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Subaltern Perspective in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*

Anita Desai, has taken up Spivak's concept and perception of subaltern and emphasized Spivak's idea in her novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) Spivak for example, objects to careless use of the term and its appropriation by marginalised groups who are not specifically subaltern. She asserts that subaltern is not just another word for the oppressed or marginalised, nor a general claim to disenfranchisement within a system of hegemonic discourse. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, her third novel deals with subalternity in an alien land, the tensions between the white locale and immigrant black birds. Desai focuses on the disturbing aspect of loss of identity that immigration involves.

Desai writes on the life of the mind, nothing less and nothing more. Beginning, as she did, with unbearable psychological traumas, imbedded deep within human mind, Her novels are always in a state of 'becoming', they never 'become'. Thus, Desai by probing into the women's psyche, has opened a new ground for the study into the various social, cultural, political, economic feminist and sexual issues. Anita Desai's characters reveal her vision of life; they share her perceptions and they set out in quest of meaning. Like their creator her protagonists also love solitude and privacy.

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aspect of loss of identity that immigration involves. The novel deal with the theme of subjugation at home and outside, in India and abroad (an alien land).

Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) is a novel that portrays the protagonists social and individual subaltern position as an immigrant in London and the trials and tribulations thereafter. It stands as a perfect replica of xenophobia that is a result out of intensive craving for foreign land. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* Desai's concern is rooted in the emigrant experience of Indians living abroad. Ostensibly concerned with the lives of Indian settler in England, the novel explores the problems of subalternity, adjustment, rootlessness, and alienation in the lives of three major characters- Dev, Adit and Sarah. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* deals with the problem of solitude and hollowness, adjustment and belonging in an alien land. Fascination for England and for the West is demonstrated in the novel through two Indians Adit and Dev. The interest in India and the East, is illustrated through Sarah, Emma Moffit and Christine Langford, three British females in particular. The theme of immigration and the consequent subjugation and oppression of characters has been the subject matter for many Indo-Anglian and American artists. In this novel, the tension and conflict between the locale and the individual acquire a new dimension. This tension between the white locale and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of hostility, and the immigrant has to struggle in an alien and oppressive environment. In fact, the East-West dilemma is very strong in this novel, and subalternity also runs parallel to this uncertainty. It deals with Indian immigrants who rush to the West, in search of prosperity, yet are unable to adapt to the country, where then nostalgia sets in and they miss their own country and become victims of racial domination and dissolution.

Dev, a student from Bengal, who has come to stay with Adit and Sarah in England. He wakes up in England with the noise of birds and bottles clanking and informal good morning voices which fills him with disgust. He very much misses his mother or the servant

boy who would bring him a cup of tea in India. The aspiring new immigrant Dev is a guest at two old friends Adit Sen and his wife Sarah Sen-a European by birth, has started facing problems of adjustment from the very next day of his arrival to this land of opportunities. He does not want to join the Sikh fitters of Bradford, and live in their ghettos and do the “dirty” work for the British Engineers? Dev has an ambition to pursue higher studies in the prestigious London School of Economics. Dev seems familiar with England through books, but when he comes to England he finds himself a misfit and suffers from Anglophobia. Initially he feels frustrated, since he is unable to secure a job for himself and in course of time much to his relief he gets the job of a salesman in a bookshop. Instead of contentment, he is deeply shocked to see the humiliating behaviour of English people towards the Indians, who are treated as inferior and openly insulted. He is also dumbfounded and shocked when English school boys call Indians as “Indian dog”. In the humorous shows and mock-scenes organised for the Indians, their pathetic condition is openly depicted and despised. The English people do not let houses on rent to the Indians. Dev is deeply hurt by this kind of racial discrimination. He declares to his friend Adit that, he will never step into a white man’s shoes. He asserts that he will not live in a country where he is insulted and unwanted. Besides being the victims of social prejudice the Indians have to face economic prejudice also. An Indian cannot hold a top position in the office because there is always an English man in waiting. Dev is deeply distressed with the imperialistic approach of the English people and Dev feels greatly annoyed by their dominating behaviour and attitude

