

Psychological Conflicts encountered by Indian Migrants in Anita Desai's *Bye - Bye Black Bird*

A Research Paper by

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Abstract

Migration is a move; a move from one place to another. In most cases, it takes place in order to live and work. Most commonly, movement of people from their homes to another city, state, country or continent for some reasons like a job or shelter is called migration. The paper discusses the life-issues faced by the Indian migrants who survived in England and their psychological conflicts as depicted in *Bye-Bye Black Bird* by Anita Desai. The paper also portrays the success and failure of Indian Migrants in England through the characters of Dev and Adit. In addition, it elaborates upon the theme of exile and cultural alienation leading to the ontological insecurity, alternation and anguish of uprooted individuals in the novel.

Introduction

Bye - Bye Blackbird is a novel written by Anita Desai. The story exhibits the life of the immigrants, who experiences a mixed feeling of love and hatred towards their adopted country, in a strange society. It also inspects the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The term blackbird used in the name of the book refers to the immigrants to whom the people of London want to say goodbye. The author discovers the adjustment and feelings that the people from India face there.

Life of Anita Desai

Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Her mother was a German immigrant, Toni Nime. Her father was a Bengali businessman, D. N. Mazumdar. Shortly after her

parent's marriage, both husband and wife moved to New Delhi, where Desai was grown up with her two elder sisters and brother.

She knows Hindi, German, Bengali, Urdu and English languages. She first learned to read and write in English at school and that is why English became her "literary language". She started to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine.

She was a student at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and graduated in English Literature in 1957 from the Miranda House of the University of Delhi. Anita married Ashvin Desai in 1958. Ashvin Desai was the Director of a computer software company and author of the book *Between Eternities: Ideas on Life and The Cosmos*.

Anita and Ashvin have four children, including Booker Prize - winning novelist Kiran Desai.

Career

Anita Desai's first novel was published in 1963 namely, *Cry The Peacock*. Then, another novel *Clear Light of Day*, most autobiographical work of her age, was published in 1980.

The 1999 Booker Prize finalist novel was *Fasting, Feasting*. It increased her fame. Her novel, *The Zigzag Way*, set in 20th-century Mexico, was published in 2004. Similarly, her newest collection of short stories, *The Artist of Disappearance* was available in 2011.

Presently, she is the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a writer, she has been shortlisted for the **Booker Prize** three times. She has taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College and Smith College. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and of Girton College, Cambridge .

Her novel *In Custody* was adapted by Merchant Ivory Productions into an English film by the same name, directed by Ismail Merchant, with a screenplay by Shahrukh Husain in 1993. It achieved the 1994 **President of India Gold Medal** for Best Picture.

Works of Anita Desai

In the reverse chronology, her works are: *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011); *The Zigzag Way* (2004); *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000); *Fasting, Feasting* (1999); *Journey to Ithaca* (1995); *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988); *In Custody* (1984); *The Village by the Sea* (1982); *Clear Light of Day* (1980); *Games at Twilight* (1978); *Fire on the Mountain* (1977); *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976); *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975); *The Peacock Garden* (1974); *Bye-bye Blackbird* (1971); *Voices in the City* (1965); and *Cry, The Peacock* (1963).

Bye - Bye Black Bird

Anita Desai has divided the complete story into three parts - Arrival, Revelation and Perception, and at last Abandonment. She has also got *Sahitya Academy Award* for this book.

In the novel, she depicts the beautiful London and the busy lives of the people there. The characters are not so real but they really undergo real problems; similar to those faced in a foreign country by the immigrants. The story revolves around three characters – Dev, Adit and Sarah.

It is about a recent immigrant declining to fit in and looking at those who do with scorn, an immigrant trying to accept and loving everything about the new place. It is also about a 'native' who weds an immigrant. The story contains a beautiful meaning in it. *Bye - Bye Blackbird* picturises the England of 1960s. The story is woven around two friends Dev, and Adit in London. Adit has lived for a longer period in London and wedded an English woman, Sarah. Dev arrives in London for his higher studies and job. Adit is disappointed and dissatisfied a lot. 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.

