

# BYE BYE BLACKBIRD: A Reflection of the Struggle for Female Autonomy against a rigid system of patriarchy

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## ABSTRACT

I am a married woman. I am also a working woman. I love what I do. And I am actually paid to do what I love. Yet, everyday I return home from work with a heavy heart. No. My workplace poses no threats. Although many working women across the world would disagree with me; but fortunately, I am not one of them. My greatest threat is my returning home to my in-laws and tolerating their snide comments on my being out all day. The men in the house can do it. That is not a problem. But my going and staying out to work is a matter of domestic debate. I usually don't retaliate. But I cannot help brooding over, from time to time, how unfair life still is towards women. When you really think about it, the fact that women all over the world are still fighting for equal rights defies all logic. Humans have mastered flight, walked on the moon and created the internet but women still can't be trusted to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies, be guaranteed freedom from violence or harassment or get paid the same amount as men for doing the same damn work. From time to time, many women have voiced their disgruntlement over the gender inequality. Anita Desai is one such powerful and persuasive voice among the writers, endeavouring in all her works to reflect the how the female autonomy strives to prove its existence in a strictly patriarchal cultural pattern. This paper seeks to refer to one of her novels, *Bye, Bye Black Bird* (1971) to highlight the way man-woman relationships are bedevilled by cultural encounters. The novel deals with alienation of an English lady, Sarah, married to Adit, an immigrant from India, who spends her days wallowed in the guilt of committing a mistake of marrying an Indian in her own society. In spite of being a woman from the so-called advanced west, she is quiet, meek and submissive; while Adit, behaves most of the time, like a typical Indian male, conservative, rigid and patriarchal. Through Sarah, Desai draws our attention to the annihilation of self that marriage involves for a female, through a recurring theme of insecurity, fragmentation, homelessness and the quest for identity among different communities across the world

## Keywords

Woman, Identity, Freedom, Diaspora, Home

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## Introduction

The internal and external conflicts between people are perhaps most vividly expressed through the powerful medium of literature. Diasporic literature expresses the insecurity, fragmentation, homelessness and the quest for identity among different communities across the world. It may be noted that hybridity, that springs from the intermingling of various classes, ethnicities and religions, forms the core of this genre of literature. In the process of assimilating the two worlds, the migrants become transnationals who coexist in two or different nations together and this finally leads to a deeper understanding of varied cultures and ethnicities. Anita Desai, has often written about characters who do not flow with the current or who are stranded while the others flow along. She has always been interested in people who live in a kind of exile, often the exile is not political but in a sense it is exile from the rest of the society. Probably because she is a daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother, she could relate to the state of exile in a unique way. Her origin and upbringing rendered her an insight that helped her to understand the nuances involved in the sense of exile. In many of her interviews she has recounted how her mother could never bring herself to visit Germany even after the war was over, as it was a devastating experience for her to lose her country and kinsmen. She has also reiterated the fact that her father was also in a state of exile as his native place in East Bengal became a part of East Pakistan after the partition in 1947, and the family lost all their property and possession. Later in

Bangladesh and then in North India her father felt completely out of place and Anita Desai absorbed in this state of homelessness while she grew up. Despite the fact that she was born in a country, she constantly felt as though she were an outsider there. No wonder her works explore the themes of identity crisis, homelessness, trauma and the predicament of the immigrants so intricately. She truly brings out her plight when she says, '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, 24). Estrangement and alienation characterise the works of fiction of the twentieth century as modern man confronts the turmoil of not only the external strife like war, persecution and famine but also the inner conflicts that manifest in various forms such as isolation, generation gap, loss of credibility and a constant feeling that life itself is meaningless. The complete dissolution of old certainties has shoved the modern man into disintegration, identity crisis, complete uncertainty, disillusionment and an unsettled demeanour. The existential dilemma so profoundly expressed in the works of Dostoevsky, Camus, Kafka, Beckett, Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison in modern Western fiction also percolated into the filigree of Indian diasporic authors and the manifestations of the emerging dilemma have been reflected in their writings as well. Anita Desai vividly portrays exiled and uprooted characters in her novels and delves deep into the turmoil of their psychic states.

