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INTERPRETATION OF ANITA DESAI'S 'BYE BYE BLACK BIRD' AS A DIASPORIC NOVEL

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Abstract

Geographical dislocation of people from their homeland can be traced back to the time when the Jews were forced to migrate to Babilonia. The recent times have witnessed a large- scale displacement and dispersal of people across the world. Increasing number of Indians too have been migrating to different Western countries seeking better prospects. Indian diaspora who have settled in an alien land, face innumerable challenges – of having to live like an outsider throughout their lives.

Anita Desai, one of the major Indian diasporic writers, explores the issue of dislocation –both physical and cultural – in her novel, ` Bye Bye Black Bird `, through the characters of Dev, Adit and his English wife Sarah...The novel deals with the problem of Indian diaspora, of assimilating themselves in an alien culture as also of severing themselves completely from their cultural roots and emotional ties.

The present paper intends to study Anitha Desai's Bye Bye Black Bird from this perspective.

Keywords: Dislocation, Displacement, Dispersal, Indian Diaspora, Cultural roots.

Geographical dislocation of people from their homeland is an age old phenomenon, which can be traced back to the time when the Jews were forced to migrate to Babilonia. Today displacement for greater job opportunities and for pursuing higher education is a common feature. The recent times have witnessed a large- scale displacement and dispersal of people across the world. Globalization has accelerated this kind of movement of people from their homeland to the land of fortune, which, in most cases, is the West. Increasing number of Indians too have been migrating to different Western countries seeking better prospects and higher education as well. Indian diaspora who have settled in an alien land, face innumerable challenges – of having to live like an outsider, throughout their lives. A sense of being uprooted, of homelessness, of having lost their identity, leaves a deep impact on

their psyche, leading to depression, and straining of relationship between them and the people of their host country. Their nostalgia for their homeland, their longing to return to their country, their helplessness in doing so, and the resultant anguish,- - are the major themes of many Indian diasporic writers. Anita Desai, one of the major Indian diasporic writers, explores the issue of dislocation – both physical and cultural – in her novel, ` Bye Bye Black Bird `, through the characters of Dev, Adit and his English wife Sarah...The novel deals with the problem of assimilating oneself in an alien culture as also of severing oneself completely from one's own cultural roots and emotional ties. The character of Adit initially lives in the illusion that he has assimilated the English culture and absorbed all the nuances of that culture. He always expresses his liking for England, its people, its culture, and he has

also married an English woman. Gradually he comes out of that illusion and faces the reality – that he cannot make that culture his own. Through the jeering remarks about his slavish immigrant mentality, it is Dev, another Indian who has gone there for higher studies, who introduces Adit to the reality. When he realises the inner schism in his own consciousness, Adit suffers a dilemma., whether to live a prosperous life in England at the cost of his identity, or to go back to toil day in and day out for a meagre salary, in order to achieve a sense of identity. He decides to leave for India and bids farewell to The Black Bird. The Black Bird may be interpreted as the Asian people residing in England with whom he had been associated all those years. The image of the black bird can be interpreted, at the psychological level, as his own illusion about England and its culture as the most perfect and superior culture. Deciding to leave England for his home land, Adit bids goodbye to his illusion too.

Dev, another Indian character in the novel, stands as an ante thesis to that of Adit. Dev stays in Adit's house in England for sometime. Dev has gone there to pursue higher studies in The School of Economics. He had been preparing himself for this for so many years and now he is happy for the opportunity. But he cherishes a great regard for Indian culture and a kind of revulsion for the English way of life. He cannot tolerate the humiliating remarks on his Indian origin by the English people on various occasions. He gets infuriated by the treatment of discrimination meted out at the Indian community. He observes how Adit tries to evade such humiliations and feels frustrated. He vows not to stay there for long. But the irony of it is that, at the end he decides to stay there, while Adit decides to return to India.. Like Adit he too seems to have been under the spell of an illusion about England and English culture. He thinks of England in a negative way, ignoring its positive aspects. This gives rise to his hatred for England. But gradually he learns to adjust to that alien culture and decides to stay there. It appears as if he takes the place of Adit both physically and psychologically as well. Thus, the writer seems to suggest that the process continues; that Adit's diasporic experience continues in the person of Dev.. In this way, Anita Desai seems to

highlight the issue of diasporic experience as a permanent phenomenon of the contemporary life.

Sense of dislocation and the resultant feelings of loss of identity and depression are not merely the experience of the immigrants. The English, who choose to associate with the Indians, also suffer from similar feelings. This is exemplified through the character of Sarah, the English woman who marries Adit. Sarah suffers a kind of exile in her own country from her own people, for having married an Indian. She is shown as a tragic figure who is always in a dilemma. Sarah is a mature lady and manages to ignore such situations. Like a loving wife she learns to cook Indian food though she does not like the taste of it. Like a dutiful wife she tries to adjust to Adit's way of living, and finally follows him to India, a land and a culture completely alien for her. Her inner conflict, her dilemma in choosing between her own English identity and a new Indian identity to be adopted, are all very realistically portrayed. Cultural clash between Sarah and Adit is shown through apparently minor differences like her fondness for pets and his abhorance for pets. Sarah always struggles to adjust to her new identity as the wife of an Indian. Her problems are the problems of all modern women who try to cross beyond their culture, to marry a man from another culture. Again, through her character the writer shows how complete absorption in an altogether different culture is highly demanding. Though Sarah readily assimilates many Indian ways of life, yet she is like a silent volcano, not dead, not yet bursting. Though she displays maturity and strength of character, there is a split, a dilemma in her personality. She feels as if she is just playing roles. She once reflects, "She was playing a part when she tapped her finger to the sitar music on Adit's records, or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat" (Bye Bye Black Bird, 1971:34)

The novel portrays the sense of longing for the homeland through the character of Adit. Adit initially appears to have absorbed the English way of life completely, but his longing for his homeland, his home-sickness are all expressed through his craze for Indian food, music and many other things. He suffers from a sense of homelessness, up-rootedness and loss of identity. He at last decides to

leave England and return to his land, to his own roots, though at the cost of material comforts. Thus he bids good bye to England, and to the Indian friends there. Sarah too decides to follow him thus shedding her English identity. The novel thus portrays the diasporic experience of Indians in England, which, in a way, is an experience of all Indian diaspora – their experience of discrimination and humiliation. Along with the issues of socio-cultural differences, the novel also depicts the Indo-English encounter involving love, marriage and the problems of adjustment within the family.

Thus Anita Desai, in this novel brings forth the problems of the Indian diaspora and the prospects and challenges of establishing an intimate and harmonious relationship between the English and the Indian diaspora.

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