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Exploring Multiculturalism in Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Black Bird*

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ABSTRACT

Before 1960, England had adopted multiculturalism as a policy to attract 'outsiders' because England was in need of unskilled and uneducated workers for her material growth and economic prosperity. It has also accepted multiculturalism as a political weapon for ruling people of different cultures. As a result, England turned out to be a large multicultural society. In the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai has successfully depicted Asian immigrants' problems, especially those of Indian immigrants in England. In the novel, she presents blackbirds as marginalized, dislocated, rejected and unwanted foreigners staying in a country that has not adopted and accepted them honestly. Blackbirds, here, symbolize Indian immigrants settled in England. The present paper tries to analyze the novel from sociological perspectives in order to deplore how multiculturalism is reflected in the novel.

Key words: hegemony, cultural conflict, self-identity, occidental, oriental.

Bye Bye Blackbird is an authentic study of how human relationships get distorted by cultural encounters. Throughout the novel, continuous ups and downs of ideas in the minds of different characters are noticed. The close analysis of the novel reveals different themes—Adit's fascination and disregard for British culture, Dev's contempt for British culture, racial discrimination, prejudice, cultural intolerance, narrow-mindedness. Dev looks down upon the British's problems of inter-racial or inter-cultural marriage, identity crisis, social marginalization, cultural rootlessness and socio-cultural conflicts. Adit is the protagonist of the novel who leads a settled life as an immigrant in London with his wife Sarah, a dominant female character in the novel. At first, Adit is fascinated by the British culture and then disillusioned by it. He regards England as a "land of opportunity". (19). The country seems to him as land of materialistic

prosperity. It indicates that Adit is very critical of everything about India. It is clear from his words:

Nothing ever goes right at home there is famine or flood, there is drought or epidemic, always. (129)

His fascination for British culture makes him to value and respect British culture as one that is more rational and advanced than Indian culture. It has been rightly explained about Adit's love for British culture:

Love of England and the Occident is exemplified through love of English society and its order and employment opportunity and economic and social and political freedom, love of English literature, English History, English Architecture and monuments, museums, Towers of victory and churches, English and Western Art and Paintings

and Picture Galleries of the past and the present, love of English countryside and nature, topography and rivers and valleys and the vegetations. (J.P. Tripathi, 44)

His fascination for British culture remains fresh only till the middle of the novel. His debate with his friend, Dev, exhibits his initial fascination for British culture. Adit criticizes Indian ways of life and appreciates British culture:

I love it here. I'm so happy here; I hardly notice the few drawbacks. I'll tell you – I did go back, three years ago, when I got engaged to Sarah and my parents wanted me to come with her. I stayed there looking for a job for four months. All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourists bureau ... I'm happy here ... I like the Convent Garden opera house ... I feel like millionaire. I like the girls here ... I used to like dancing with them ... I like thatched cottages and British history and reading the letters in The Times. I like the pubs. I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom! I like reading the posters in the tube ... I like weekend at the seaside. I even like the BBC! He ended with a shout of triumph. (17-18)

In his view, British promotes autonomy and liberty, but India is an embodiment of restrictions and limits. It is a kind of fascination on his part for a superior culture which is the indication of his colonial hangover. For him, India symbolizes a passive and sluggish life and the British society is vibrant in all its aspects:

... here there is no death at all. Everything – animal, vegetable, mineral – is alive, rich and green forever. (129)

As far as Adit is concerned, things are really bright in England:

Here the rain falls so softly and evenly, never too much and never too short. The sun is mild. The earth is fertile. The rivers are full. The birds are plump. The bears are fat. Everything so wealthy, so luxurious – so fortunate. (129)

This shows Adit's obsession for British culture that alienates him from his homeland. He

has transformed himself entirely up to the expectations of England. Social, political and bureaucratic policies of Britishers are also responsible for Adit's admiration for England. He says that there is no corruption in England. He feels:

.... The magic of England – her grace, her peace, her abundance and the embroidery of her history and traditions (157)

The clerks of England are not lazy unlike their Indian counterparts and he does not have to be bothered by unpunctuality of trains and buses. What England offers to him is a carefree life that suits a sybarite. What India offers to him is a life of inconveniences and a difficult style of existence. But he enjoys the life of bourgeois in England, which offers him pubs, women to eye and a lot of wine. England is a symbol of luxurious and sophisticated life for him. On the other side India is a country pervading with poverty, dirtiness and corruption. This comparison between Indian and British culture on his part makes him to become more Anglophile. His fascination for British culture is not so objectionable, but the way he looks at his 'home' culture is not acceptable in the light of the theory of multiculturalism, because multiculturalism acknowledges cultural equality, recognition of differences and disapproves the dominance of one culture over the other.

