

A Study of Postcolonial Elements in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*

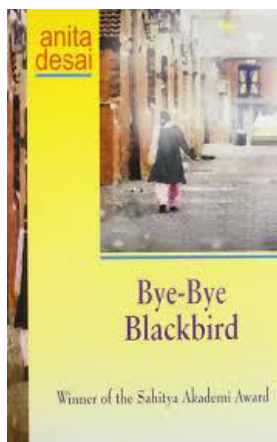
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Abstract

The quest for identity and alienation are the central concerns of Anita Desai's works. She tends to explore every aspect of a person's life. Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with Indian immigrants in England before 1964, the year when England completely changed its immigration policy. The blackbirds are especially Indians flying to England. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* explores the world of three people who are stuck with their identity and how they have to find out their true self. The novel centers around three characters Adit, Sarah and Dev. The novel depicts the real crisis of these people who really try hard to find their own existence in an alien land, where Adit and Sarah are more inclined to India after their brutal experiences in England. But Dev who came to England with a sort of hatred began to accept it as his homeland. Through this paper I tend to explore the phases of their immigration in the light of Homi K Bhabha's theory of Mimicry and Hybridity.

Keywords: post colonialism, hybridity, identity, alienation, other



Introduction

Post-Colonialism is an intellectual direction (sometimes also called an “era” or the “post- colonial theory”) that exists since around the middle of the 20th century. It developed from and mainly refers to the time after colonialism. The post- colonial direction was created as colonial countries became independent. Nowadays, aspects of post- colonialism can be found not only in science concerning history, literature and politics, and also in approach to culture and identity of both the country that were colonized. Postcolonial theory is a theoretical approach to analyze the literature produced in countries that were once the colonies of Britain and Spain. The Palestinian American cultural critic Edward Said was the major figure in post-colonial thought and his work *Orientalism* is the founding text. Other important postcolonial critics are Homi K Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon. Anita Desai is a

powerful and persuasive voice among the Indian novelists cut off from their roots. Anita Desai usually uses the theme of expatriation in most of her words. She evokes the right atmosphere through the rich mental images characteristic of her style and the use of symbols. Anita Desai has turned novel into a serious intellectual endeavor rather than an object of mere entertainment. In her hands, novel is a mature, evolved and creative genre fit for expressing somber and reflective thoughts. She is more concerned with the inner world than with the outer world. Emigration of the individual is a tenacious idea in Desai's novels. The sensitive human being suffers from a sense of alienation which could reach the intensity of an existential despondency. She reveals the existential attributes of man in society. She examines a man in action in order to reveal his hidden intentions behind the reality of conscious mind. Desai's novel brings forth some ingenious presumptions of her creativity. They leave an impression on the reader that Desai's art moves from strength to strength, proliferate in wit, humor and creative abundance.

Cultural Conjunction

The novel opens with the arrival of Dev in England. Dev, a young Bengali student, is ambitious to join the prestigious London School of Economics. He stays with Adit Sen and his English wife Sarah. Adit Sen leads a settled life as an immigrant in England. He has a good job and with his considerably lucrative income, is able to live a decent and comfortable life. He is attracted towards the rich economic status of England and its material prosperity whereas Dev finds it difficult to acclimatize himself. Dev gives up the idea of studying and starts looking for a job. He does not get a job. So, he is disturbed and distressed with the prejudicial manners of English towards Indians. He rebels against Adit's 'Englishness' and the way the English treat the Indians there. He gets frustrated and wants to return to India.

Sarah is homeless in her own homeland on account of her marriage with Adit an Indian. She is teased and mocked by her own colleagues. She is always quiet and helpless and vague. She does not indulge in any argument with Adit and his Indian friends. She knows she can be easily misunderstood. A delicate balancing of emotion and will is needed to shore up her spiritual strength. The significant turn in the whole situation comes when Adit, Sarah and Dev visit Sarah's mother Mrs. Roscommon James. The novel then proceeds with a vivid description of the beauty of English country side. Adit becomes aware of the great gulf between her country home and his own over-filled city home in Calcutta. Adit's mesmeric attraction towards England is ended. He declares that he does not love England anymore. He wants to go back to his homeland to live 'real' life and Sarah accompanies him. Meanwhile Dev's attitude changes. He manages to find a job in Foyle's bookshop. He faces existential dilemma whether he should return to India or remain in England. Of course, he finally decides to stay on in England.

In this novel, Desai portrays the conflict of the Indian immigrants who strive to create a new identity in an alien territory and find themselves alienated. The theme of alienation is expressed in this novel. It also speaks of the problem of East- West encounter. The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* revolves round three major character namely Adit, Sarah and Dev. Adit Sen, the hero of the novel, settles in London and marries Sarah, an English woman. He loves England, admires Nelson and his battles, Waterloo, Churchill, anything and everything England. On the other hand, he holds quite the opposite view of India. Earlier to his engagement to Sarah, he had been to India searching for a job. But in four months, he could find only "a ruddy clerking job" (*Bye -Bye Blackbird* 20) at the salary of two hundred and fifty rupees and a possible rise to five hundred after thirty years. When he thinks about India, he hates ". . .the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the files and the stench - and the boredom . . . of it" (50). Adit's hopes are fulfilled in England. He has an English wife Sarah, friends, a house and job. He feels happy and contented. He admires England. He says, "I like

the pubs. I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom! I like reading posters in the tube . . . And I like the Thames . . ." (20).

