

## CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD: A THEMATIC STUDY

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### Abstract

Anita Desai is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene. In an era of rapid social changes, she has played a vital role in defining female selfhood by focusing on predicaments and dilemmas faced by Indian women in cross-cultural conflicts. Her novels have a deep cultural significance as she successfully captures, in them, the transitional phases of the continuously changing roles of contemporary women in India.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai treats the theme of human predicament resulting from the cultural hybridity, cross-cultural conflicts, alienation etc. In this novel, she very successfully portrays the problems of Indian immigrants to England. She presents this dilemma of the Indian immigrants in England through the story of Adit, an Indian immigrant, who comes to England and marries a British girl Sarah. Now, this interracial marriage becomes the cause of confrontation between their different cultures. Sarah feels as if she has been sandwiched by the forces of these Occidental and Oriental cultures.

The character of Dev represents Indians' hatred of British culture. In the beginning, Dev is very much disappointed at the racial discrimination by the British people who show their disrespect for Indian immigrants, but by and by there appears a gradual change in the behavior of Adit and Dev as the novel progresses. It is Sarah who takes the initial step of breaking the code of British culture when she marries a black Asian. We know she belongs to the West whose people think of themselves to be refined in their culture. The three major characters Dev, Adit and Sarah are obliged to face the problem of adjustment and re-adjustment in London. Now, this predicament of the three people is taken as a work of God on mythical plane, from the point of view of India.

### Keywords

Predicament, marginalized, immigrant, alienation, Oriental, Occidental.

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## Introduction

Anita Desai is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene and ranks with such eminent Indian English novelists as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Babhani Bhattacharya, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, etc. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, she has shown her concern about the disturbing question of the existence of women. In an era of rapid social changes, she has played a vital role in defining female selfhood by focusing on predicaments and dilemmas faced by Indian women in cross-cultural conflicts.

Anita Desai's novels have a deep cultural significance as she successfully captures, in them, the transitional phases of the continuously changing roles of contemporary women in India. The importance of Anita Desai's novels emerges only when her works are set against a specific cultural milieu. Anita Desai shows her concern about the cross-cultural confrontation that puts women in a state of dilemmas and predicaments. As a novelist, Anita Desai holds the opinion that cultural conflicts affect women in their personal life and consequently they feel alienated. She makes her women raise their voices against the injustice and humiliations meted out to them on account of the cultural confrontation.

In her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai presents the problem of immigrants who migrate to an alien land, here to England which was becoming a center of multiculturalism. This migration of people may be termed as a shift between the Oriental and Occidental culture. The people of the East take the Occidental culture as rational and more significant because they believe it to be having logical thinking, growth, forbearance, freedom, peace and modernism. Contrary to this Occidentals hold the opinion about the people of the East that they are uncivilized, orthodox, black barbarously violent, not ready to accept development and ever conventional and conservative. These differences in opinions have given rise to a superiority-inferiority complex between the people who follow their own cultures.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai treats the theme of human predicament resulting from the cultural hybridity, cross-cultural conflicts, alienation etc. In this novel, she very successfully portrays the problems of Indian immigrants to England. The Europeans call the people migrating from Asian countries 'blackbirds'. Consequently, these Indians are always in a marginalized position and they are taken to be unwanted foreigners who are not accepted by the native people of the West.

Due to this, these Indians are always alienated and lead a secluded life. Anita Desai presents this dilemma of the Indian immigrants in England through the story of Adit, an Indian immigrant, who comes to England and marries a British girl Sarah. Now, this interracial marriage becomes the cause of confrontation between their different cultures. Sarah feels as if she has been sandwiched between the forces of these Occidental and Oriental cultures.

The character of Dev represents Indians' hatred of British culture. In the beginning, Dev is very much disappointed at the racial discrimination by the British people who show their disrespect to Indian immigrants, but by and by there appears a gradual change in the behavior of Adit and Dev as the novel progresses. It is Sarah who takes the initial step of breaking the code of British culture when she marries a black Asian. We know she belongs to the West whose people think of themselves to be refined in their culture. Anyhow, we see that there is a regular debate in the minds of the characters on this point. And thus there is a treatment of the theme of cross-cultural conflict in this novel. Adit, though fascinated, always shows his disrespect to the culture of the West; Dev also bears hatred against the culture of the West which, he thinks, is responsible for racial discrimination, cultural intolerance, and bias, narrow-mindedness etc. and creates problems in interracial or intercultural marriage.

