

**DIASPORIC AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY DIASPORIC
ELEMENT IN ANITA DESAI'S *BYE BYE BLACKBIRD***

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Abstract

Diaspora refers to the sense of displacement, alienation and feeling of nostalgia. The terms diaspora, alienation, exile and expatriation are synonymous. There are various kinds of diasporas such as European diaspora, African diaspora, American diaspora, Asian diaspora, so on and so forth. The principal characteristics of diasporic writing are alienation, search for identity, uprootedness, nostalgia etc.

*The focus of the present paper is on the diasporic element as reflected in Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971). The diaspora is clearly visible in this novel. The feeling of nostalgia is reflected in the characters of the novel. Alienation and the crisis of identity are the dominant themes in the novel. Anita Desai has dealt with a group of diasporic Indians in Britain at the late 1960s. Of all the novels of Desai, this is the most intimately related to her own experience. The protagonist of the novel, Adit, living in England has passion for the country like England. But as the novel goes on to proceed his attitude is changed towards England and the life lived there. He comes back to his homeland i.e. India with his England born wife, Sarah.*

He declares to his wife, "No England. I have done with England now, Sarah. I am going back to India-home". (p.203) The present paper also tries to show the dilemma in the second major character, Dev who, though thinking to settle down in England, is not sure whether he will permanently live there or not. Both the characters, Adit and Dev, suffer from the problems like loss of identity, alienation and humiliation largely on account of being Indians. And this creates the feeling of rootlessness in both the characters.

Key words: *Diaspora, Displacement, Alienation, Exile, Expatriation, Identity crisis, Indian diaspora, Nostalgia etc.*

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"This has brought two separate stands into my life. My roots are divided because the Indian soil on which I grew and English culture which I inherited from my mother."

Anita Desai (The Book I Enjoyed Writing Most.
Contemporary English Literature, XIII, 1973,24).

The word '**Diaspora**' derives from the Greek verb *diaspeiro* which means to disperse or to scatter. It is simply the displacement of a community or culture into another geographical and cultural region. Diaspora is the effect of a migration, immigration and exile. Its use began to develop when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. The term became widely assimilated into English by the mid 1950s. Over the last decade the term 'diaspora' has become popular in both the academic literature and public discourse.

As pointed out by Salman Rushdie nostalgia and dislocation are the common features of diasporic writing. Diasporic writing, most of the time, is a response to the loss of home and issues like dislocation, nostalgia, survival, culture change, discrimination and identity. Sense of loneliness, alienation and loss of home are inseparable for the diasporic people. These people try to adjust with the culture and situation in the host land, even though they suffer from the alienation and loss of identity. They create an imaginary homeland similar culturally and traditionally to the home they left behind. Having uprooted from the native land the diasporic people strive for the life lived in their homeland in the past. Home is reconstructed out of memories from childhood,

newspaper accounts and fragments too.

Elements of diaspora:

Alienation/Nostalgia/Displacement-

Alienation, nostalgia and displacement are the common features of the diasporic writing. The first generation of a diasporic community often faces the problem of alienation and loneliness. When the native society finds the mixture of the culture of the diasporic community with their own culture, they feel danger for their culture and therefore they do not accept the assimilation of the alien countrymen into their culture and society.

Loss of Identity-

“Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful and only occasionally rewarding. Some write semiautobiographical novels, delving into personal pasts in order to either discover or re-examine their motivations and affinities. Others use fictional characters and situations to question traditional norms, testing, trying, and occasionally reinforcing (whether internally or otherwise) notions of race and culture.”
(Lau: 252)(Diasporic features: Chapter II)

The second generation of a diasporic community finds the problem of loss of identity. They try to adopt the culture and life style of the country of their adoption, but they do not find love and affection in the alien country. As a result, they lose not only their original identity which they inherit from their parents but also their adopted identity which they wish to acquire.

Dislocation and Relocation-

Dislocation is the first feeling that haunts the diasporic community. The people dislocate from their homeland for various purposes like education,

economical, political, national and in case of women it is marital. The process of dislocation can occur as a physical movement from territory forced by war and persecution. Dislocation, generally, occurs with the first generation of the diasporic community.

Relocation is related to the second and later generations of the diasporic community. The people of second generation relocate themselves in the country of their origin, even though they are born and brought up in the settled land.

Memory-

Memory can create the primal home, the blessed location by drawing on fragments and shards of remembered things. Though the immigrant people physically settle in the country of their adoption, they do not forget their own country. They eventually memorize some incidents from their past life in their homeland. They reach to their motherland not physically but mentally and emotionally by remembering their past.

Discrimination-

As the natives feel insecurity from the immigrants, they do not allow them to participate in their community. They treat them as aliens and inferior to them. The immigrant society often faces the problem of the discrimination in the settled society on account of race, color, religion and culture.

