

EXILE AND CULTURAL ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD* - AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The essay as an article seeks to explore the complexities and the dilemma of the immigrants in Exile literature by focusing upon its attraction, repulsion and their exploitation by the vested interests. The study shows how Indian diasporic literature novelists like Anita Desai has chartered this very crisis tormenting the sensitive soul of immigrants. The essay also attempts to highlight, through an authentic study of the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, how Desai has delineated the problems and plights of exile and the diasporic individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. Through Desai's innovative approach compelling drama and masterful style the essay tries to capture the confusions and conflicts of the exiles and shows how her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* simultaneously pictures a holistic view of the Exile literature and the Indian Diasporic literature. The purpose of this paper is to serve as an introduction and inducement to the study of Exile literature. This paper proposes to present a broad outline to Anita Desai's novel *Bye- Bye Blackbird*.

Introduction

A work which utilizes one's experiences, expectations, yearnings, dreams, doubts and dilemmas to look at the world in a different light with the intention of creating a better, more prosperous and more peaceful world stands a better chance of being accepted and acknowledged. Such a work not only draws the attention of the people but it attains their approval and appreciations too. The great legends irrespective of the language in which they have been written stand testimony to this by their deep concern for mankind and its betterment for the exiles and the ailing aliens. In other words, the literatures all over the world are concerned with and build upon the strong feelings and passions of men and women all over the world in spite of their differences in nationality, race, religion, colour or government.

The theme of exile and cultural alienation is common in the 20th century literary scene. Lost, lonely, drifting characters parade before us and their mechanical march point to the absence of meaningful relationship in the era of technological development and global interaction. Exile and cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon. Anita Desai gives a graphic picture of the exile and alienation of uprooted individuals in the novels. Desai reads the minds and understands the fact that they are suffering from alienation. Her characters in *Bye-Bye Black Bird* become victims of these feelings.

Exile and cultural alienation is the most dominating theme in Desai novels. As an expert, Desai portrays the ontological insecurity, alternation and anguish of uprooted individuals in her novels. Her alienation of this problem is prevalent in most of her works. She remarks her conditions as:

“This has brought two separate stands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and European culture which I inherited from my mother.” (Desai, Anita. *The Book I Enjoyed writing most. Contemporary Indian Literature*, XIII, 1973, 24).

Anita Desai’s preoccupation as a novelist has been the exile alienation of characters. Each of her novels presents one or two memorable characters. In the character portrayal again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions, loves and hates. Unlike most of Indo-English novelists, Anita Desai does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Her concern for the character alienation enables her to offer an unexpected glimpse into the deeper psychic state of her protagonists. She says:

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 the current, it makes no demands, and 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. (Anita Desai in her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Times of India*, Sunday Bulletin, April 29, 1979, 1)

Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, captures the confusions and conflicts of another set of alienated persons. It has rightly been maintained that in the novel "the tension between the local and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world." (R.S. Sharma, Alienation, Accommodation and the Local in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, *The Literary Criterion*, 1979, 14/4). In this novel Desai seeks to explore the complexities of the dilemma of alienated immigration by focusing upon its attractions as well as repulsions. In the novel there is xenophobia or dislike for the foreigners and it focuses on the socio-political and communal values or biases which make the life of an individual a veritable hell in an alienated world.

The novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, is an authentic study of human relationship bedeviled by exile and cultural encounters. Desai held: "*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is the closest of all my books to actuality-practically everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London." (Atma Ram, *Interviews*, 31). The focus off *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is on Dev who comes to London to pursue his studies. As the plot develops, one can find him turning into a completely disillusioned man. He feels alienated in London from both Indians and English men. There is a lack of sympathy in English men, who do not, recognize their neighbours and behave with them like strangers. The silence and hollowness London disturb Dev and makes him uneasy and alienated. He finds himself insulated and isolated. He realizes that the Indian immigrants rush to the west and in the process miss badly their own mother land. He feels extremely suffocated in the Tube station and considers himself, "like a kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison" (Bye, 57).

