

Cultural Encounters in Anita Desai's *Bye, Bye Black Bird*

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Anita Desai's novel *Bye, Bye Black Bird* (1971) is an authentic study of man-woman relationships bedevilled by cultural encounters. Of all the novels of Desai this is the most intimately related to her own experience. She said in an interview "of all my novels *Bye, Bye Black Bird* is the most rooted and experienced and the least literary in derivation." (92, R.K Dhavan)

Desai's novels seems pre-eminently a novel about East-West encounter and the traumas of cross-cultural adjustments, the anger, shame, and frustrations of characters re-enact the colonial experience of both, the erstwhile oppressor and the oppressed, and their struggle to break through cultural situations brought about by the colonial political history.

The heroine of the novel, Sarah stands between the poles –India and England. She is weak but possess steady voice, she becomes a victim of psychic and social alienation, yet signifying the twentieth century man's attempt to forget a historical situation, which he did nothing to create and could do little to alter. This novel portrays Indians and Englishmen in England with their problems both physical and psychological. Adit, an Indian is married to Sarah an English girl. Both of them suffer from problems such as the loss of identity, alienation and humiliation largely on account of racial and cultural prejudices. In *Bye, Bye Black Bird* Adit is an Indian who lives in England. He reconciles to his stay in England even though he suffers humiliations ungrudgingly and he inwardly identifies himself with Indian. Apart from this he obviously longs for Indian friends, activities, food, dress, music and culture. Sarah, his English wife, finds by hints and suggestions that she is not liked by her own countrymen for having married an Indian. Adit and Sarah love each other even though their language and culture continue to differ. Sarah cooks Indian curry without developing a taste for it while Adit has none for some British items of food. Sarah's cat doesn't please Adit. Sarah does not like Indian music nor can she understand and appreciate Indian jokes and conversations which Adit enjoys a great deal. Initially, Dev is misfit in England, discriminated everywhere; he can't get accustomed to the silence and emptiness of the city. Towards the end of the novel, things entirely change. Adit begins to be nostalgic for India and gradually gets disenchanted with England. The outbreak of India-Pakistan war becomes a turning point in his life and he decides to return back to India, while Dev who had difficulty in adjusting in England in the beginning, begins to settle down there for his higher education.

The novel depicts the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The title of the novel refers to England's bidding farewell to an Indian "*Black Bird*." The novel is in three parts "Arrival", "Discovery" and "Recognition and Departure." Dev arrives in England for higher studies, stays with Adit and Sarah. He is perturbed when he finds Indians humiliated in both public and private places. In the second part they become changed person and begin to feel the charm of the country. In part three, Adit once comfortably settled in England becomes then home-sick for it and Dev stays on there. Artistically speaking, this novel of Desai is rather weak. There is good deal of light-hearted comedy in it. Desai portrays well the conflict of the immigrants who can't save their cultural roots and makes an effort to strike new roots in alien territory and eventually becomes alienated. The novel is basically concerned with immigrants abroad, their experience of alienation, loneliness and nostalgia for their past life in India. From our point of view the central problem with which the novel deals with is the problem of marital maladjustment which is one of

the most recurrent and dominant theme in Anita Desai's work. Some critics like Uma Banerjee, R.S Sharma, Madhusand Prasad and P.F Patil have studied the novel from the point of view of existentialist philosophy.

Sarah is different from other characters. She is almost in an exile in her own land but unlike others she never withdraws. The novelist herself says Sarah's loneliness is different from other heroines because she chooses it deliberately where as for her other characters its part of their nature. Sarah loves Adit an Indian immigrant. But she wants to hide her relationship from her own English people. Here we find that Sarah though in an advanced country, she is still weak and submissive. She expresses her love openly for Adit. Desai deals with the theme of displacement in her novel. The locale of this novel is in London. The city has a strong impact on sensibilities of the main characters Dev, Adit and Sarah. Sarah lives a life of a cultural exile in her own country. She feels displaced in England by marrying an Indian in the sense she is victim of values, system i.e. culture. Sarah faces the problem of aloneness. Married to an Indian she tries her best to adjust the loose of identity in her own society. When the people discuss about India, she deliberately avoids the discussion. She is disturbed by the anguish of shedding her own name and identity. The matter becomes still worse when we see that even Adit was unable to apprehend the real reason of her anguish and loneliness and 'sat back, silent, shocked by that anguish of her. Adit and Sarah have totally different cultural backgrounds. Adit even though living in a foreign country but being Indian male dominates Sarah. She has longing desire to keep pets but her love for pets is condemned by her husband Adit and thus she feels suppressed and losing her own self not in India but even in her own country. Even though Sarah belongs to the advanced *West*, she is basically a women easily object to manipulation and control. She is acceptable this is obvious from Adit's remark;