He says that he likes the fat old women with faces like buns full of currants. Adit's attachment to England has made Dev call him a "Boot-licking toady. Spineless imperialist-lover. . ." (21). Adit is a great admirer of England, no doubt, but his attachment and affinity for his motherland still remains and he says:

When I have a whole month of leave saved up, I'll go. My mother will cook hilsa fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sisters will dress Sarah in saris and gold ornaments. I'll lie in bed till every morning and sit up half the night listening to the shehnai and sitar. (49)

He visits his mother-in law's house in a village. That visit totally changes him. It is clear that when he lay in Sarah's bed that night, it was not the large, unhurried owl's cry that he heard, but the raving of peacocks and jackals that make the Indian night loud with reminders of the emptiness, the melancholy of everything. (174). His love for India now bursts forth. He feels that he does not belong to England. Adit feels like "...the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory..." (177) In *Indian Women Writers*, Manavar expresses that "Like an existentialist Adit considers himself to be a stranger, a non-belonger. He moves about in London in search of belonging." (43) Now he thinks about India. He talks about the pigeons that sat on the rooftop in Calcutta.

He recalls his early days in India. Sarah wonders, " . . . how he had kept this amount of yearning shut up and enclosed inside him for so long, releasing it now like a dam that releases its water when it is full to bursting" (179). Another important incident which is responsible for this change is Pakistan's war against India. He loses all interest in England. He wants to go back to India. Adit now sees England as "...the falsehood, the fakery, the unnatural strain of it all" (182). His sense of non-belonging, loneliness and alienation forces him to tell Sarah that he wants to go back to India. He declares ". . . No -England! England. I've done with England now. Sarah, I'm going back" (198). Finally, he declares his decision to go back to India, . . . I can't live here anymore. Our lives here - they've been so unreal; don't you feel it? Little India in London. 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'm twenty-seven now. I've got to go home and start living a real life. (198)

Other/ Self-Conflict

Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of the colonized society tend to imitate the language, dress religion and culture of the colonizers. Bhabha's analysis of mimicry in this essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' is largely based on the Lacanian vision of mimicry as camouflage resulting in colonial ambivalence. He sees colonizer as a snake in the grass who speaks in "a tongue that is forked" and produces a mimetic representation that "... emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha 122) the best example to be pointed out in the novel will be the character of Adit, who believes that imitating one in power can make him the same. He tries to be one among the colonizers who once suppressed him but gradually he understands that whatever happens he will remain as the "other" among those colonizers. Dev on the other hand entered England with a hatred, as it suppressed his homeland for a long period. But gradually he falls in to the attire of Adit who left it for his homeland. Dev gradually try to believe that he could be one among those and thus the sad reality awaits him.

The dream is different for each character but it's truly connected to their homeland and its memories. Adit comfortably employed in London, marries Sarah. Something oriental in her attracts him. In order to accommodate oneself in a new environment one has to reconstruct one's self. He has to tolerate and adapt. He appears as a romantic admirer of England at the beginning. He has his own reasons for becoming an immigrant. He finds it difficult to notice drawbacks in the English system. For him India meant everything that is bad.

When I'm there...I take these things for granted and again I only notice the laziness of the clerks and unpunctuality of the buses and the trains and the beggars and the flies and the stench- and the boredom... Then I'm mad to get back to England and the nice warm pubs and pick up a glass of Guinness and eye the girl and be happy again. (49)

He admires and is happy to be an immigrant. Adit regards England as a "land of golden opportunities" and material prosperity. He hardly notices the drawbacks in England and considers himself an admirer of its golden beauty. He says: "I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom!"(18).

Dev, another protagonist of Desai's *Bye-Bye Black Bird* is a prolongation of Adit's character. Dev has come to England to study at the London school of Economics. Initially he is averse to the idea of staying in England as an immigrant. He has ferocious hatred towards England because once England has overpowered his motherland and ill-treated his countrymen. He finds that his homeland is beautiful than any other country and he is mesmerized by its culture and values that when he comes to England every second he feels that he is an outsider there. He considers London a 'jungle city' and has no wish to live in a country, where one has a chance of being 'insulted' and 'unwanted' (17). Keeping away from India made Dev feel entangled and suffocated. He kept saying to himself that he was trapped. Whenever, he gazed out of the window what gave him comfort is the view of the cedar tree, willows, meadows and woods. Though he feels he can never bear to be the unwanted immigrant, England finally changes Dev's Anglophobia and he is transformed into an Anglophile; he gives himself as an opportunity to identify England and to adjust with the ways of life. Dev shocks one and all when he bids goodbye to Adit and Sarah at the end of the novel. Dev also undergoes transformations in his character and strikes a comparison and contrast with Adit in existential pursuits. Thus, there is a stepwise psychic change in both the characters.