In the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Anita Desai depicts human predicament caused by cross-cultural conflicts. She depicts the conflicts of persons who suffer from alienation. The novel highlights the tension between the native citizens and the immigrants who face the issues of alienation and accommodation and for this, they have to fight in an alien world. Dev who is the protagonist, comes to London to study at the London School of Economics so that intellectually he may grow for the proper career in life, but he faces the issue of adjustment in the alien city. Anita Desai writes about him in the following words:

One of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like Strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong. (*Bye-Bye Blackbird* 208)

The novelist goes on to highlight the peculiarities of Dev who struggles in adjusting himself in London. R. Sivakumar writes in his research article: *Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's Bye-Bye Blackbird*:

The absurdities of Dev's existence in England and its drab superficialities have been recorded by the novelist with accuracy and detachment in a poetic and humorous language. Dev's longing for living with its variety and multiplicity remains unsatisfied in the new atmosphere where "everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding." It is a world that makes him nostalgic about India—the India of familiar faces, familiar sounds and familiar smells. Dev is particularly with the treatment accorded to immigrants in England. They are openly insulted, so much so that they are not allowed to use a lavatory meant for the English; "the London docks have three kinds of lavatories—Ladies, Gents and Asiatic." He gives vent to his feelings candidly when he tells Adit: "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted." The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets in London make him uneasy: "The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut . . . of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues" remains incomprehensible to him. He finds even a thickly populated place like London "utterly silent, deserted—a cold wasteland of brick and tile." (<http://www.goiv.com> 34)

Dev's predicament has been represented through his horrible experiences in the London tube:

Dev ventures into the city. He descends, deeper and deeper, into the white-tiled bowels of Clapham tube station. . . . The meaning slithers of escalators strike panic into a speechless Dev as he is 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 wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison. (Bye-Bye- Blackbird 63-64)

Dev does not like immigrants' lethargic behavior that becomes responsible for their loss of self-respect and dignity. Dev says to Adit:

The trouble with you immigrants... is that go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you wouldn't dream of doing it. You might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. Over here all you to do is shut up and look sat upon. (Bye-Bye Blackbird 65)

However, after a short time when Dev roams about in London and observes the several thrilling sights and attractive activities, his anger towards immigrants begins to soften. Anita Desai writes about the occurring change in Dev's behavior:

And so he walks the streets and parks of the city, grateful for its daffodil patches of the sunshine. . . He is intoxicated to think that of all the long programmers of music, theatre, cinema and art exhibitions that he sees in the papers, he can choose

any to go to on any day at all. . . It is a strange summer in which he is the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and the thrilled sightseer all at in succession. (Bye-Bye 94-96)

Now his attitude begins to change and a delusive uncertainty toward English people is created in his mind. He experiences acute pain at the brewing of tumult in him:

...a tumult inside him, a growing bewilderment, a kind of schizophrenic that wakes him in the middle of the night and shadows him by day. [Bye-Bye 96]

At last, he is not able to control himself and finally gets trapped in the charm of the beauty of London. He continuously shifts from one place to another with Adit whom he takes for a “Boot-licking toddy” and “Spineless imperialist-lover.” (Bye-Bye 21)

As far as Adit’s arrival in England is concerned, he has already done a number of jobs in England. He has served as a sorting officer in a post office as well as done the business of equipment camping. Besides these, he also becomes a teacher at the school Blue Skies. When he marries an English woman Sarah, his happiness knows no bounds. In the following description, we get an idea of Adit’s happiness:

I am happy here. I like going into the local for paint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day .... I like being called a wog. I like the pubs. I like the freedom; Social freedom .... Oh, I think gold, Dev, gold— everywhere—gold like Sarah’s golden hair. (Bye-Bye 18-19)

Later on, we find that there also appears a gradual change in the behavior and attitude of Adit for London and a sort of prejudice against England creeps into his mind. Hence he becomes nostalgic for India and begins to wish to return to India. With this feeling in his mind, Adit pays a visit to his in-laws with whom his rapport was almost lost. His visit is “ ... marred by tactlessness, by inane misunderstandings, by loud underlining of the basic disharmony of the situation. [Bye-Bye 199] Adit’s emotions pose a dangerous situation to him in the way that he begins to feel “an illness, an ache.” He frankly admits to being “a stranger, a non-belonged” in England, “hunted out by the black sensation of not belonging.” [Bye-Bye 206]