Even though Dev has accepted English culture and ways of life, he finds himself an outsider. What shocks Dev in particular is that the pattern of life in England is entirely different from what it was in India. In England he finds everyone an outsider and living in hiding, there is no, one to one personal contact. The concept of cultural alienation crops in slowly and he feels alienated so that he leads a life of silence and invisibility. His perception

is that this could happen nowhere in India, though in England, Indians are discriminated against everywhere and they are subjected to the worst possible humiliation. Once he wanted to purchase a dusky glinting icon of Russia, a Madonna and a child. The young man humiliates him saying it is too expensive for an immigrant and refuses to name even the price. Dev is thunderstruck at the inferior treatment.

Dev, Adit and Sarah, the three important characters of the novel come to reckon their reality in three different ways; but none of these are able to do it completely. The question of being cast out on basis of subalternity in one's own land is raised through Sarah who has chosen to marry Adit in order to fill certain gaps and chasms in her life. But it is very doubtful whether she succeeds fully. However, her life affirming attitude and faith in making sincere efforts for assimilation into an alien culture are clearly perceptible in her decision to come to India with Adit in spite of the counsel to the contrary by her parents. The marriage of Adit and Sarah emblemizes the effort of reducing tensions due to racial discrimination. Dev's decision to stay and Adit's decision to leave London symbolize the dialectical character of the synthesizing of alien cultures. In its core meaning, the novel does admit of the possibility of healthy coming together of different cultures which can be beneficial for both.

The British people are introverts, while the Indians are extroverts. Obviously, Dev feels lonely in the society of London because he is an Indian. There is a lack of empathy amongst Englishmen, who pay more attention to their pets, but do not recognise their neighbours and behave with them like strangers. The silence and hollowness of London disturbs Dev and makes him sense a feeling of loneliness and uneasiness. He finds a street heavily populated, and yet utterly silent and deserted. He finds himself at a loss, insulted and isolated. He realises that the Indian immigrants rush to the West and in the process, suffer from identity crises and consider themselves like a Kafka stranger wandering through the

dark labyrinth of a prison. Dev regards London as a city of machines, where people live in a mechanical way. This suffocates him because in India, life is quite different. He is surprised to see that the English people are not self-conscious about their relationships, unlike the Indians. That is the reason why he feels like a stranger. The difference and the conflict between the cultures of the East and the West is the main cause of disharmony.

Dev's sense of pride does not allow him to adjust in England and adopt the alien culture. He is shocked to notice that the Indians can sell even their souls in England and he also finds that they are completely indifferent to India. The trouble with the immigrants is that they become submissive in an alien country. If anyone in India had asked one to turn off the radio, one wouldn't dream of doing it. One might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. In England all that one does is to oblige and cow down silently. Thus, he puts himself in a subaltern position and travels different in behaviour to the Indian friends because he is unable to adopt to their changed style of living. One can see that Desai has dealt with the problem caused by racial relations.

Dev and Adit, immigrant Indians find themselves entrapped in England which is an alien country. They are victimised and suffer from a loss of identity due to the change in the social atmosphere of England and they find themselves uprooted from their own moorings. The sense of racial discrimination is felt more acutely by Dev than perhaps by Adit. His condition is like that of one of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk in the streets like strangers in an enemy territory. They lead a frozen, listless but dutiful life trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially try to belong there in the adopted land. Adit, even though he has married Sarah, finds that the behaviour of the English people towards him does not change at all. Sarah's mother, Roscommon, hurts him in particular and he feels so deeply insulted by it. With the sanskaras of an Indian he feels that a son-in-law deserves a special treatment in his father-in law's house. But the

situation here is quite different, and he desires to go back to his mother country and witness the Indian landscape of vastness and wilderness, sunrise and sunset. He feels that he is leading an unworthy artificial life and wishes to leave it for a real life. This would be possible for him only if he goes back to his mother country and native culture.