Dev contact begins from Adit who has settled in London with an English wife. He is confronted with the major problems as Dev moves out in search of a job. He finds it difficult to adjust with silences and emptiness of it – the house and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents – all. He never wants to live in a country where he is insulted and unwanted. He calls Adit, his friend a boot-licking today and a "spineless imperialist- lover" (Bye, 19). Searching for an identity in an alien culture, Dev feels lost and suffers from alienation.

Dev becomes a victim of alienation as his conception and perception are at variance with the experiences he gets. He compares and relates everything to India. He goes through different phases

of the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sightseer all at once in succession. Kalpana S. Wandrekar's observations aptly sum up Dev's alienated status.

Dev's experience in England makes him neurotic because he is unable to attach meaning to his experience. He is aware of this state of chaos and confusion in him caused by the outside pressure. (Wandrekar, S. Kalpana. *The Ailing Aliens, (A Study of the immigrants in six Indian Novels)*, Gulbarga, JIWE Publications, 1996, 152).

Dev takes his final decision not to return to India and not to lead the way of the masses there. He slowly and steadily adapts himself to the new environment. His friend Adit Sen, a young man from India lives in England with his English wife. After coming to England Adit worked as a teacher, and finally accepted a little job at Blue skies. He is happy with his job. He feels now a sense of cultural affinity. This closeness, however, does not obliterate the sense of his own cultural identity. He appreciates the landscape of England. For him England is fertile, luxurious and prosperous. At times Adit even groans: "O England's green and grisly land, I love you and only a babu can" (Bye, 130). But scenario changes in the last part of the novel. He secretly longs for Indian food, music and friends. A sudden clamour was aroused in him, like a child's tantrum, to see again an India's sunset. Even on out spread hair about Sarah's shoulders he could see the Indian landscape. Even when he thinks of a brief visit to India, the images of Indian food, dress and music are predominant in his mind. Adit feels himself as a stranger in England, and realizes alienated from the English people. He frankly admits to be "a stranger, a non-belonger" in England. He takes a boat back to India with his wife.

Sumitra Kurketi comments why Adit took a "U" turn to return to India.

Ironically, notwithstanding all his appraisal... He realizes that England can provide him neither of these (liberty, individualism) wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and is constantly regarded as ... a second grade citizen ...an intruder: (Kurketi, Sumitra. Love Hate relationship of Expatriates in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, the novels of Anita Desai : A critical study, E d. Bhatnagar & Rajeswar M., New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000, 45-50).

The novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* which has an international theme in the sense that Adit marries an English girl Sarah and by doing so he incurs the anger of the white society. Ironically, it is not Adit who suffers most on this account but his docile wife Sarah. By marrying a brown Asian she has broken the social code of England hence she is always subject to taunts and jibes of not only her colleagues but even of young pupils of the school where she works as a clerk. She always avoids any questions regarding her husband and family life but her peers take a perverse delight in asking such questions. Julia who is a teacher in her school comes out with typical British superciliousness. Sarah dreads such embarrassing comments:

She was still breathing hard at having so narrowly escaped having to answer personal questions. It would have wrecked her for the whole day to have to discuss Adit with Julia, with Miss Pimm, in this sane, chalk dusted, workday office. She was willing to listen for hours to Miss Pimm's diagnosis of her aches and pains... But to display her letters from India, 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, although they would have been more than ready to believe her ... She had stammered out her replies, too unhappy even to accuse them of tactlessness or inquisitiveness and, for her pains, had heard Julia sniff, as she left the room, "if she's ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?". (Bye, 4).

What of grown-ups, even the young ones emulating the elders, taunt her. Her pupils ignore her and taunt. As she dated through their throng, they pretended not to notice her at all, but once she came across the road, she heard them scream, "Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry." And "Where's the fire, pussy cat?" this much about the ordeal she undergoes at her work place at the hands of her colleagues and pupils. But the strains of interracial marriage are so much on her that they affect her day-to-day life. When she goes for shopping she avoids going to the stores of Laurel Lane where she lives, for her shopping would easily betray her link with India. So she prefers going to big department store where she would remain an anonymous buyer, none knowing her Asian connections.