Cultural Crisis-

As the diasporic community tries to adopt the culture of the settled society, the conflict is emerged between their original culture and the culture they have to adopt. They are caught between these two cultures.

Gender Inequality-

Till 1920s, most of the workers' wives were not allowed to go abroad

with their husbands who settled there for their better prospect. But now the women join their husbands and families to settle and live in foreign countries. The experience of diasporic women is more painful than that of diasporic men. Clifford believes that diasporic women are “caught between patriarchies, ambiguous past and future.”(314). After marriage women have to go abroad with their husbands. Due to non-voluntary displacement such women undergo the psychological trauma.

Changes in Attitude-

The attitude of the diasporic community gets changed during their stay in the settled country. They intervene in the culture of dominant society.

Anita Desai, one of the most prolific Indian women novelists, wrote the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* in 1971. This diasporic novel focuses on the psyche of these immigrants, their attitudes towards their own country, India and their settled country, England. It deals with a group of diasporic Indians in Britain of the late 1960s. The novelist highlights the physical as well as psychological problems of the Indian immigrants and also explores the difficulties they face in adjusting with the culture of England.

Generally Anita Desai's several novels deal with the tension between family members and the alienation of the middle class women in India. The present novel examines the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The novel is divided in three parts: Arrival, Discovery and Recognition and Departure. It opens with the story of a Bengali Indian immigrant, Adit Sen, his English wife Sarah and his Indian friend Dev. The first part presents Adit as an admirer of England. He admires England for its environment, clubs, coffee houses, buildings etc. Dev who has come in London for his studies in economics finds difficult to adjust with the life in London. He likes nothing about England rather he criticizes it and its people. The second part of the novel gives the description of London city. At the same time the writer portrays the confused psyche of Dev who is newly settled immigrant in London. The third part throws light on the emotional upheaval, chaotic sentiments due to uncertainty

of existence. Finally the departure takes place and Adit who was the lover of England leaves the country and goes back to India along with his wife, Sarah.

In *Bye Bye Blackbird* Desai has dealt with the complex problem of alienation. R. S. Sharma stated in *Alienation, Accommodation and the Local in Anita Desai's Bye Bye Blackbird, The Literary Criterion* (1979) that "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." Initially Adit seems very happy for having settled in England and having Sarah, an English born girl as a wife. He expresses his love for England:

"I am happy here. I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day... I like the pubs. I like the freedom; social freedom...Oh, I think gold, Dev, gold – everywhere – gold like Sarah's golden hair." (Bye, 18-19)

Adit appears as a romantic admirer of England in the beginning of the novel. For him everything about London is fascinating and captivating. He has fully adopted the lifestyle of Britishers. He compares England with his motherland i.e. India and openly criticizes India for its traditionality and backwardness. He is proud of his blind admiration of England.

In spite of this apparent attraction for England and repulsion for India, somewhere deep down in his heart he continues his attachment with his motherland.

"When I have a whole month of leave saved up, I will go... I will lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up half the nights listening to the Sehnai and Sitar." (48)

Adit who once sees all gold in England, now starts to see the fallacy and unnatural strain of it all. He finally decides to go back to India in order to live a 'real life'. He declares that his feeling that he was a half-English was only

pretence. He says,

“I can’t live here anymore. Our lives here – they have been so unreal, don’t you feel it? Little India in London... I must go and face myself half-English, but it was only pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come?” (204)

Adit starts longing for his own land and the people he has left behind. Despite his love and admiration for England, he feels himself as an alien and stranger and at these moments his heart is full with nostalgic reveries of his native. The roots of this nostalgia are hidden in his inward hatred for England.

The second character of the novel, Dev also feels alienated in the settled society. He has come to England in order to pursue his studies. He faces so many difficulties to adjust with the atmosphere in London. He finds the climate in London city extremely difficult. He gets sick of the silence and emptiness that prevailed in London which is uncharacteristic of India.

“if this were India,” he explodes one dull day, standing at the window, “I would by now know all my neighbors – even if I had never spoken to them. I’d know their radios. I’d know the age of their child by the sound of its howling. I’d know if the older children were studying for exams by the sound of lessons being recited.” (56)

As Adit is shown as the romantic lover of England in the beginning, Dev calls Adit, ‘a boot-licking toady’ and a ‘spineless imperialist lover’ (19). Adit sees all gold in London and Dev sees all iron i.e. dull and cold. But till the end of the novel the attitudes of both of these friends are changed and Adit returns to India. Dev remains behind.

