

Crisis of Identity among Characters in Anita Desai's "Bye Bye Blackbird"

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ABSTRACT

During the last two decades, we have a list of women novelists in Indian fiction in English. They are Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, R.P.Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Santa Rama Rao, Shobha De etc. among them Anita Desai is one of the most significant fiction writers. Her novel "Bye Bye Blackbird" deals with the tropical problem of adjustment and it is the story of Indians who have immigrated to England for the better prospects of life. Some critics consider the present novel as an autobiography as it describes Desai's own experiences whatever she felt, observed, and lived in England. Thus, the novel is a combination of personal experiences as well as the experiences of all immigrants. In true sense, the novel reveals alienation encountered by Indian immigrants in England. In the novel, identity crisis is portrayed through these three characters named Dev, Adit and Sarah. In the novel, there are so many situations in which the characters feel uncertainty. They become nostalgic about India.

Key Words: *Feeling of Alienation, Fascination for England, Nostalgia, Prejudices, Immigration, Search of Identity, Carving for motherland.*

Introduction:

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist and short story writer. She is known for the portrayal of the inner life of the characters. She is deeply concerned with human problems. According to Bindulata Chowdhary, "She has given a new direction to the novel writing in modern India". She uses different techniques to narrate her story. She has won 'National Academy of Letters Award' and 'Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize' for her work "Fire on the Mountain".

Her present novel mirrors the complexity of human relationship. There are three major characters named Dev, Adit and Sarah. The novel mainly deals with the problem in immigrants, alienation, love-hate relationship, lack of adjustment and existentialism. In the words of Iyengar "It is a story of human relationship and cultural differences" (Srinivasa, 1958). Anita Desai makes use of various techniques such as contrasting characters, the use of Hindi words, rhetorical skills, slogans, psychological analysis, and poetry.

Fascination for England:

Dev is a Bengali student. He arrives in England to enter the famous London school of Economics. He wanted to get higher education. At the very beginning, he starts to seek the job for him. He analyses his fascination for England in the very beginning of the novel as... "...he is appreciative of the greens and oranges of Cezanne, the trees of Van Gogh and the muscular ballet girls of Degas in their ethereal tutus." Dev arrives in England for higher studies. He stays with Adit and Sarah. Nevertheless, he has high prejudice against English snobbery. After arrival, he starts to seek the job for him. Initially he is frustrated but gets the job of a sales representative in a bookshop. As Vinay Kripal observes, "it is not merely physical journey from one land to another but it involves severing of 'spiritual and symbolic ties with his mother country'" (1989).

At the beginning of the novel, we find Adit Sen and his English wife Sarah live very happily. He settled down at this alien shores. He is the hero of this novel. He was born in middle class. He comes to England to enjoy the freedom. Here he falls in love with English girl Sarah and get married. London is fascinating and captivating for him. He expresses his feeling for this place as... "I love England. I admire England. I can appreciate her history and poetry as much as many Englishmen". Thus, Adit Sen has transformed himself entirely to England. He has fully adopted the lifestyle of Britain.

Feeling of Alienation and Nostalgia:

Feeling of alienation is the other side of identity crisis and uncertainty. In the novel "Bye-Bye Blackbird", Dev's alienation and spiritual agony are objectified in his hellish experience in London at the tube station. He is in dilemma as whether he stays on in London or return to India. The novelist explains his condition as... "in this growing uncertainty, he feels the divisions inside him divided further and then re-divided one more..." it is the world which make him nostalgic for India. India is that place for him full of familiar faces, sounds and smell. For him London is the thickly Populated place. As he thinks... "...utterly silent, deserted, a cold wasteland of brick and tile". In Desai's support, R.S.Sharma writes... "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, 1979).

Even Adit does not escape from the feeling of alienation and nostalgia. Adit's nostalgia is caused by his visit of in-laws. It is also intensified by the unexpected outbreak of the Indo-Pak war. Gradually his nostalgia takes a dreadful turn. It makes him ill and suffocating in English surrounding. He gets visions as one who is a psychic case. He is lost in the memory of India. He craves for the Indian twilight. Like a child, he wants to see an Indian sunset with rose, orange, pink and lemon colors in the sky. He becomes so homesick that he visualizes the Indian rivers. He also desire to see the bullock-carts, a monkey-walah and a marriage procession of India. He declares to his wife... “I can't live here anymore..., our lives, here have been so unreal.....”

In the case of Sarah, she feels uprooted even from her own culture because of her marriage with Indian immigrant. Basically, she is a great lover of India. She came to know about Indian life from the glimpses of pictures on the stamps. Emma is her co-sharer. Both Sarah and Emma are fond of Tagore's poetry, Himalayan flowers, Henna patterns on the palms on ladies, food items, music of Bismillah Khan and Ravishankar. In this way, Sarah is very close to India. Nevertheless, she puts away all her wishes. She feels her face only a mask and her body only a custom. Her own people like Mrs. Miller, insults her... “What about you Mrs. Sen? Have you no intensions of starting a family or do you think it wiser not in view of”. These all the things haunted her a lot. Thus, she is culturally alienated and her marriage with a 'wog' obliges her to keep “to the loneliest path”.

