



CULTURAL CRISES IN ANITA DESAI'S "BYE, BYE BLACKBIRD"

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's *Bye, Bye Blackbird* presents the cultural crises suffered by her main characters due to the East-West encounters. This novel details the traumas of cross cultural maladjustments, the fear and the anger, the turmoil and the tribulations, the shame and the shock of the characters that could not come to terms with uniting the inner self with the society they are placed in. The novel revolves around three main characters Dev, Adit and his English wife, Sarah. It explores the inner sufferings and trials that each of them undergoes due to the East-West encounters. Desai evokes the psychological issue in her character's life affairs and portrays the dimensions of existential agony rooted in the existential loneliness that corrodes their being and makes it possible for them to find meaning in an arid existence. Anita Desai's protagonists find themselves trapped in the social web and thereby, experience a sense of ennui and meaninglessness of life. Hence, in order to overcome this anguish of being alienated they undergo self-introspection which, in turn, aids them in arriving at self-realization and a clear vision about the meaningfulness of life.

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Anita Desai, the grand dame of Indian English literature, was born in Mussorie on 24 June 1937, of a Bengali father and a German mother. This identity of her plays a significant role in the portrayal of characters in most of her novels especially *Bye, Bye Blackbird* as it presents the cultural crises suffered by her main characters due to the East-West encounters. This novel is considered to be most intimately connected to her own experience as she herself has mentioned in an interview thus, "...of all my novels *Bye, Bye Blackbird* is the most rooted and experienced and the least literary in derivation (Dhawan 92)."

This novel details the traumas of cross cultural maladjustments, the fear and the anger, the turmoil and the tribulations, the shame and the shock of the characters that could not come to

terms with uniting the inner self with the society they are placed in. This inability to connect the self with the society results in the alienation of self. In the words of O. P. Saxena:

.....self alienation, however, means the loss of contact of the individual self with any inclination or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns, as a result of which an individual is forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands or feels incapable of controlling his actions. (71)

Desai's main characters are all presented as alienated characters in a harsh, cold and relentless world that search for value and harmony in life and either annihilate themselves or compromise with their destiny. Desai also takes care to attribute all

the characters with a higher level of sensibility which distinguishes them from the ordinary folk and makes them, at the same time, misfits in the conventional environment in which they are placed. Regarding the choice of these characters, she observes:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great" No who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Sengupta 8)

The novel revolves around three main characters Dev, Adit and his English wife, Sarah. It explores the inner sufferings and trials that each of them undergoes due to the East-West encounters. Dev lands up in London for his higher studies and finds England's landscape to be absolutely enigmatic and attractive. In the beginning, he is too carried away by the materialistic and flimsy sophistication of the alien land and falls for it. It is visible in Dev's craze for London thus:

...nothing in his past twenty- two years had resembled remotely this world had entered by stepping through the door of the king's arms, this world of beer-soft, plum -thick semi-darkness and its soft, thick characters. Yet it was known, familiar, easy to touch, enjoy and accept because he was so well prepared to enter it- so well prepared by fifteen years of reading the books that had been his meat and drink, the English books that had formed at least one half of his conscious existence.

Desai manages to portray the disturbed psyche of Dev as a new immigrant Indian who soon finds himself besotted with the magical spell of England. Dev's insight into the private lives of the Britishers and the barrenness that surrounds them amazes him. Desai puts his feelings thus:

...he walks the street and parks of the city, grateful for its daffodil patches of sunshine,

loathing its sooty, sodden dampness eat toffee apples in petticoat lane and fishes limp sausages out of pools of fat in Lyons corner house lies in the grass under the green canopies of Kew gardens... boastfully gazing at the peacock-blue and rose-red paper flowers in a Mexican boutique, then is enthralled by the massive, blank bulk of Battersea power station...he is the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the enraged outsider and thrilled sight-seer all at once and in succession.

Regarding the voidness of English private lives, Desai expresses, "he walks down the street, thinking surely somewhere a child will cry, somewhere a radio will be playing, but the houses might be uninhabited if it were not for the window boxes of geranium, freshly watered, here and there, and the lights that come as in the dark...a cold wasteland of brick and tile." He gradually feels a tumult inside him that disturbs him day and night and wonders him whether he should stay, or go back. As it is clearly illustrates, "he is perfectly aware of the schizophrenia that is infecting him like the disease to which all Indians abroad, he declares, are prone...He is not sure, any longer".

Contrary to Dev, Adit is rather a well settled Indian with an English wife and at the beginning of the novel, he seems to be a seemingly contented individual. His attraction towards England is justified by his critically sharp remarks on his observation of India that has been ever disappointing as he says:

All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourist bureau. They were going to pay me two hundred and fifty rupees and after thirty years I could expect to have five hundred rupees. That is what depressed me-the thirty years I would have to spend in panting after that extra two hundred and fifty rupees.

As he is compelled to leave India for better life style and consistent economy, he has derived a gradual compromise to put up with the mistreatment of emigrants and insults shot at him. He admires the Western life thus, "I like the pubs, I like the freedom a man has here-economic freedom! Social freedom! ... and I like the Thames. I like old Ma Jenkins who

cleans my rooms ... And I like weekend at the seaside. I even like the B.B.C.”