Sarah, Adit's English wife, finds by hints and suggestions that she is a subaltern among her own countrymen. Adit and Sarah love each other even though their language and culture continue to differ. Even though there are certain differences and controversies between them, Sarah cooks Indian curry without developing a taste for it while Adit has no taste for some British food items. Sarah does not like Indian music nor can she understand and appreciate Indian jokes and conversations which Adit enjoys with great zeal. It must be noted that Sarah makes sincere efforts to mentally relate herself with her husband inspite of all the differences and genuinely intends to fulfil her life. She is very dutiful and is supported with the aid of a priestess to believe that if all the rites are performed, all the rules observed, life would after all be quite simple. She is anguished by a sense of emptiness and lack of fulfilment, despite the fact that she tries to be an ideal and faithful wife. Sarah is different from other characters, she is almost an exile, a subaltern in her own land but unlike others she never withdraws. Unlike women who behave uncouth in public, Sarah starts emulating the Indian way of life after her wedding to Adit. Sarah has an intense longing to lead a life of utmost sincerity. After wedding, her silence turns into aloofness, Sarah loses her zest to participate in an active way of living, mellows down, lethargy pervades and she is alienated from herself. She feels empty, and ineffectual in directing her life. Sarah is not lonely at home, she lives her life with Adit with due adjustment, and also adjusts with Dev and his social circle. In school, she has her colleagues but amidst the crowd Sarah is solitary, she cannot enjoy the company of her countrymen, as she feels like a subaltern. She is unable to work with co-ordination, wants to escape socializing and likes to hide from her own people.

This analysis of Sarah's character is remarkable as she is displaced in her own country and her crisis of identity will not be solved even if she goes to India, yet she can get over her crisis by developing her own inner resources: If Sarah is able to maintain the spirit of her constructive thoughts and if they are not followed by any repercussions of self-destructive feelings, she may be successful. It is clear that she strives towards a clearer and deeper experiencing of her feelings, beliefs and wishes, outgrowing narrow, neurotic egocentricity and she manages to relate herself to others. She will steadily gain inner certainty which comes by belonging, through active participation in life.

In the second part of the novel both Adit and Dev become transformed people and Dev begins to feel the charm of the country and Adit longs for his native. In part three, Adit comfortably settled in England becomes home-sick and leaves England while Dev stays on. Dev portrays the conflict of the immigrants who can't save their cultural roots and make an effort to strike new roots in an alien territory and eventually attain a subaltern status. The psychological intricacies of the behaviour of the protagonists, their struggle to find a meaning in life symbolize the concern of modern man with the eternal human situation which speaks of the changed perspective. He is found to live either in illusions by retreating into fabrication and fantasy, or shows reluctance to face reality; lives in a self-imposed solitary confinement.

Dev is prompted by an urge for emotional identification with his new home and struggles to discover his identity in a strange and silent milieu. Stranded between acceptance and rejection, he is tortured emotionally and intellectually. Lack of decision and choice brings out a psychic deadlock. London makes him aware that he does not belong to the place, which he thinks is the source of his conscious existence. It is this otherness in him that brings out the subalternity in him.

Sarah, the British wife of Adit Sen, figures as a character struggling against a set of very difficult circumstances. Dev and Adit encounter situations of racial discrimination but

Sarah's estrangement is much more intricate. By marrying a non-white, she has broken the social code, and all the more so having married to an Indian, one from the country which was once a British colony. The narrative gives the hints of disparaging attitude of the English to Adit and Indians in general. Sarah is mocked, taunted and ridiculed by her colleagues and even small children studying in the school where she is a clerk. Thus *Bye Bye, Blackbird* explores the lives of the subalterns seeking to forge a new identity in alien society.

As one rightly observes, Subaltern is defined as the general attribute of subordination, whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and otherness. The silence of the subaltern in the struggle for liberation also seems invisible. The elite, particularly politicians and those at their service, wield discursive power which enables them to misrepresent the subaltern. The subaltern cannot speak because they do not have discursive power. The novel throws light on the private and the public subaltern aspects faced by the character, Uma, who left with no choice of her own become the prototype of subaltern victim. In Uma's pain one finds an entrapment and subjugation because she is at home and under parents custody but somewhere fail to overcome the subaltern position.

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