Anita Desai's third novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, published in 1971, explores the theme of exile and dilemma of the

immigrants and portrays their struggle to grasp the connotations of their true identities. The author gives a deep insight into the ways of lives of Indians in England and the subtleties of hybridity and intermingling of cultural ethos of the two communities through the lives of the protagonists, Dev, Adit and Sarah. The socio-political, racial and cultural values of the two communities and their implications on the lives of the protagonists is portrayed by the author at different levels. The interaction between the English customs and the immigrant blackbird permeates the entire ambience of the novel which is quite meaningfully divided into three sections – ‘Arrival’, ‘Discovery and Recognition’ and ‘Departure’- and the interaction makes this a unique read and an exemplary diasporic text. According to Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is very personal in note as it draws closely from her own experiences as an Indian immigrant in England.

The first section of the novel begins with the title ‘Arrival’ which introduces one of the protagonists, Dev as propping himself on one elbow loathing to get up from bed on a Sunday morning but desperately in need of a morning cup of bed-tea. Dev has recently shifted to London to study Economics from London School of Economics and has put up in the apartment of his friend Adit Sen, who has cosily settled himself in London for a long time with his British wife Sarah, and they have been staying in the vicinity of Clapham, London. Anita Desai introduces the theme of conflict in the perspectives of two different categories of immigrants at the very outset of the novel, by depicting the thoughts of Dev and Adit in the first section of the novel. Dev seems to be very clear in his approach towards his own migration to England, that is, to get a higher degree of education from a European university and return to India and sounds very confident when he says – ‘I will go back to India an “England-returned” teacher. I will teach. It’s a pity I have come all the way here for a proper education but there it is – I must’ (Desai, 19). Adit makes no effort to hide his contempt for the way a person with a degree from abroad is hailed in India and retorts – ‘When you go back – to enlighten the dark races with Keynes’ theory of economics – they will award you the Padma Bhushan, Class II, on a Republic Day.’ (Desai, 19). Despite the fact that Dev has certain reservations about coming to London, he accepts the fact that a degree from London School of Economics is a coveted possession for an Indian like him and that would undoubtedly increase his respect and reputation in India. Adit blatantly spells out this fact to his friend Dev when he is scorned at for his nonchalant attitude towards racial discrimination in London. From the very beginning of his stay in London, Dev seems perturbed at the European ways of life and finds it extremely annoying at times. The simple fact that one has to help himself even for morning tea and breakfast whereas in an Indian household, the women of the house would keep these things ready for the men folk every morning, irked Dev and he would fondly break into a reminiscence – ‘he thought with momentary bitterness of the cup of tea that would have been brought to him if he were at home in India now, by a mother fresh from her morning prayers, or a servant boy scorched and sooty from a newly made fire.’ (Desai, 8). Dev goes to the extent of taunting Adit for giving up the Indian habit of offering morning prayers before having tea and calls him an iconoclast.

In this section of the novel Dev and Adit are constantly pitted against each other by the author to drive home the two poles of an immigrant’s thoughts and perspectives. When Dev talks about his plan of coming to London well in advance to approach the Professors of London School of Economics and try to impress them with his intellectual abilities that he refers to as ‘the deep wisdom of the Oriental mind’ (Desai, 10), Adit misunderstands this as bribery and corruption and is quick to warn Dev –

Approaches! Do you think you can get into an English college by sending the Principal a basket of mangoes? ... There’s no such thing as bribery here, you know. (Desai, 10)

Adit, who has spent a considerable number of years in London, has accepted the European thoughts and ideologies so well that, at times, he feels a strange distance with the Indian ethos and sensitivities. Dev confronts Adit for his servile attitude that accepts every kind of racial discrimination perpetrated upon the immigrants by the Europeans. He accuses Adit that he conveniently turned a deaf ear when a white schoolboy hurled slangs at them at the bus stop. The fact that there are three kinds of lavatories at the London docks – Ladies, Gents and Asiatics, hurts Dev and speaks a lot about the cold attitude of the Europeans towards the Asians. Dev is perplexed at Adit’s love for London despite knowing the fact that he will always be treated like an outsider and will remain in the periphery forever because the Europeans will be at the centre of things in this country. He calls Adit ‘spineless imperialist-lover’ (Desai, 21) and accuses him of selling his soul to the European ways of life. Adit, on the other hand reveals that he has learnt his lessons through a hard way as he had gone back to India after his marriage to Sarah and had tried to settle down in his own country. However, in India he could not find the opportunities in his career and felt that he was deprived of what he truly deserved and therefore he had decided to settle down in London which he considered as ‘the land of opportunity’ (Desai, 21).