This has forced him to go away from his mother country and settle in overseas for a decent income. As Adit adopted England as his habitat, he is able to survive the insults hurled at him and humiliations. He respects the Western life and erstwhile masters. He says:

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

Adit falls in love with an English girl and weds her. He becomes a 'spineless immigrant lover'. Sarah accepts to become a typical Hindu wife. Adit is thrilled and says,

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!

Dev, on the other hand, gets angry by being called as 'wog' by a school boy. When they are walking down the street, they hear Mrs. Simpson murmuring aloud, 'Littered with Asians! Must get Richard to move out of Clapham, it is impossible now'. These lines hints how emigrants, especially Asians are looked down as 'other' in England. 'Otherness' is clearly seen in the difference, usually difference marked by outward signs like race and gender. Dev realized that Adit is least worried about insults he hurled at him 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 understood that they are opportunists after this juncture. Few days later they intend a gathering with other colored emigrants, where they can eat and drink. "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 mixture 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 Audit enjoy Bhangra dance and the enjoyment has reached its peak with the high volume of radio. All of sudden they hear a voice saying,

Wrap it up, you blighters, where d’ you think you are, eh?

Next moment the scene changes and the group is forced to reduce the intensity of its merry-making. Dev can’t take this and says,

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.

Samar narrates the day, he was called a *bloody Pakistani* as he said no to close his sun umbrella at the order of an Englishman.

These occasions leave a deep mark in Dev, who is divided between the opportunity he has got in England and the moments of bearing repression and differences. The feelings of unfriendliness and un-identification overwhelmed him. Desai expresses his pain:

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)

Dev’s pain vanished as he is ushered by the fresh morning. He himself is trying to face the challenges of an immigrant. However, he tries to manage with the superiority of English

people the constant humiliations upset him. When Dev asks about the feelings of Adit, he says

...the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench – and the boredom, Dev yar, the boredom of it. I live for the moment. I don't think, I don't worry.

One day Adit persists a visit to his previous land lady where he lived for three years. Strangely Sarah did not wanted to go. Then, he also shares his feelings as an alien in London. He also shares his bad experiences regarding his existence. He also expresses his experiences with his mother - in - law. He faces the anger of his mother - in - law. These were the treatments which Adit and Dev got from London citizens.

Thus, the Diaspora communicates the swings mind, pain and torture of cultural change. In the end, Dev who always complains about the nation and its people choose to settle in England to obtain a rich harvest. Dev is successful to set up his roots in England. But Adit and Sarah offer good bye to England. At the time of departure Dev calls out, “**Bye-Bye Blackbird**”. This is how Anita Desai portrays the diasporic concerns to the eyes of readers.

Psychological Conflict

In this novel, Anita Desai shows the current problem of adjustment faced by black immigrants in England. She evaluates this critical problem by representing the three major characters, Adit, Sarah and Dev and finding the effect of ethnic malice and hatred on their sensibility. These three characters face the problem of finding their individuality because their background is rooted in the different classes of society divided by birth, and from a definite sense of social placement, they find themselves in an alien atmosphere where it is not easy for an individual to adjust.

Ms. Desai also highlights the admirable success, the confusions and clashes of another set of isolated characters. Dev feels lonely in London from both Indians and Englishmen because the former have become used to the pompous attitudes and motives which he cannot pursue, and the latter consider him an outsider. At the beginning, Adit is happy

but later on, he feels lonely and his approach towards an England changes to a greater extent.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the theme of psychological conflict with encountered by the Indian migrants in England on account of their failure to adjust with the atmosphere and situations alien to them. The novelist examines this existential dilemma by describing realistically the situations of three major characters - Dev, Adit and Sarah, who fail to come under the terms of reality and consequently, feel rootless and utterly cut off from the people around them and also from their own selves.

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