“...These English wives are quiet manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look—very quiet and hard-working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week...” (29)

Sarah leads a miserable routine life with Indian husband. Adit behaves like a typical Indian husband who is least bothered about the convenience of this English wife. This is clear from the following:

“...Wash up, Sarah, dear and go to bed and don't mind me when I fall over the cat...unable to part with the warmth of shared experience and shared humour, leaving Sarah to pick up empty cups and glasses and full ash trays and yawn her way to bed...”(27)

Everything else being gone, she is left with shock of loneliness. She has lost her identity and appears herself meek, submissive and voiceless. But she could even come to grips with reality? Character like Sarah and Dev under the spell of rootlessness, are not made for such things. But Virginia woolf says: “unreality about their lives swamps the paper walls of their fort---turning them soggy, making the pages float away on dim waves.”Despite this Sarah represents herself alienated in her own culture. Her fate is worse than that of “the bouncing dog”, the homeless adventure she experiences in the novel

Sarah experiences an extreme kind of loneliness after married an Indian. Her marriage is an act of free choice. She boldly accepts the consequences of her choice with regret or any sense of remorse. She does her domestic as well as official duties with great patience and perseverance.

But she suffers a great deal on account of the crisis of identity. This is clear from the following passage:

“...if Sarah had any existence at all and then she wandered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step of the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real weather English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only sincerity its truth...”(35)

On the occasion of their wedding anniversary when Adit asked Sarah to wear a saree and a golden necklace referring to heavy change of golden mangoes sent by his mother as a wedding present and she contradicts his view by comparing herself to a Christmas tree. Adit gets upset and says:

“...You feel like a Christmas tree! I suppose all Indian women look like Christmas trees to you—or perhaps liker clowns, because they wear sarees and jewellery you--you—English people and your xenophobia! You’ll never laccept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your, boring ways. Anything else also clownish to you, laughable...” (193)

Bidulata Chaudhari in her essay *The Role Of Women in Modern Indian Society* remarked that Sarah the chief women character is painted as lifeless character, with a spectacular spiritual death with inside and whole is given to herself. Minor woman characters such as Mala, Bala and Ratna the old Punjabi ladies are not spiritually rich. They merely cluster around to densify the ordinary contrast between *East and West*. On the other hand attention has been shifted to Dev and Adit, the male characters in the novel.

Mrs.Desai’ little India in England draws attention to noticeable haunt for Indianness in English self. Sarah with her Anglo-Saxon origin is oriental in gentleness and submissiveness though she is alien to the torrid oriental heat and ugliness.

Sarah is reserved and sensitive woman. She suffers agonies when Adit reveals the credulous side of his character to invite scorn and pity from her relatives, friends, colleagues and relatives. Her longing for a Christmas wedding explicitly indicates non-belongingness and instability in her marriage:

“...I have never been to a Hindu wedding, so I don’t know how to compare but I don’t know that Christian wedding is touching and charming and heart wringing...”(190)

Sarah has objectively analysed the change in the late end of their lives. Sarah’s grudge was directed against her parents. She clearly identified the cause of the marital discord as the clash between her egoistical tendencies of her parents.

Mrs. Desai has deeply and objectively studied Indian married couples. She had therefore fearlessly commented on the marital disharmony existing in the lives of Indian married couples.

Sarah and Adit both feel that in their live there is little more than utter confusion and escapism, asserting into the recurrent doubt about their divorce and separation. In reality both of them are afraid of the instantaneous rejection vicious distrust and mocking pity from their own people transforming into involuntary escapist. Sarah dies a slow, spiritual death through her intense unfulfilled longing to escape from mundane and drudgery. It filled the world of English home, to become an integral part of splendour than in India. Adit sacrifices every bit of self respect and loyalty to her own people in order to become prefect “Babu.” He considers it the height of great achievement so in the end it is the contradiction that constitutes the base of maladjustment in the married life.