Anita Desai has dexterously interwoven the theme of colonial hegemony in the filigree of the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. While handling the British coins, Dev felt himself to be the Director of the East India Company and mused that during the colonial subjugation of India, the British had used these coins to trade the cotton, sandalwood, Kohinoors and the lands of Indian peasants. Claspings them in his fists gave him a strange solace and a feeling of getting even with the Englishmen after ages of oppression at their hands. In the High Street of London, a strange realisation dawned on Dev that the holiday retreats of his childhood in India were actually copies of the London’s suburbs and England’s villages. This is a commentary on the subtle ways in which Indians still carry on the colonial hegemony. Dev also interacts with the different ethnic communities of Indians staying in London and voices his discontent with their submissive attitude towards the Europeans and the provincial banter between the Punjabis, Bengalis, Pakistani Punjabis and people from Lahore and Amritsar reveal the nuances of communal and provincial myth and prejudice, language and custom. This undoubtedly enriches the tapestry of the novel. On close analysis of Dev and Adit’s interactions, one may infer that Adit has superficially embraced the European ways and customs but his heart is steeped in Indian sensibilities. While talking about his

British wife Sarah, Adit says that he has 'taught her well', to cook charchari and halwa with a strict instruction 'No British broths and stews' (Desai,17). On one hand Adit glorifies the Western world that gives equal opportunities to all and on the other, he reveals his feudal mentality when he is not hesitant to wake up Sarah by his loud brawling with Dev –

She's used to being woken up. These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look – very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week. (Desai,31)

The dichotomy of the characters make the novel so very fascinating and reveals intricate psychic layers to be grasped and unravelled by the readers. Adit confides to Dev that he craves for hilsa fish wrapped in banana leaf and yearns to listen to shehnai and sitar being played in Indian households and often dreams of seeing Sarah clad in sari and gold ornaments. However, he also says that, once he starts staying in India for more than a few months, he starts taking these things for granted and the laziness of the clerks and unpunctuality of public means of transport start haunting him and he desperately wants to come to London. The existential dilemma of the immigrants is very well brought out by the author through the predicament of Adit Sen.

Representation of women's victimization, subordination and marginalization by the patriarchy has been portrayed by Anita Desai in almost all her novels with fervour. As a female writer she has always strived to expose the sham and hollowness of the society through the representation of her women characters. She expresses the psychological stress, anxiety and sensitivities of her women characters with a deep empathy. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Sarah, Adit's wife is in a state of exile in her own country, amidst her own people. Her loneliness and alienation are unique as she has chosen it deliberately unlike the other characters in the novel. In marrying Adit for love, Sarah has initiated her displacement in her own country and she is always conscious of the wide gulf that exists between the European culture, tradition and Indian ethos.

Sarah genuinely wants to know about India and makes every effort to discover the knowledge about the country and its people. She buys Indian stamps in an attempt to familiarise herself with the Indian sages, philosophers and statesmen and she is not ready to let anyone encroach on this private effort to know India. She realises that both the selves in her were imposters and her entire life was a sham and the poignant revelation is that she has no control over the entire charade. She felt as though she were enacting a role while handling letters and cheques in her school as the secretary. Even in her personal life she feigned to enjoy the music on sitar that her husband fondly listened to and felt as an imposter grinding spices for the curry she did not care to eat. She is extremely antagonised by Adit's insensitivity towards her pet cat on the pretext that Indians detest pets and she points out that even Indians consider cows to be sacred. However her Indian husband sternly retorts that it is a different matter and Sarah would not understand this.

At office or with the other British acquaintances, she deliberately avoids discussing her Indian husband or her personal life and is horrified at any reference to them in the most unnatural way for she cannot bring herself to make

claims to a life or an identity that she did not herself feel her own. English ladies like Julia sniff her at this and Sarah is aware of their sarcasm and ridicule at her back.

