



**MARITAL DISHARMONY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION-A
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN ANITA DESAI'S "BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD"
AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "WIFE"**

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ABSTRACT

Among the Indian women novelists, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee are primarily concerned in their novels with the psychological crises in the lives of women who are subjected to physical and psychological torture in a male dominated society. The novelists have showed their skill in projecting the agonized mind of the alienated women. Their portrayal of women characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to their feminist approach, outlook and perspective. Their keen observation of the life of women and their interest in the study of their inner mind are evidence by the portrayal of their women characters. These writers being women dive deep into the inner mind of the repressed women and bring to light their alienation and loneliness which are the outcome of women's psychological and emotional imbalances.

KEY WORDS: Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, alienation, emotional imbalances.

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INTRODUCTION

The world is full of hardships and challenges for women. They are always suppressed by the male dominated society. They are lonely and alienated in this world. They are hopeless and full of despair. A woman should play various roles in a family. One of those roles is that of the wife is that she readily accepts life with all its challenges. In the male dominated society women are supposed to be an ideal wife, another and an excellent home maker. As a wife she has to serve her husband. She has to sacrifice her identity. Tolerance and submissiveness are qualities demanded of an ideal wife. In the patriarchal system, they pass through alienation in their life.

Hence the portrayal of the protagonists may be classified into two distinct groups- one group fails to adjust to the harsh realities of life, resulting in a tragic end; the other group

compromises with their surroundings for their survival. Dimple in Wife belongs to the first group whereas Sarah in Bye-Bye Blackbird suffers from alienation. Their alienation is different from Aditi, Dev and Amit. Both of them are suppressed by the patriarchal system. The husband-wife alienation is conspicuous in both the novels.

Husband-wife relationship begins with marriage. Marriage seems to be a bridge for husband and wife. According to the Indian concept, marriage is a lifelong companionship based on mutual love, a sharing of each other's happiness and sorrows coupled with a sense of forbearance and adaptability: such an approach and temperament of both the partners prevent the marriage from being wrecked.

No doubt, love and marriage are complementary to each other and without love married life is not supposed to be happy. Thus

marriage is a social recognition of love between two persons.(Dubey1)

In wife, Dimple' marriage becomes the doom of her life. Dimple has some expectation from her marriage. She likes to marry a neuro-surgeon. But she marries Amit Basu, an engineer, against her wish. As a typical Indian wife, she serves her mother-in-law and Amit. Even though she is humiliated by her mother-in-law, she cares for her.

Dimple has been brought up in an Indian traditional family. She is always dependent on Amit. Amit does not show any emotional attachment towards her wherever it is –India or New York. Amit does not respect her feelings. In Indian English fiction Malti Agarwal remarks that, "her inability to communicate with her husband Amit intensifies her alienation in an alien culture."(37)

He likes her to stay at home and attend to the household work, rather than go out, work and earn. He is a personification of the patriarchal society. Amit does not care to understand her loneliness and insomnia. She feels lonely and insecure. It is also clear that her background in no way helps her to live independently. She longs for her husband's love and security.

Isolated from other Indian friends who live across town, isolated from her husband, and with her reality shaped by images of violence seen on tv Dimple devises a list of nine ways to kill herself and chants through the list when she is anxious. (Whitson 173)

Her rejection of pregnancy shows that symbolically she rejects Amit and her bond of marriage. Dimple's dreams are shattered and she becomes isolated from her husband. She suffers from nostalgic feelings. She wants to return home. She recollects the bond of traditional family life in India. She thinks about the closeness of relationships. So she weaves a web of her own and remains imprisoned in its privacy. This increases her neurotic disease.

When the feeling of alienation intensifies, she finds solution only through violence. Instead of killing herself, she kills her husband. She revolts against the patriarchal society.

Her confusion is understandable, given her Indian culture, which on one hand valorizes

the story of Sita, the mythical woman who lived to serve her husband, even walking through fire for him, and on the other hand

is informed by an encroaching westernization and its notion of female identity and autonomy. (Whitson 172)

Like Dimple, Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, too goes through the emotional disturbance, alienation, mental and spiritual conflict and domination of her husband Adit. But she adopts the compromising view and manages to survive. In spite of disillusionment, alienation, disharmony unfavourable circumstances, she believes that life is worth living. She faces the realities of life, tries to understand and compromise with it. Sarah represents the positive side of life.

Sarah has a fascination for India. She expects Adit to fill her life with so many relations and attachments, pictures, stories and legends and promises. But Adit does not feed her fantasy. She is an English woman who smokes and jointly makes frying eggs with her husband. In western culture, a woman has as much a right to live a life of dignity as a man has. She can do anything she wants. But she lives like typical Indian wife.

She has all the virtues of a good wife. She never quarrels with her husband. She tries to be a sincere and a loving wife to her husband. She does not want to destroy her life. She never involves in any controversy with her husband. She is very calm and practical. She never complains of anything to her husband. She is very understanding, considerate and diplomatic not to rub Adit on the wrong side.

Sarah's intercultural marriage does not provide her anything. In inter-cultural marriage, it is difficult for husband and wife to make adjustments. Sarah has sacrificed her identity. She hides inside her shell. She leads two roles in the society- one as an English woman and other as a typical Indian wife. She does not think about the past and future. She leads her life in a practical way. She feels alienated in her own homeland. She does not have anyone to share her views.

