity and you have come adventuring it.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Rooted somewhere deep within his consciousness the colonial pull finds expression in his utterance:

“Oh, I think gold, Dev, gold. I see gold everywhere---gold like Sarah’s golden hair.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Adit is very critical of the lack of avenues in India, where after many years of hard work, he could find only “a ruddy clerking job.”⁽¹⁸⁾. He is proud of his financial achievements in England:

“What a relief it was to have a desk of my own, a secretary to make me tea and the feeling that I had found something I would like to make permanent at last”⁽¹⁰⁵⁾.

Adit is also critical of general condition of life in India:

“The laziness of the clerks and unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench and the boredom.....Then I’m mad to get back to England”(49).

In comparison to famine, flood, draught and epidemic at home, he finds in England nature ‘soft and mild’ and land ‘fertile’. “everything so wealthy, so luxuriant.”(129). Adit is proud of his blind admiration of England. Love, admiration and loyalty have much offer to England, in return he feels to enjoy and celebrate. Ironically, in all his appraisal worship, land of liberty, individualism he realized that England can provide him neither of these wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and constantly treated as second citizen. His irresistible destiny gets on as long as he wishes to stay in England. Despite his love and admiration for England, he feels himself as alien and stranger at the moment his heart is full with nostalgic reveries of his native land. He longs for many things especially for food items in his home. Adit closed the circle of his migration complete from India to England and again to India.

Desai’s characters are constantly being overwhelmed by scenes and events in an extreme, gothic manner. Dev is a new-comer to England with ideas of entering university. He is spell-bound in either delight or horror at the sights of London. With unconscious irony, he accuses his host group of having lost a sense of proportion, while seeing everything himself from the emotionally exited state of the tourist(16). Adit, his old friend and host has grown accustomed to English ways, but is horror-struck by the sudden sight of his wife on a bus:

“he had sat back, sat silent, shocked by that anguish. An anguish, it seemed to him, of loneliness---and than it became absurd to call her by his own name, to call her by any name: she had become nameless....she had her

ancestry and identity and sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear(31). Later, he himself is invaded by a fit of depression and vivid memories of India (183-84,191-92). “the mood had begun to enter him, circulate within him and alter him”(176).

In fact, a key moment in the book is when Adit’s friends watch a documentary about migrant factory workers (20-23). They distance the pathos with wise-cracks based on class and ethnic difference, but when it is revealed later that one of them has ‘salvaged’ a piece of marble on the way home, they are melodramatically plunged into crisis: “Bella stamped her foot and shouted. It’s all very well to laugh, but you’re Indians, you’re foreigners, you’ve got to be that careful, you do, and what’s a joke to you would have booked like a dirty Asian’s cheek to the bobbies, and how would you feel then?”(187). The point is, it is a soap-opera world that the migrants inhabit: “a space of extremes and instability, of vulnerable visibility and the knowledge that one is dispensable and thus visible except as representative of a group. The would-be migrant arrives as a guest and acts as tourist, but even when he has settled down, he is kept by the dominant culture in the role of the tourist who will eventually return home, who does not really belong (36, 220). The people of diaspora, therefore, all carry, to varying degrees: “an opposition.....between a state of alienation and a desire to return.....a conjunction of past and present, the exotic and the everyday, in a radically destabilized form.”¹⁵

‘Bye Bye Blackbird’ is a novel in which communal values or biases made the life of an individual a hell. There is xenophobia or dislike for the foreigners. The novel has an international theme in the sense that Adit marries an English girl Sarah and by doing so he incurs the anger of the white society. Ironically it is not Adit who suffers most on this account by his docile wife Sarah. By marrying brown Asian she has broken the social code of England hence

she is always subject to taunts and jibes of not only her colleagues but even of young pupils of the school where she works as a clerk. She always avoids any question regarding her husband and family life but her peers take a perverse delight in asking such questions. Julia who is teacher in her school comes out with typical British superciliousness. Sarah dreads such embarrassing comments:

“She had stammered out her replies, too unhappy even to accuse them of tactlessness or inquisitiveness and, for her pains, had heard Julia sniff, as she left the room, if she is ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?”

The strains of inter-racial marriage are so much on her that they affect her day-to-day life. Even her pupils ignore her. They pretended not to notice her at all. Once she came across the road, she heard them scream, “Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry!” and where is the fire, pussy cat?” (32). This much about the ordeal she undergoes at her work place at the hands of her colleagues and pupils. When she goes for shopping she avoids going to the stores of Laurel Lane where she lives, for her shopping would easily betray her link with India. Therefore, she prefers to go to big department store where she would remain an anonymous buyer, none knowing her Asian connections:

“.....she went into the supermarket to wander amongst the stacked shelves in an absent-mindedly happy way for she loved the supermarket, only just remembering to snatch up a bottle of mango chutney and a Lyons blackberry pie in order not to arouse the accountant suspicion. The supermarket was a soothing place to her. Here she could buy her Patna rice and her pickles without acquiring the distinct personality; these

purchases would have marked her with, had she shopped for them in one of those pleasant little shops at the end of Laurel Lane.” “...but inside the sparkling halls of the supermarket where walls of soap and cornflakes hid her from strangers’ eyes she could be as eccentric, as individual, as she pleased without being noticed by even a mouse.” (38-39).