But in spite of all her precautions she cannot escape the charade which is made part of her life. The tension between pretension and actuality, appearance and reality is always there which tells upon her, resulting in schizophrenia. She does not know to where she belongs and she is fed-up with putting on faces. She wants genuineness and that would come only when she leaves England for good at the end of the novel. In England she is not at peace. Her alienation has been described more than once in the novel which makes her lonely, the question always nagging her who she is. After marriage Sarah faces an alienated crisis:

She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring as though she watched them disappear. Or could only someone who knew her, knew of her background and her marriage, imagine this? Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name that she seemed, with a sudden silver falling on the light of glamour, to an unusually subdued and thoughtful Adit?. (Cry, 31).

A clear description of Sarah's identity crisis is to be found in later authorial comment in the same chapter of the novel. If a girl marries in the same culture it is easier for her to adjust to her new home and people. But interracial and intercultural marriage causes adjustment problem which are not easy to overcome. In Sarah's case the problem becomes more complicated for she has married a person whose race was once ruled over by her own.

In spite of "progress" and "modernity" old prejudices die hard. Sarah is homeless in her own native country which is the biggest irony. The question continues to haunt her: who was she? :

Who was she – Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari One burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen the Head's secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency? Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters ... she felt an impostor, but equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit's records ... she had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the

morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles and when she was playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Where was Sarah? ... she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth. (Bye, 34-35).

Sarah's problem is human. She wants to be a real person whether English or Indian. She is fed-up with sitting in the fence. She tries her best to remain a sincere wife seeing to it that her marital life is not destroyed. Her husband too had been playing charade although not as consciously as she. But he also realizes falsity of his existence in England and Sarah also knows it well: "His whole personality seemed to her to have cracked apart into an unbearable number of disjointed pieces, rattling together noisily and disharmoniously" (Bye, 200). When after the 1965 Indo-Pak war Adit is in the process of making a decision to leave England for good, he is very edgy and unstable and this is the time when he needs a cooperative understanding wife, and Sarah does well as a wife. Of all wives in Anita Desai's novels she is the best in understanding and supports her husband. In the circumstance mentioned above she knows how to handle her husband:

She could not tell what effect the smaller refusal or contradiction might have on him - ...Rather she would sacrifice anything at all, in order to maintain, however superficially, a semblance of order and discipline in her house, in her relationship with him. His whole personality seemed to her to have cracked apart ... if she allowed this chaos to reflect upon their marriage, she knew its fragments would not remain jangling together but would scatter, drift and crumble."(Bye, 200).

Sarah, the English wife of Adit Sen has the same feeling of alienation as her husband. She lives in a dual world, the two social worlds that do not meet the two incompatible cultures that split her. She gets herself alienated from her society through her marriage. She remains an outsider in the

Indian community because she is English. She does not belong anywhere. She is not a physically uprooted person. Yet her condition is precarious.

Sarah's dilemma is not that of finding new roots but it is that of uprootedness and hence deeper. She finds herself an alien and a stranger. At the time of her departure, Sarah is sad to leave her place, "It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye." (Bye,221).

Conclusion

The above study of the novel shows that even though socially Sarah is not very happy because of racial prejudice and alienation from her people yet as a wife she very sensibly takes care of things. Most of Anita Desai's couples don't pull well in marriage but happily here we have a warm understanding wife that is Sarah. Her social being may not be satisfied and contented. We have all-out praise for this alien woman who understands her husband, his family and country which she would accept, once in India. Anita Desai very brilliantly has brought to focus the exile and self-alienation of these three characters in Bye-Bye Black Bird. The uprooted individuals Adit, Dev and Sarah have constant identity crises and suffer from exile, cultural and social alienation throughout the novel. This paper has tried to present the growth of the Exile Literature from its humble beginnings to its status in the present day with special reference to Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. This is only a beginning but not the end in that this paper hopes to create many more interested in the study of Exile Literature.

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