Adit blames his English wife Sarah for her hatred of foreign people. He remarks:

You’ll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your dull, boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable. (Bye-Bye 220)

Adit now feels that his attraction for his education gained in England is no more powerful and binding for him not to go back to India. Thus he tries to take himself out of the English bog and go back to his motherland. However, the tragedy is that not many immigrants are able to fulfill their dream of returning to their own country. In fact, they are trapped and helpless blackbirds in the alien land. Anita Desai remarks:

England had left Adit to drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realized that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev (Bye-Bye 261).

This continues forever and forever. No change, no diminishing of pain! The character of Sarah also highlights the dilemma and predicament of English women. Her problem of loneliness and helplessness due to cultural alienation has also been discussed by Anita Desai. It is not only Indians who experience isolation in a foreign land, the English people like Sarah also suffer from the agony and pain of alienation even in their own land just because of their alliance with foreign persons in the form of marriage. Sarah is also obliged to keep -

...to the loneliest path and walk “drawing across her face a mask of secrecy.” “Those who glanced at her —made aware of her by the violence with which she turned away from them—felt apprehensive, but, since she was a stranger, gave it no thought.” (Bye-Bye 34)

Sarah’s problem is that she also loses her identity by marrying Adit with whom her conjugal life becomes perturbed as a result of which she hides herself from the people belonging to her society. Not only this, but she also loses confidence in herself. She realizes that she is behaving like an impostor:

...like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own. (Bye-Bye 41)

This false appearance of normalcy in her behavior begins to make her nervous and sensitive:

“...so cut and slashed into living, bleeding piece”. By the time they move to live in a new house, Adit retires from Sarah’s life as well. (Bye-Bye 164)

When she realizes that her husband is worried about her misery, she experiences pain and agony:

It was as though she had chosen to be cast out of her home, her background, and would not be drawn back to it, not even by her husband. . . She had begun to

drift, round and round, heavily and giddily, as though caught in a slow whirlpool of dark, deep water. (Bye-Bye170)

The situation further worsens when Adit is not able to understand the real cause of Sara's pain of alienation. He is shocked at this realization of Sarah's anguish. Anita Desai comments:

...anguish, it seemed to him, of loneliness—and then it became absurd to call her by his own name as she had shed her ancestry and identity. (Bye-Bye 34)

Having lost all charm in life and her relationship with her husband, she is grabbed by loneliness. At this juncture, she desires to know her own identity on one hand while on the other she wants to understand the cause of her disillusionment. The novelist gives a vivid description of Sarah's loneliness in the following words:

Who was she—Mrs? Sen who had been married in are and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head's secretary. . . Both these characters were frauds; each had a larger, shadowed element of charade about it. . . . But could she ever come to grips with reality? People like Dev and Sarah, born under the spell of rootlessness, are not made for such things. The “unreality” about their life swamps the “paper walls” of their fort “turning them soggy, making the pages float away on dim waves,” (Bye-Bye38)

Thus we see that Sarah's predicament represents the predicament of all the immigrants and their wives. No doubt they might belong to that very country where their husbands are immigrants; these women have their own problems of loneliness and dilemmas, for they also have to make adjustments in that culture which is not of their own. In a way, as Anita Desai wants to bring home the point that their case is worse than the case of Indian immigrants. The novelist writes:

However, embarrassing sometimes the position of people like Sarah can be! They had learned exactly how much of this foreign world was theirs to tread and had given up their early attempts made out of curiosity and a desire to join, to interpret jokes which seemed to depend entirely on such matters as a Bengali's accent or a Punjabi's eating habits or a Bihari's intellectual limitations, of which they naturally had no experience or comprehension. (Bye-Bye 28)

In the light of the above discussion, the remarks of K. Sivakumar become apt when he writes:

It is this incomprehension that leads such persons to rootlessness. People like Dev and Sarah cannot belong to a world. It is their nature and destiny to hang between the two worlds, Indian and European, and be torn by their conflicting loyalties. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* had immense possibilities of being a great novel of profound psychological delineation. It is pity that the novelist could not fully make the most of the opportunity given to her by the story. The interplay of the characters, their cultures and motives, the crisis faced by each one of them and the resultant problems of disorientation have not been given as much attention as they should have been. For this reason, the novels, but the problems contained in the first few pages of the novel have not been fulfilled. (Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* 36)