Sarah takes all precautions to avoid the remarks of the people even then she cannot escape the riddle which is now part of her life. The tension between appearance and actuality results in schizophrenia. She does not know where she belongs to and she is fed up with putting on faces. She wants genuineness and that would come only when she leaves England for good at the end of the novel. By contrast, as Joanna Kirk Patrick points out, “Identity in a caste society has a fixed sense of social placement.”¹⁶ We are not told how she would fare in the Indian society. In England she is not at peace. Her identity crisis has been described more than once in the novel which makes her lonely, the question always nagging her who is she. After marriage, she faces an identity crisis:

“She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear. Or could only someone knew her, knew of her background and her marriage, imagine this? Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name that she seemed, with a sudden silver falling of the light of glamour, to an unusually subdued and thoughtful Adit.”(33).

We find later a more clear description of the crisis of Sarah’s identity in the same chapter of the novel. It is easier for a girl to adjust to her new home if she marries in the same

culture. But inter-racial and inter-cultural marriage causes hardships and adjustment problems which are difficult to overcome. In the case of Sarah, the problem becomes more intense because she marries a person who belongs to the race that was once ruled over by her own. Sarah feels homeless in her own native country which is greatest irony. The question is still there to nag her, who was she?

“Who was she—Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade saree 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 creature 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 commands over these two charade she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not ever tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other role. There were roles and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only costume. Where was Sarah?” “.....she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, , if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the Theatre and enter the world----whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth.”(36).

The novel lastly leaves an impression of doubt and uncertainty about the new role Sarah is expected to perform. “Sarah represents, in a sense, all immigrants’ wives who have their own problems of adjustment when placed in the context of cultures at loggerheads.”¹⁷ It has been rightly suggested that Sarah’s dual estrangement comes not from social transformation within her society but from a cross-cultural catalysis of her own choice.”¹⁸

We see that Sarah’s parents accept her and her husband. But most significant thing about this foreigner is that she is devoted wife even though she bears suffering and mental torture. Racial conflict and hostile opposition are the natural consequences the immigrants have to face in the adopted country. *Bye Bye Blackbird* is full of situations in which we find characters struggling to survive the racial onslaught. Racial prejudice often gets expression through the accusation against the coloured immigrants for spreading dirt and filth. The mother of Sarah, Mrs. Roscommon—James, finds the situation unbearable when her son-in-law, Adit, intrudes into her kitchen along with his other Indian friend:

“It was evident she was thinking that all she had heard about the filthy ways of the Asian immigrants was correct.”(135).

Slinging derogatory remarks on immigrants on the basis of skin is a very common form of the expression of racial prejudice. In fact, this colour consciousness of the white people appears to be a major factor that obstructs the process of assimilation between the races. In the novel, Dev is called ‘Wog’ (14) by a school-boy. He reacts very sharply. In Raja Rao’s ‘Comrade Kirilov’ the reflections of discrimination of skin-colour can be noticed in the following words:

“This colour problem in England is terrible. You always know what you are through others’ eyes. You cannot walk a mile without discovering yourself over and over

again a hundred times.”¹⁹

In spite of all discrimination, in the end of the novel, Dev decides to stay in England. The luxurious, happiness, privacy which everyone possess and enjoys English culture slowly changes and starts admiring the ‘once hatred’ culture. And interestingly enough, Adit who really enjoyed the English life, too undergoes a change and his national feelings call him back to his country. It is to be appreciable that the role of the novelist in bringing the psychic changes of the protagonist and their plight in alien countries. She reveals that the culture will change any person to follow if not out of compulsion of any external force but by changing the person’s psyche to follow it voluntarily, whether it is eastern culture or western changes the protagonists of Desai.

The end of the novel sums up with the words ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’. Is it that Dev is bidding good-bye to Adit only or is it to his Indian self? Desai usually used the theme of exploration in most of her novels. She evokes the right atmosphere through the rich imagery characteristics of her style and the use of symbols. The psychological issue in her character’s life affairs the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the existential loneliness and corrodes her being and makes it possible for her to find meaning in an arid existence.

Expatriation of the individual is a persistent theme in Anita Desai’s novels. The sensitive human being suffers from a sense of alienation who could reach the intensity of an existential malaise. Desai unfolds the existential traits of man in society. She analyses a man in action in order to reveal his hidden motives behind the reality of conscious mind. Her novel brings forth some bright prospect of her creativity.

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