In stark contrast to English people as Julia, who have a condescending attitude for everything that is Indian, Anita Desai portrays Emma Moffit, whose obsession with India and the romantic affair with the country would put even the Indians to shame. Emma's love for Tagore is genuine and Sarah learns a lot from her about India. The Sikhs whom Sarah and Adit find detestable, are loved by Emma as her own kinsmen. She enjoys the silver burfee that the Sikhs distribute to share a piece of good news. To put it in a nutshell Emma loves everything that breathes of India because she had once been engaged to a British soldier who had served in India and died there of dysentery. He had been buried in Ambala and Emma had kept his letters and gifts wrapped in a cashmere shawl for over thirty years. Emma is ecstatic to set up a little India Club at her own house where she plans to invite the Indian immigrants staying in London to hold singing, poetry reading, dance and yoga sessions. This is her effort to know India closely and to bring Indians staying in a foreign country close to each other. While Sarah tries to construct the India of her imagination in silence and solitude, Emma wants to create her own conception of India through a close interaction with the diasporic community in London. Anita Desai gives us myriad ways in which the interaction between the Orient and the Occidental is achieved.

In the second part of the novel which is titled 'Discovery and Recognition', we observe a lot of changes in the characters particularly in their ways of perceiving a foreign country. Adit decides to visit Sarah's parents who live in the suburbs of London and spend a week there with Sarah and Dev. His friends, Samar, Jasbir Singh and his wife Mala also accompany them though they decide to stay there for a day. Samar's wife Bella is unable to accompany the others as her sister is in the hospital and she decides to stay back and look after the kids. Everybody is very excited about the getaway but Sarah is sceptical and cold about the escapade. Initially Dev felt as though he were trapped in the country house amidst Sarah's family and dreaded spending the entire week with them. However the tranquillity of the countryside and the simple living of the English people there have a strange appeal for him and he experiences a love for the country and its people –

There's something about your house that makes one dream golden dreams, Sarah – too golden. It is unreal. It is so completely peaceful and beautiful and abundant. Life isn't really like that at all. Yet, look at that rose bush – I've never in my life seen so many roses on one bush. And the colour! (Desai, 151)

He is deeply touched at the hard work of the country people who do all the sweeping, cleaning, weeding and digging to create a beautiful place for all. Sarah does not share Dev or Adit's excitement about her kinsmen or her native land. On the contrary, she points out the monotony of the English country life and says that all the people more or less follow the same chores and do not have any scope of experimentation or innovation. Dev transformation is complete in the last chapter of this section when he goes to visit the Church. In the hustle and bustle of London he had never realised the magnanimity of the British culture, but in



the quietude of the country he gained an insight into the essential austerity of the alien culture and was completely overwhelmed with it.

In contrast to Dev's satori, Adit and Sarah were relieved to return to London. Sarah was too exhausted by the entire ordeal and Adit felt depressed by his interaction with Sarah's parents. He was hopeful that he would regain his composure on leaving the countryside but he continued to review his experiences as 'hateful, ugly and irredeemable' (Desai, 172).

The third and the final section of the novel, 'Departure', begins with Adit's musings on the bitterness of his life. He continues to feel depressed by the thought that Sarah's family despised him as an Indian and even after his long association with them, he is not accepted as a member of the family. Moreover, the thought that Sarah completely shut him off from the memories of her childhood and the growing up years in the countryside, rattled him and dampened his spirits. In this gloomy state of mind, Adit passionately longed to be in his own country and the imagery of India kept coming to his mind again and again – The long, lingering twilight of the English summer trembling over the garden had seemed to him like an invalid stricken with anaemia, had aroused in him a sudden clamour, like a child's tantrum, to see again an Indian sunset, its wild conflagration, rose and orange, flamingo pink and lemon, scattering into a million sparks in the night sky. (Desai, 174).

Once he had complacently ignored the innuendoes and racial aspersions that he encountered everywhere in London, but now he was traumatised by them. He felt that the immigrants in London would never be able to accept the new land as their home and would continue to walk the streets as strangers in enemy territory, dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and superficially belong. This state of alienation and Adit's transformation is beautifully expressed by Anita Desai:

...his own education, his 'feel' for British history and poetry, fell away from him like a coat that has been secretly undermined by moths so that its sinews and tendons are gone and, upon being touched, crumbles quietly to dust upon the wearer's shoulders. Unclothed, Adit began to shiver in the cold and fear the approaching winter. (Desai, 177).