In *Indian women Novelists*, Wandrekar points out that "Sarah, when rejected by her parents and society, finds the world around her parents and society, finds the world around her hostile and tries

to submit to Adit- the very cause of her isolation and alienation”(3:161)

Sarah tries to build a harmonious relationship with Adit. But Adit is a typical Indian man. Adit’s concern for Sarah is like that he needs company to face the alien culture in England. Adit feels happy when Sarah cares for him. He tells Dev “...where somebody cares for me, Sugar is sweet and so is she...” (BBB21)

Adit never bothers about Sarah’s emotional feelings. Adit loves Sarah because of her submissiveness like a Bengali girl. “You are like a Bengali girl... Bengali women are like that reserved, quiet...” (BBB74)

Adit makes Sarah to cook Indian food straight away after marriage. She does not seem to have learned how to do kitchen work in order to satisfy Adit. She loses her self-identity. She becomes mechanical keeping an emotional distance from anyone and anything. She does not go for shopping in the laurel where she lives. She goes to super market and buys patna rice and pickles where no one knows her. She becomes alienated in her own soil.

In *Indian Women Novelists*, Parmar says that

She remains cut off from her own society and people to hide her secret. She becomes aloof among her own brothers and sisters. It can be said that she comes under the evil spell of rootlessness in her own country and community.(35)

Adit does not give importance to Sarah’s desires. As he was brought up in the patriarchal society, he dominates Sarah. He quarrels with Sarah. He comments and jokes about English people and their way of life forgetting that Sarah has been brought up in English culture. Nevertheless, he is fascinated by the rich economic status of England. England offers him comfortable job and life. He loves England ““O England’s green and grisly land,’... ‘The babu loves you –even when no one else can.’”(BBB 159)

Adit tolerates the humiliation that comes from the white society. “ trying to accommodate in a new country is like giving birth to a new personality.”(Wandrekar 3:154)

He adapts himself to the alien culture; but marriage does not give him equal status to the

society. His visit to Mrs. Roscommon Jams’ house has disillusioned him. He is insulted by his mother-in-law. She can’t bear Adit intruding into her kitchen along with his friends.”it was evident she was thinking that all she had heard about the filthy ways of the Asian immigrants was correct.”(BBB 131)

He slowly understands that he is a misfit in an alien country. The nostalgic memories of his home intensify his feeling of alienation in London.

Adit tells Samar

Don’t you get fed up too, Samar? Adit asked his friend, also attempting a lighter tone, but unsuccessfully. ‘sometimes it stifles me-this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label Indian immigrant, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle.

This business of burrowing about those grisly sidestreets, looking for Indian shops and Indian restaurants. All our jokes about Indians in England, all our talk about our own situation-never about anyone Or anything else. It’s so stifling- all the time, all the damned time – Being aware of who one is and where one is . god, i’m fed up!(BBB183)

The feeling of non-belonger and the sense of frustration, his nostalgia for the Indian way of life, his inability to merge with the English culture shows his alienation in England.

In spite of these hardships and hindrance, immigrants are unable to bid farewell to their country of adoption. They at the bottom of their heart realize that they are foreigners but they are unable to get rid of clutches of England.(Tank 62)

As an Indian husband, Adit does not want Sarah to go for a job after marriage. In Indian culture, the wife has to look after the family and manage all household chores as well. He advises Sarah: “How often I’ve said, Sarah, give up your job, it doesn’t look nice for you to work after you are married...”(BBB 132)

This shows that he is immersed in the Indian patriarchal system. Adit does not discuss with Sarah about his decision to go back to India. He does not

think about Sarah. If she is residing away from England, it would mean that she has to leave her friends, parents and relatives.

Thus, both Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and Dimple in *Wife* are the victims of marital disharmonies. In both of their married life, they face loneliness, frustration and alienation.

A marriage is a union of two souls. Some adjustments must come from both the husband and wife. Dimple in *Wife* fails in her life because she murders her husband.

This is how the story of *Wife* ends:

She opened and closed a kitchen drawer, and heard Amit put a spoonful of Cereal in his mouth and whirl it noisily around and under his tongue... she sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hair line... and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She...let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, and each time a little harder until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and then she saw the head fall off –but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M.- and it stayed upright on the counter top, still with its eyes averted from her face, and she said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had ever been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and on the same counter, 'I wonder if Leni can make a base for it; she's supposed to be very clever with her fingers.' Women on television got away with murder. (*Wife* 212-213)

The very last line of the novel leaves Dimple as also the reader wondering what next because there's no

certainty about 'women 'not' on television'. In Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*

Sarah leaves for India with her husband and her departure from England is thus described:

Sarah leaned out one arm waving, briefly, slowly, in doubt or unwillingness, she herself could not say. She called out a subdued goodbye to the little dark knot on the platform, waving. The last she saw of it was Bella's bright head in its midst, like a aucy marigold in a city window box, last symbol of London's cockney staunchness that she was losing now, had lost already. (BBB 222)

The reader believes and hopes that Sarah, once she sets foot on the Indian soil, will acclimatize herself to the new culture and way of life.

Both Dimple and Sarah are portrayed as victims of alienation, yet the way in which these stories end only prove that it is up to the individual and the circumstances to some extent that make one's life.

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