On the other hand, Dev finds it hard to remain composed when a school boy calls him a ‘wog’. He gets angry at the way the emigrants especially the Asians being treated. Once when he is walking down the street with Adit, they hear Mrs. Simpson mumbling loudly, “Littered with Asians! Must get Richard to move out of Clapham, it is impossible now”. This expression suggests how emigrants, especially Asians are looked down as ‘other’ in England. ‘Otherness’ is defined by difference marked by race and gender. Dev understands that Adit is least bothered about insults and says, “Boot-licking toady. Spineless imperialist lover....You would sell your soul, and your passport too, for a glimpse, at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home”. But both have realized that they are opportunists after this juncture.

One day Adit takes a drive to his former land lady saying “That’s where I lived for three years, Dev. That’s the only landlady I stayed with for more than a fortnight. The others all threw me out, but I stayed with them, with the Millers, for three years.” Adit is given a feeling of unwelcome when he observes the behaviour and attitude of the landlady. When Adit sincerely asks about their daughter’s wellbeing, Mrs Miller snubs expressing that she does not like any personal questions about her house or family. Adit is taken aback but he takes control of the situation. Having infected by schizophrenia, he cannot come to terms with the humiliation he faced during his visit to the landlady. His pangs of uncertainty are innately spelt out by Desai thus:

In this growing uncertainty, he feels the divisions inside him divided further, and then re-divided once more. Simple reactions and feeling lose their simplicity and develop complex angles, facets, shades and tints... there are days in which the life of an alien appears enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision and, drawing

himself together, he feels he can never bear to be unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land, however abject or dull, where he has, at least, a place in the sun, security, status and freedom.

Later they have planned a gathering with other emigrants where they can party. “Modern Diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin- their homeland.” That gathering is a fusion of different migrants. One Pakistani claims, “My religion forbids me to drink or smoke or touch a woman. But here, in this country, what am I to do? I also do the things I see other men doing”. Sarah and Adit enjoy Bhangra dance and the amusement has extended its peak with the high volume of radio. Suddenly they hear a voice saying “Wrap it up, you blighters, where d’ you think you are, eh?” Next moment, the group is forced to reduce the intensity of its merry-making. Dev expresses his contempt thus “The trouble with you emigrants is that you go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you won’t dream of doing it. You might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. Over here all you do is shut up and look sat upon” (24). Samar, a Pakistani emigrant from the group, recalls the day he was called a bloody Pakistani” (26) as he refused to close his umbrella at the order of an Englishman.

These encounters leave a serious impact regarding the treatment of colored emigrants by the natives of England. The sense of homelessness and alienation overwhelms Dev as Desai puts it as follows:

Dev ventures into the city.... The menacing slighter of the escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down – like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wondering through the dark labyrinth of a prison....Dev is swamped inkily, with a great dread of being caught, step in the underground by some accident, some collapse, and being slowly suffocated to a

worm's death, never to emerge into freshness and light. (57-58)

Adit's English wife is more adaptive to the situations and agrees to follow him like a typical Hindu wife. Adit adores and celebrates her thus, "You are like a Bengali girl ... Bengali women are like that Reserved, quiet. May be you were one in your previous life. But you are improving on it-you are so much prettier!" When they visit Sarah's mother's house, he gets annoyed with the treatment as he says "My mother-in-law hates and despises me. They make fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore, I am angry. I am hurt. These fleeting moods of anger are new to him and ,...faced with one, he was unable to deal with it – he merely stood still and felt his leaden feet sink in as though in quick-sands". Adit has established a deep hatred for England as he starts thinking everything English to be disappointing and humiliating. He bursts out saying:

...he stood staring, not at one of the posters he so delighted in but at a piece of that Nigger, go home graffiti on the walls that had previously nearly skidded off the surface of his eyeballs without actually penetrating. Now he is screwed up his eyes and studied it as though it were a very pertinent sign board ...the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong.

He decides to leave England and says Sarah "Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself half-English, but it was only pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come?" Though Sarah decides to move to India with him, she faces a kind of alienation that is internal which Desai explicitly expresses thus, "shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear". Sarah is brave enough to face the situations in life though she has gnawing fears in her mind. She recollects her emotions as

She felt all the pangs of saying good bye to her past twenty- four years. It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew it, it was her English self to which she must say good bye. That was what hurt – not saying good bye to England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance from her, but always within the scope of a return visit. England, she whispered, but the word aroused no special longing or possessiveness in her. English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already.

She is aware that she can neither give up her native English identity nor accept the adopted Indian tradition wholly. During the farewell, when her friend, Christine asks her about baby, Sarah says, "You mean boy or girl? I don't mind either. "Or do you mean who it will look like, Adit or me? I hope it will look like Adit, brown as brown, with black hair and black, black eyes". Christine replies, "Well, in that case ...I suppose it will be better to have the child in India". Now that she has lost her identity as an English woman, she can only be considered as a multi-cultured, Mrs. Sen, the wife of an Asian.

Towards the end, Dev decides to settle in England to have a better lifestyle as he is hopeful of prospects in England. But Adit and Sarah say good bye to England. At the time of bidding goodbye, Dev calls out, "Bye-Bye Blackbird". This is how Anita Desai describes the diasporic element to the eyes of readers. Desai evokes the psychological issue in her character's life affairs and portrays the dimensions of existential agony rooted in the existential loneliness that corrodes their being and makes it possible for them to find meaning in an arid existence. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it, "is the exploration of sensibility the particular kind of modern sensibility that is ill at ease." Anita Desai's protagonists find themselves trapped in the social web and thereby, experience a sense of ennui and meaninglessness of life. Hence, in order to overcome this anguish of being alienated they undergo self-introspection which, in turn, aids them

in arriving at self-realization and a clear vision about the meaningfulness of life.

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