B.R. Rao put that in the novel *Bye, Bye Black Bird* the marriage of English girl Sarah would be an excellent subject for the novel. But there is a brief reference of the first meeting between Sarah and Adit. There is not real attempt made to explain the irresistible passion that impelled and English women to marry an Indian and break the scorn of English society. The loneliness of Sarah is made dramatic- more interesting than the tension between her and Adit. His sudden decision return to India, Devi's changing attitude towards England, the *Black Bird's* feelings that he is welcomed in England. The unwelcomed in England, the tension between hatred are faithfully 'described'. In spite of challenges' quality of theme of the novel fails in moving the readers. The novel depicts the Indo-English encounter involving specifically sex, love and marriage. The novel depicts the social isolation problem and prospects of establishing intimate and meaningful relationship between the two racial and cultural groups. This novel covers numerous aspects of the East- West encounter, between the British and the Asiatic immigrants in England and one such relationship is of marriage between disquieting life, the immigrant husband quietly pocketing insults and humiliations, enamoured of his fascination for England. His view is similar to that of B.R Rao's who believes that the novel makes almost no mention of love and happiness in the married life of Adit and Sarah with numerous adjustment that the married couple is compelled to make or has failed to make their ways of living. Sarah has difficulty in adjusting to each other norms of cleanliness; Adit's Bengali music is all dissonance to Sarah's ears. She has problem of wearing saree and jewellery. The rituals and belief mean nothing to the groan in praise at the lack of regard part of the other, for what one holds dear to one's heart. The large part of the novel deals with the social isolation of Adit and Sarah.

Sandhyarani Das rightly puts that characters in this novel experience a different type of defeat and disillusionment. (79) Sarah tries her best to keep up her identity despite her Indian husband but is defeated. She finally decides to go to India with her husband. On the hand Adit betrays himself by adopting the citizenship of foreign country and marrying a foreigner but he too is finally defeated in his adventure. At last decides to return to his country. When Adit informs Sarah about his desire to go back to Indian, Sarah also agrees to go with him. Adit feels nostalgic for his motherhood. He feels he has been pretending all the time. Their lives in India have been so unreal. When the flat is almost empty after all that was to be sold and they were preparing themselves to go to India to transport her to a land where she would regain warmth and personality. In the new land if she was to come to life again, that would be a different and perhaps a better life. She must say good -bye to her English self.

At the end of novel Sarah is seen leaving her own country, its own culture for the sake of Adit and thus her own self by accompanying him to India. It is aptly seen thus:

“..Sarah leaned out—one arm waving, briefly, slowly, in doubt or unwillingness, she herself could not say. She called out a subdued good-bye to the little dark knot on the platform, waving. The last she saw of it was Bella's bright head in the mist, like a saucy merrigold in the city window box, last symbol of London's cockney stanches that she was losing now, had lost already...”(228)

Dev's prayer at the end is ironical. It is a farewell to the *Black Bird*, the Indian immigrant, Adit to his own *West*. Adit and Dev can't shed their Indianness despite staying in foreign country. Adit accepts the reality of the Indianness and decides that his son will be born in India. Sarah's loose of identity and alienness among her own people in her own country leads her to the conclusion that going back to India with her husband is the best solution to her problem of her own personal identity. Though Dev stay back in England for higher studies but in his parting to Adit and Sarah

which is also a prayer for himself, there is a suggestion of acceptance of his real self: that Dev-the black bird will also feel obliged to return to its permanent *West* in future.

Thus, a close textual analysis reveals decisive influence of the socio-cultural, historical and economic factors on the ultimate destiny of the characters in the novel. It would be over simplification to say that characters are merely passive products of their culture. The novel deals with alienation of an English lady Sarah married to Adit an immigrant from India. In the novel Adit faces economic crises due to which he could not come back to India immediately after his marriage. As a result Sarah bows down her head of committing a mistake of marrying an Indian in her own society. She is treated as an out caste while in her own land. Adit in spite of his adjustments—compromises he makes under given circumstances, behaves at time like a typical Indian male whereas Sarah in spite of being a women from so called advanced west is quiet meek and submissive. While, Adit and Dev has choice to opt for their natural conditions, their true circumstances—Sarah has no choice she surrenders to the decision of her husband. In seeking her own self Adit is totally unaware of the loss of self that his decision implies for Sarah .once again Desai draws our attention to the annihilation of self that marriage involves for a female –a theme that she picks up in her novel.

Works Cited:

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