



## THE THEME OF DISPLACEMENT: A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S *BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD*

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### ABSTRACT

Among the Indian women novelists, Anita Desai is primarily concerned in her novels with the psychological crises in the lives of immigrants who are subjected to physical and psychological sufferings in a foreign land. The novelist has showed her skill in projecting the agonized mind of the alienated men and women. Her portrayal of characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to her feminist approach, outlook and perspective. The theme of Displacement plays a key role in her novels. The keen observation of the life of immigrants and the interest in the study of their inner mind are evidence by the portrayal of her characters. Desai, being a woman dive deep into the inner mind of the repressed women and bring to light their alienation and loneliness which are the outcome of women's psychological and emotional imbalances.

**KEY WORDS:** Anita Desai, alienation, displacement and emotional imbalances.

### INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, and Jhumpa Lahiri are the Indian writers who are residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have shared their sense of displacement and also considered as the major theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also with a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles.

Of these writers Anita Desai has stood out exclusively in dealing with human relationships with inter-cultural conflicts of values. Anita Desai presents a new dimension to English fiction through the exploration of displacement and conflict of values, which has become a typical neo-Indian phenomenon. Anti Desai's novels are known for their importance of characters. In all her novels, she explores the human mind. She places her characters

in complex situations and they find themselves alienated. Bye-Bye Blackbird is her third novel. This novel shows displacement, alienation and lack of adjustment faced by Indian immigrants in England.

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 cit 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" (BBB 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" (BBB 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..." (BBB 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,..."(BBB 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. (BBB 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. (BBB 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..." (BBB 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."(BBB 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. (BBB 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."(BBB 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. (BBB 198)

At Waterloo station, Adit and Sarah were on the train. Adit is excited thinking about India. His sense of loneliness and alienation was waning. The train lurched, a whistle shrilled. Smoke spumed. The fog parted to allow it a passage. The train burrowed into its grey tunnel.

Adit leaned out - one arm swinging its purple sleeve, its gold chain, its furled flag. He shouted in a voice that expanded and exploded with feeling. He gazed at the dark knot on the platform, waving. The last he saw of it was Bella's bright head in its midst, like the rounded flame of an Indian oil lamp, symbol of the warmth that awaited him. (BBB 222)

After marrying Adit, Sarah feels alienated in her own country. Adit notices Sarah suffering from loneliness. The only fault she has done is she has married an Indian. "Unlike Adit and Dev who have willingly uprooted themselves from their native soil, Sarah gets herself alienated from her society through her marriage."(Jacob 172). She is ill-treated by her own colleagues in the school. She dislikes questions about her personal life: "...to discuss her Indian husband, would have forced her to parade like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own..."(BBB 38). Sarah is even insulted by the school children. They take delight in calling her "Hurry, Mrs. Scurry!" (BBB 34).

Julia, her colleague insults Sarah when she is in school, "...if she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?..." (BBB 39). She is alienated and walks in the loneliest path. She loses her identity. She begins to wear a mask: "Her face was only a mask, her body only a

costume. Where was Sarah? .... she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all..."(BBB 36)

Adit and Sarah have quite opposite attraction to their respective motherland. Sarah loves India. She shows interest in reading stories about India and Indian life. This is one of the reasons for her marriage to an Indian, Adit Sen. Adit finds Sarah to be quite manageable, yet he dislikes her attitude. She takes no care to prepare food for Adit. She does not prevent her cat from sniffing it in. She finds Indian way of cooking difficult.

Sarah is not able to relate to Adit and his friends in their conversation, jokes and laughter. Remaining a foreigner in their world, she finds difficulty in wearing the Indian saris and jewelry. He compels Sarah to wear them because it has been sent by his mother. This is an instance of husband-wife alienation. "In short Sarah is sandwiched between the two races and decides to bid her own soil and society for good. She is in search of her real self and real life."(Tank 63)

When Adit declares his decision to go back to India, Sarah as a sincere and loving wife accepts his decision. But she has to face the problems before her, "There was the baby. There was the voyage. The uprooting."(BBB 201).