Thus, the three major characters Dev, Adit and Sarah are obliged to face the problem of adjustment and re-adjustment in London. Now, this predicament of the three people is taken as a work of God on mythical plane, from the point of view of India. Regarding this, K. Sivakumar comments:

It has been maintained that in her novels Anita Desai has moved from alienation to a "mythic acceptance" of life and its myriad problems." However, even the last novel possesses lineaments of an existential novel and continues to unravel the problem of alienation, in its various forms, candidly and closely and describes its individual and social effects without mincing words. These novels present, like the earlier one, the essential tragedy of modern India, which the novelist sees as the loss of the truly human beneath the welter of impersonal social forces. (Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* 36)

As far as the predicament of the protagonists from the point of view of the places is concerned, in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the city of London also plays its role in posing dilemmas before its inhabitants. There appears as if there is silence and loneliness even on the streets and in the houses. This void situation makes Dev hateful and disturbed. He finds himself shocked at the hollowness of the houses:

. . . the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents — the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut — off guarding their privacy — It remains incomprehensible to him. It never fails to make Dev uneasy to walk down a street he knows to be heavily populated and yet finds it utterly silent, deserted — a cold wasteland of brick and tile. (*Bye-Bye* 70).

When Dev is extremely troubled by the pain of loneliness in London, he begins to hate it. He almost reaches the brim of revolt against the silence of the city



of London. The desolated look of the Waterloo station which is full of smog and haze represents the loneliness of the blackbirds in London. Thus there is all-around loneliness which looks like a perennial thing there. When the couple departs from London, there is a pessimistic atmosphere everywhere; even the words have no sound:

As in an old film, the dialogue was blurred, almost inaudible, merely an accompaniment to the scene — Words snatched away and sank into the haze of departure, the fog of preconceived absence. (Bye-Bye257)

K. Sivakumar comments on the treatment of the problems of alienation and predicament of people in the following words:

Anita Desai has thus delineated in the novels the problems and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. She excels particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels. She represents, therefore “a set of new attitudes and themes” associated with modern Indian novels in English. In the last two novels the problems of the alienated self, have been confronted and resolved in a positive way. (Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* 38)

Regarding Anita Desai’s treatment of the human predicament caused by cross-cultural conflict in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, N. R.Gopal comments:

*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* deals with the problems of acculturation. Adit and Dev in this novel are Indian immigrants in Britain and they suffer from many cultural shocks and degradations. The major reason for such problems is the romantic image that the Indians have had of England and *vice-versa*. The clash is between a romantic image and a real image of India and Indians in England and British and Britishers who come to India. The clash is further highlighted by the fact that the British have ruled India for two centuries. Adit is first of all fascinated by British culture and then disillusioned. He marries a lady named Sarah who is fascinated by India. Sarah marries Adit without knowing whether the Indian family system would accept her or not. This is again a clash between continent and island and *vice-versa*. At the end of the novel, Adit returns to India in search of his roots. Anita Desai emphasizes and is clearly able to put forth the fact that the romantic immigrant’s vision torments them. This novel also deals with the theme of xenophobia or dislike for the foreigners. Immigration through primarily an

economic phenomenon has also sociocultural dimensions. It is natural for a man to have a confrontation with the alien culture of the country he visits, giving birth to problems of interpersonal, and by implication, socio-cultural adjustment. And when such cultures are of different natures the problem becomes more acute and complicated. (From the Continent to the Island: Image as Archetype in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* 232).

Thus, to sum up it is modestly affirmed that in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai holds cross-cultural confrontation responsible for the human predicament and sufferings of Indian immigrants to England. The cultural hybridity causes alienation which further creates problems in the life of immigrants. Europeans think very highly of their culture whereas oriental culture is something barbarous and uncivilized, away from progress and growth. Hence they keep the Indian immigrants in a marginalized position and call them 'blackbirds' who are unwanted foreigners for them. On account of this racial discrimination, Indians are obliged to lead a secluded life. And Anita Desai highlights this problem by portraying the lives of Dev, Sarah and Adit. Through their stories, the novelist wants to bring home the point that this cross-cultural conflict should come to stop so that the people may get freedom from being sandwiched between the forces of Occidental and Oriental cultures and that they may lead their life without facing any predicament.

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