Crisis of Identity:

All the principal characters are not sensitive but introvert. Dev hangs with a sense of uncertainty. His problem starts from the sort of treatment, which Indian immigrants get from the English people. Dev is full of excitement and agitation. He feels divided within. Because English people treat him very badly. He becomes a victim of insult and abuse at the hands of English people. Indian immigrants are even not allowed to use a lavatory of the English. The London docks have three kinds of lavatories i.e. Ladies, Gents and Asiatic. He wants to return to India because he can never bear to be unwanted. Once a peddler refuses to tell Dev the price of Russian icon because he considered Dev too poor an Indian to purchase it. That peddler thinks that India is known for its poverty. Their typical and narrow-mindedness towards Indian immigrants is very sharp. Even Sumitra Kurketi rightly observed about Dev's situation... “Wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and is constantly regarded as ... a second grade citizen ...an intruder.(Sumitra Kurketi, 2000). Dev hates the label 'Indian Immigrant'. He feels like a stranger in England. Yet Dev is sceptic and realistic about everyone who believes in oriental wisdom. When therefore, he was called 'wog' by white boy, Dev sharply reacts and addresses him as 'paji'. While about Dev, R.K.Dhawan says... “He also thinks that there is a slow development in his own country and makes use of every opportunity to breathe the Indian mentality as provincial and narrow.” (Dhawan, 1993). Dev feels alienated in the beginning but at the end of the novel, he is very happy. In contrast to this, Adit feels nostalgic for India. In the beginning of the novel Dev is in confusion between either to stay or to return his homeland. He reveals his prejudices for the foreign land. Dev thinks that he is losing his real identity.

Adit understood well the line of reconciliation between these two cultures i.e. the eastern and the western. Once upon a time, he has a great fascination for England but the same feeling is now suffocating him. At Christine Longford's wedding the symptoms of his nervous breakdown. It can be seen... “Struck with feat for his health, for his mental balance, he stood frozen on the pavement”. A question torments him “Who is he and where is he?” He wants to no longer to be seen under label 'Wog', 'Asiatic', 'Indian Immigrant' etc. He craves for his identity. He feels alienation. He feels that he is losing his real identity. He wants to return to the mother womb. His nostalgia acquires a dreadful dimension and illness. He fed up with the life in England. Ultimately he decides to return India with his wife.

Like Dev, Sarah too is in search of identity. She is portrayed as a traditional wife. Her situation is more complex. She cannot decide her real identity. There are numerous adjustments of Sarah in the novel. She hates English People's love of privacy and narrow-mindedness. Sarah's position “represents, in a sense, all immigrant wives who have their own problems of adjustment when placed in the contexts of cultures at loggerheads.” (Pathak 1989). She thinks herself as puppet in the hands of Englishman like Adit. Though Sarah is fully devoted to her husband. She readily makes Indian food for her husband. On her husband's demand, though she has problem in puts on Indian attire and ornaments, she wears Sari. She prepares herself for her husband every time. However, her husband only thinks about her that... “She is like a Bengali girl. Bengali women are like that – reserved and quite”. Her marriage is successful but she lives a disturbed

life by her contact with Adit. She is fed up with this unhappy life. She avoids answering the personal questions from her neighborhood. She lost the harmony of her life. She cannot join English group in conversation, jokes and laughter. Her rituals and beliefs are very different from those English people. As a result, she remains as an alien in their world. She felt mismatch herself among these English people. Sometimes she felt ashamed of her husband and sometimes she felt afraid of being tortured. She is always ready to care her husband but there is still some lack of liveliness between them. She has to face many taunts from colleague because she has broken the social code by marrying a brown Asian. She felt uncertain in her own society. Adit too notices in Sarah “an anguise loneliness”. That is why she tries to keep herself away from English people. She does not know where she belongs. She feels uprooted. In fact, she is caught between two worlds and she belonged to none. She wondered: “Where was Sarah? She wondered if Sarah had any existence at all. (Desai 1971). Thus, about her identity crisis in England, a critic Jasbir Jain says... “She worries and wonders about her identity and two sides of her character, the two roles do not seem to match or meet. Both Mrs. Sen and the Head’s secretary were frauds”. She is a pathetic figure. She accepts to remain outsider in her own land. She has chosen her alienation deliberately by marrying foreigner. She is like a stoic character with gentleness and submissive nature. She represents all immigrants’ wives who have their own problems of adjustments. Many critics consider that her problem is rooted in her cross culture marriage and that is why she only suffers the pathos of an alienated girl. She cannot decide her real world. Really, she longs for her real identity.

Summary:

Thus, both Dev and Sarah are in search of identity. Dev is a stranger in an alien land. Whereas Sarah is an exile in her own native land. Fascination for India is also portrayed by Anita Desai. Adit feels non-belonging to England. The same feeling was felt by Dev in early part of the novel. Adit has much emotion for his motherland in the later part of the novel. At the end of the novel he rejects the western culture and society. Adit wants to escape from the unreal and artificial life, which he is leading. The Indo-Pak war is the last stroke to finalize Adit’s decision to return his own clan. Therefore, Adit, with his wife Sarah leaves England and goes to India. If talk about Dev, he is an extrovert, Sarah is an introvert. Both Dev and Sarah are caught in the conflict of acceptance and rejection, which leads them into intense suffering.

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Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.

~ Japanese Proverb