The feeling of alienation emerges in the mind of Sarah also. Even though England is her motherland, she feels alienated. Since she marries to an Indian, she is insulted from her own countrymen. When Adit tells her that he has

decided to go back to his homeland and she can join him, Sarah consoles herself: 'I think when I go to India, I will not find it too strange at all. I am sure I shall feel quite at home very soon.' (219) but then soon she feels 'an assurance and certainty melt inside her'. It appears to her that going to India would mean 'all the pangs of saying good-bye to her past twenty four years'. (221)

Another problem faced by these Indian immigrants in England is crisis of identity. Not only Adit and Dev face this problem of identity, but Sarah also has to go through this problem. In case of Dev, plural identity inspires assimilation in him. The same problem is created in the character of Adit. Adit and Dev both seek to forge a new identity in an alien society, but as mentioned earlier the native people do not accept the immigrants and their culture. These immigrants cannot create their own identity in the country of their adoption. Adit and Dev define their selves by belonging to diasporic Indian community. In the novel they are called as 'wogs' by the British people. And this is their identity in England. Dev is angry at being insulted, but still he lives there trying again to establish his own identity.

Another character from the novel, Sarah, faces the same problem. For her marriage with an Indian person, she has to bear the taunts and insults from her own people. She has shed her ancestry and identity for Adit. Her friends call her, "hurry, hurry, Mrs. Curry". (38) She has to learn the Indian way of life. She learns all the things keeping aside her original identity. Her identity as an English woman is lost. She is now a multi-cultured, Mrs. Sen, the wife of an Indian instead Sarah, the English woman. Along with alienation, nostalgia and crisis of identity, there is also another diasporic element found in the present novel i.e. discrimination. Adit and Dev face the racial, religious, cultural and language discrimination in London. They are called 'wogs' because they are Indians. Adit is able to withstand insults hurled at him. But Dev gets infuriated when a schoolboy calls Adit 'Wog'. Therefore one can notice that the discrimination is clearly reflected in the novel. Often Dev has to go through the incidents of discrimination when he starts to find a job for himself. The

Englishmen at job place say him,

“Not Catholic? Not even Christian?” ... “I am sorry. Dear me, I ought to have mentioned it at once, oughtn’t I? We simply must have a Catholic, or at least a High Church man. It’s public relations, you see? It wouldn’t do, no, I’m afraid it wouldn’t do to have a Hindu gentleman in this job.” (108)

Dev replies on this statement:

“I am here, he intoned, as an ambassador. I am showing these damn imperialists with their lost colonies complex that we are free people now, with our own personalities that this veneer of an English education has not obscured, and not afraid to match ours with theirs’. I am here, he proselytized, to interpret my country to them, to conquer England as they once conquered once conquered India.” (123)

However this is the best example to show the racial and religious discrimination faced by the Indian immigrants in England like country.

Memory also plays an important part in the novel. The major characters, Adit and Dev recall some events from their past life in India. They start longing for the Indian food, atmosphere, Indian way of life, their neighbors’ noise in India etc. Adit wants Sarah to live like a Bengali woman as his mother and sisters live. He insists her to wear saree and heavy jewellery given by his mother and sisters. Though she is shocked of Adit’s decision, she finally decides to join As Adit and Dev feel alienated in London, Sarah, a native English woman also feel uprooted in her own country. Now it is her turn to face displacement. When Adit declares her that he has decided to turn back to his homeland, she supports his decision and becomes ready to go with him. She has not yet seen India, hence she feels difficult to live there. At last, Adit and Sarah fled for India to find a real life without knowing what ‘real life’ meant? When his English self was receiving and fading and dying – that to achieve

their real self and to have a real life, he must go to India. Dev who initially hated and criticized England, now decides to stay there, he resolves to teach the Englishmen a lesson for the abuse he had to bear from them. Though in the beginning, he was fully determined that he would not stay in England where he has to bear all the insults and tell vehemently to Adit, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted." (17) But at the end of the novel, his attitude gets changed and he decides to settle in England and join the tourist bureau in which Adit was working previously. Adit leaves England for good and Dev remains behind.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* is a story of a plight of Indian immigrants in England. The novel deals with the migration of the Indians to England and the disillusionment that follows it. Desai dives deep into the conscious and subconscious psyche of the Indian expatriates and reveals their nostalgia and longingness to their native land. All these immigrants are prone to a schizophrenia and predicament to live or not live in England. The novel also depicts the love-hate relationship of the immigrants with England. In this way the novel is discussed from the diasporic point of view. All the three characters, Adit, Dev and Sarah go through the plight of alienation and crisis of identity. Though Dev has decided to stay in England, he is not sure that he would stay there permanently. Adit and Sarah have already returned to India. Now Sarah has to adjust with the culture and way of life in India. Her journey of nostalgia is continued after leaving England. As Sarah was to say 'good-bye' to her English self, here Dev must be saying good-bye to his Indian self. When Adit and Sarah bid him, goodbye, he calls out, "Bye Bye Blackbird." Here the metaphor 'Blackbird' is used for Adit, an Indian immigrant in England who returns back to his motherland forever. Dev goes to Railway Station to say goodbye to Adit and Sarah. Dev states after returning to his room,

'Make my bed and light the light, I'll arrive late tonight. Blackbird, bye-bye.'
(230)

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