Multiculturalism in *Bye- Bye Blackbird*

Multiculturalism is one of the inevitable features of post colonialism. Hybridity happens when a person is caught between two things or two worlds, often two cultures, which leads him/her to a "double vision" or "double consciousness" finally resulting in a lost identity. Sarah and Adit are the victims of hybridity. Every second Adit is reminded of his Homeland and it compels him to change his view about his homeland. He never tried to know the real value and love of homeland when he was in India, but now he knows what it is to be in one's own land. A person born in a culture imbibes it as the very air he breathes; it cannot be thrust up on him. The value of homeland and its culture is threatened only when one confronts an alien society and when he becomes aware of the disparity between the "native culture" and "host culture". Adit's identity is somewhere in between, in what Bhabha calls the "Third Space" (Location of Culture 37). The significant turn in the whole situation came when Adit telephoned Sarah one evening and asked her to meet him in the city. He told her when he came back to their flat that he was finding it difficult to stand it. It tells you. I've had enough. It's all got to end now. There must be a change. A big change. I've got to do it. You- you understand? Now don't stop me don't say anything. I have made up my mind. (*Bye -Bye Blackbird* 202). Sarah, Adit's wife serves as a symbolic the tryst of two cultures-East and West. By marrying Adit she has become an outsider in her own country." She has become nameless, she had shed her ancestry and identity" (*Bye- Bye Blackbird* 31). The whole life of Sarah has been a kind of role – playing. The real Sarah is somewhere between the two worlds:

She wondered with great sadness if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world . . . whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth (38)

Sarah tries to adjust the two cultures in different water tight compartments. On the contrary, Adit who was fascinated towards England gradually develops a longing towards his homeland. The discrimination, loss of identity and a feeling of being stucked between two lands regarded him as second grade citizen in England. Even during his moments of fascination to England he never forgot to admire his land, during Adit and Sarah wedding anniversary, he asked Sarah to wear a saree and prepare 'charchari'. Both of them were stuck between two different worlds one which fascinated them and the other which they were never ready to forget. Adit finally takes his way back to India accompanied by Sarah, who left her own land hoping for better future. They both doesn't want to make their child an ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) who will always be stuck in a dual world. Sarah dedicates herself to her husband and binds the different strings in the story. Though she has to confront problems during the long way fare from England to India because of her pregnancy she embraces the limping thought as Adit's wife. She marries him with expectations to share the best of mind and spirit; but she gives up her womanly desires and like a traditional Indian wife admits her destiny. She leaves her country for the sake of her husband and motherhood. Adit weighs the advantages and disadvantages of foreign land, but by the end of the novel he concludes that when his English self was fading, he was dying to achieve his real self and to live as an Indian.

Conclusion

Anita Desai through her Novel *Bye- Bye Blackbird* portrays three different people who during their course of life in England tries to find out a balance between two cultures, one they wish to follow and the other they could never forget. Homi K Bhabha's theories on post colonialism is appropriate to every immigrant. Immigrant's life has never been so comfortable as they have to live in two worlds. Here again we have this constantly present dilemma with regards to staying or leaving. To leave would mean to give up, but this is the easier path, and to stay requires a lot of effort, patience, and hope that the situation will one day change for the better. In the end Adit realizes that he can no longer hide his injured self-respect and decides to return to India with his English wife Sarah. Dev remains in England for he realizes that those who call him "wog" do it because they fear the loss of their own self-respect by the intrusion of an alien culture. Thus, the fact is that Adit and Dev share a love-hate relationship with the ex-colonizers. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* there is different effect on different characters. For Adit, there it is an eye-opener, which makes him realize his need to return to his country. He completes the full circle; Dev begins a new one. When Dev enters England his state of mind is at an extreme. He has intense detestation towards England because once England has powered his motherland and ill-treated his countrymen. He shows abhorrence towards England and its people. He loathed Indians who support the western culture. Desai digs out Dev's deep rooted national feeling he acquired by history of Indian freedom. He considers Englishmen as his foes. The ultimate end of his state of mind is completely engaged with the spirit of his national feeling. The luxuries, happiness, privacy which everyone possess and enjoys English culture slowly changes and he starts admiring the "once hatred" culture. In the end of the novel he decides to settle in England. It is another end of his state of mind. Adit leaves England with a feeling of security which he never felt in England. Dev feels secure in the land of opportunities where he tries to build a new identity, for Sarah her pregnancy is a hope which will help her to get a new identity and security in a new homeland. So, we can conclude that novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai deals with east and west culture in which we find the matching and mismatching of the cultures.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks faculty members of Government Modal Higher Secondary School, Cheeral, Sultan Bathery, Wayanad who helped me in this research article.

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About the Author



Aswathy Krishnan is working as a guest lecturer in Department of English, Government Model Higher Secondary School, Cheeral, Sultan Bathery, Wayanad. She has authored many research papers in various Journals and has participated and presented many papers in National and International Conferences.