His friends are able to sense the deep changes in Adit and are aghast at his frustration because they had never seen or heard him vent out his anger at his being an Indian immigrant. Adit, no longer enjoys the company of his Indian friends in London because he feels exasperated of always hanging with people who are immigrants and the thought that he cannot freely mingle with people outside this circle suffocates him. His bouts of depression continue to haunt him terribly and he vents his anger on Sarah, his British wife, in an effort to get back at the entire British clan. He insists that Sarah should wear a sari and gold ornaments on a rainy evening when they plan to go out on their marriage anniversary quite oblivious of Sarah's mild protests and sense of embarrassment. He retorts vehemently to Sarah's good humoured comment that decked up in a sari she looked like a 'Christmas tree' (Desai, 188).

The news of a war between India and Pakistan completely shatters Adit and brings back the memories of Calcutta in

1947, when Hindus and Muslims who had always had mutual respect since the times of the Mughals, started slaughtering each other at the end of the British reign. The dark memories of the dark times flood his mind and he is not able to accept the ongoing war between India and Pakistan. Finally Adit makes up his mind to leave England and return to India and spells out his decision to Sarah –

I've got to go home and start living a real life. I don't know what real life there will mean. I can't tell you if it won't be war, Islam, Communism, famine, anarchy or what. Whatever it is it will be Indian, it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance. I must go and face all that now. It's been wonderful here. Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself half-English, but it was only a pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come? (Desai, 198).

Sarah, decides to follow her husband to India and have their first baby in Adit's country. She had severed her ties with her parents' long back when she had decided to marry an Indian and her identity as a British woman was completely in shambles. She feels that she has always been denied the right of an individual with her own life to lead but always bogged down by duties and responsibilities. She cannot even bear the thought of paying a good-bye visit to her parents because the thought that she would probably never see them again, would tear her apart. In the final chapter, Adit's friends bid them goodbye as they board the train. Dev kept on wondering at the sudden turn of events that led Adit who had cosily settled down in London with his British wife, left for India while he stayed back in London. Dev reasoned that he did not return to India because in Hampshire, an inexplicable revelation had struck him and for the first time he had felt the rapt of a visitor rather than a person in exile – At that moment England had ceased to be an aggressor who tried to enmesh, subjugate and victimise him with the weapons of Empire, something to be taunted and mocked and fought. It had inexplicably become something quite small and soft, something he could hold in his cupped hands like a bird, something he could hold and tame and even love. (Desai, 223).

The exile and alienation of the three protagonists has been brilliantly portrayed by the author in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Adit, Sarah and Dev stand out in the history of diasporic literature as uprooted individuals with identity crisis, cultural and social alienation at different levels. The impact of the socio-cultural and historical factors on the lives of these individuals has been deftly portrayed through the various episodes of the novel. The author makes an effort to establish that it might seem an easy proposition to adjust to an alien society that is not seemingly hostile, by making some superficial or cosmetic changes in one's own self. However, the migrants are posed with a greater threat of losing their identity and self-respect as they are hurled into a melting pot of multi-ethnicity or in other words, a hybrid existence. The dilemma of the immigrants initiates from this problem as trying to integrate with this hybridity implies snapping ties with the homeland and resisting the integration means being irresponsible towards the welcoming host country. Therefore self-fashioning for a migrant becomes so very complex and critical. Through this novel, Anita Desai brings out this crisis of hyphenated existence and establishes the fact that defining one's self or identity is a dynamic and

ever-changing process. The migrant begins from his initial sense of identity conditioned by a set of socio-cultural ethos and gradually progresses to an adopted identity which ultimately leads to the emerging hybrid identity. Individual self-fashioning and the various episodes of the novel discussed in this chapter are integral parts of this entire phenomenon. The textual exploration of such human relationships adds to the canon of the study of the modern Indian diaspora. Through this novel it is proved irrevocably that "Anita Desai is a careful artist in full control of her material...the novel's success is achieved within the terms of her purpose and vision". (Singh Maini, 224).

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