Dev's feeling of alienation is quite different from Adit and Sarah. Dev has come to England with the intention of having a degree from London School of Economics and work as a teacher in India after having obtained a foreign degree. But his dreams are shattered by seeing the immigrant's loss of self-respect in England. He is called "wog" (BBB 16) by a school boy. He condemns Adit,

The trouble with you immigrants... is that you go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you wouldn't dream of doing it... Over here all you do is shut up and look sat upon. (BBB 26)

He can't bear the fact, when he knows that the London docks have three kinds of lavatories-ladies, gents and Asiatic. He reveals to Adit, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted..." (BBB 19). He feels alienated in England. He longs for his home. He is fed up with the silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London.

"The English habit of keeping all doors and

widows tightly shut...of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking..." (BBB 64)

But in India, he can find out who stays in his apartment through their noises. Dev cannot adjust with the western culture where everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding. He feels alienated and longs for his own home, India. Dev is insulted by English people in various situations. A shopkeeper in Greenwich park of London refused to tell even the price of a painting. He asks Adit, "...Do I look that shabby?..."(BBB 73). Dev is insulted by the "blatant-expression" (BBB 74) on the face of Sarah's girl friend Christine Langford when she sees him in Sarah's kitchen. He is subjected to racial discrimination. Dev wants to return to India.

In Indian Women Novelists, K.V.Surendran points out Dev's feeling of alienation and rootlessness. He explains that, "Keeping away from India made Dev feel entangled and suffocated. He kept saying to himself that he was trapped."(72)

Dev tells Adit, "...I will go back to India an 'England - returned' teacher. I will teach. It's a pity I have to come all the way here for a proper education but there it is -1 must."(BBB 19)

Dev creates for himself an imaginary world through his education and reading. So when he confronts reality, he is disappointed and alienated. He loses his temper when the immigrants are insulted by the white people. He sees that Punjabis, Bangladeshis and Sikhs live separately in England. They try to adjust and stay in England. He comes to realize that he is not adopted and welcomed by the English community. He asks Adit, "You would sell your soul and your passport too, for a glimpse at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home. (BBB 21)

He finds difficult to bear the London climate. He comments that Adit and his wife Sarah should be masochist to live in such a climate. Now, he has love-hate relationship towards England. The patriotism of his motherland is also one of the reasons for his alienation. The nostalgic memories of his home bring about alienation in Dev. He says that

He is perfectly aware of the schizophrenia that is infecting him like me disease to which all Indians abroad, he declares, are prone. At times he

invites it, at times he fights it. He is not sure what it might be like to be one himself, in totality. He is not sure. Any longer. (BBB 86)

He asked himself, why he was there wasting his father's money, and not studying politics, philosophy and economics. He feels that I am here, he intoned, 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, to show them, to show them. (BBB 122)

At last, he finds solace in the 'nature' of England. He gradually adjusts himself to the life in England. He decides that.

All I want is –well, yes, a good time. Not to return to India, not to marry breed, go to office, come home and go to office again but-to know a little freedom, to indulge in little adventure, to know, to know. (BBB 122) Dev finds that unemployment is his problem. He is in love with the natural scenery of England. He takes a long walk in the country side and admires the beauty of Nature, its colour and the calmness of the surroundings. Later he gets a job as a salesman in Foley's bookshop. He seeks a new identity in English life. He takes the place of Adit.

Now Dev is ready to meet the new challenges, having found a new identity in English life. The couples Jasbir-Mala and Samar-Bella are the other immigrants in this novel. They are from India but settled in England. Their life in England is quite comfortable. They like their jobs and enjoy clubs and coffee houses. Even through they are happy, they are Subconsciously longing for their home, India. They cannot integrate with the mainstream in this alien nation. They built a "little India" (BBB 198) in England in *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*, K.V. Surendran points out that "it is self-alienation of these characters that is brought to focus in the novels" (2:78).

The deep analysis of these characters shows that they suffer from different kinds of alienation. Immigration and immigrant experiences

are the cause for their alienation. Due to immigration, the feeling that no one cares is always at the back of their minds. They come group oriented Indian culture. They feel alienated in independent western culture. In *Bye-Bye-Blackbird*, Anita Desai focuses her attention on the problems of alienation. The characters in this novel suffer from alienation, and the intensity of their suffering varies. At last they find a different path to escape from this alienation.

It has rightly been maintained that in the novel tension between the local and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of displacement, alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and familiar world (qtd. in Dubey 54). Anita Desai has brilliantly portrayed the dilemma of uprooted individuals through her novels. The experience of exile, cultural conflict, human relationship and existential problems which are the common problems in the twentieth century literary scene are visibly dealt with in her novels.

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