Adit is very critical of his fellow countrymen in England. His rude comments on Dev's behavior and his Indian thinking reveal this fact:

If anyone suggested to going to the coffee house, it was you who pointed out that no one had money. If anyone thought of going for a moonlight drive, you pointed out that there was no moon and none of us had a car. You think black by habit. (19)

It seems to be objectionable on the part of Adit that he is unable to acknowledge the fact that he himself is a product of Indian culture and that any imitation of English ways cannot make him a native of that country. It may be also concluded that his Anglophobia is a consequence of his admiration for Sarah, his wife:

I see gold – everywhere – gold like Sarah's golden hair. (19)

Adit seems to forget the fact that the British have used them to play up their hegemony and maintain their highest position at a global level. Here Anita Desai wants to project the idea that if Orientals feel that what is Occidental is good and desirable and when the idea catches up with the subservient attitude of people like Adit, the task of the white men – to colonize the mind of the Third World – becomes easier. If Adit has greater admiration for the history and poetry of England than those of his own, then it implies the hegemonic success of the West over its blind cultural fans. It is striking about Adit's initial disregard for what is native. Indians like Adit, at least for a while, fall a prey to the glitter of the white ideology of art, philosophy and life. But after that he gets out of his obsession with British ideology as a testimony to the hollowness of British ideology. Thus, the attitudinal transformation that takes place in Adit's mind is illustrated in superb manner by Desai.

Dev comes to England for studying at the London School of Economics. He observes the neighbors' silence. This kind of cultural difference shocks him. He feels isolated in an alien land:

If this were India ... I would by now know all my neighbors – even if I had never spoken to them. I'd know their taste in music by the sound of 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)

Dev's confrontation with western indifference, unlike in the case of Adit, is the sudden realization that his own culture is accommodative. There is concern about others in Indian culture. Here we can see the desire on the part of Dev to sow seeds of his own cultural values to England. He wishes for the establishment of Indian religious centers there. In England, he sees the race for attaining material success. The white man has forgotten moral and religious ideas. Material prosperity and superiority complex have taken away the emotions of love and concern for

the other losing the true essence of multiculturalism. Thus, he notices seclusion and emptiness in a busy city like London. Desai, in the novel, tries to focus that there is need of introspection that led to the self-discovery that accommodation of different culture is needed in multicultural society.

But he is performing role as ambassador with vengeance in mind. He is proud of the harmony and peace that exists in his country even though it is multicultural in its composition. There is element of arrogance in his outburst about invasion of England on India in the past. His scorn for the Englishman's 'white' superiority consciousness is understandable. His assertion that English language and literature was white man's weapon for colonizing the Indian mind is also justifiable. But his desire to colonize the cultural thinking of the West is essentially wrong, for multiculturalism does not rest on the principle of hatred, revenge, vengeance etc.

Discrimination based on colour and race is treated with illustrations in *Bye Bye Blackbird*. The shocking fact is that even the white children grow up with a warped knowledge of colour and race differences. Thus, while on a sightseeing trip to London, Dev is called a 'wog' by a schoolboy. Dev's reaction to the insult is sharp, but the point is the boy's awareness that anyone other than a white-skinned person can be insulted publicly. A little later we find Dev pointing out to Adit that "the London docks have three kinds of lavatories – Ladies, Gents and Asiatics" (17). Even nationality of an individual, thus, becomes a criterion for discrimination. In some cases, differences in race and colour can endanger the Asian immigrants' life. For instance, Mala, an immigrant woman, explains how her son reacts when he is chased by a gang of English children. He shouts at them in despair: "I'm not black!! I'm not black – I'm grey!" (26).

The British in Desai's novels are so colour-conscious that even jobs are reserved for the fair-skinned Europeans. What is all the more shocking is how people are categorized according to their religion. Thus, at an interview for a job, the interviewer informs Dev that the latter cannot be

offered the job because he is not a Christian. And the interviewer openly speaks of the religious reservation of the job:

Not a Catholic? Not even Christian? ...I am sorry. Dear me, I ought to have mentioned it at once...we simply must have a Catholic, or at least a High Church man. It's public relations... I'm afraid it wouldn't do to have a Hindu gentleman in this job. (108).

It now becomes evident that the white hegemony is directed not only by cultural, social, racial and economic considerations but also by religious factors. The incident of the riot shows the cold attitude of the Europeans to racial discrimination. They take it in the casual way as a normal event in their societies. When Adit's friend asks Mrs. Roscommon-James about a riot that takes place in a factory, she replies coldly without concern: Heavens, one of those racial things. (136)

Sarah has great faith in the institution of marriage and the bond of love. To make her identity, she decides to move out of her own country. She takes the decision of settling down in India, the land of her husband. It is a land; she seems to have understood, that still holds some respect for marital relationship. It is a land that has accommodated people of diverse backgrounds, cultures and religions for centuries. Sarah's decision to adopt India as her homeland is an outcome of her feeling that "she had become nameless" (31). What she seeks is a land where she will not have to live with the silent fear of being indirectly ostracized. Since she has already "her ancestry and identity" (31), she needs a place where she can find humanity, kindness, fellow feeling and self-respect.

Sarah's decision to move to India with her Indian husband has an element of protest in it. She is moving to a country that was ruled by her country in the recent past. As such her own people, with their hegemonic spirit, have been looking down upon the country and its people. But Sarah quite challengingly establishes a blood relation with an Indian and further adopts a British colony as her own motherland. When her own country disowns her, she makes her home in a country that England subjugated. In this she is joining the ally of the

other and thus, rises in revolt against the white assumptions of hegemony and superiority. Thus, her marriage is a challenge while at the same time it is her means to blend the Occident with the Orient and thus suggest the possibility of multiculturalism that crosses the artificial boundaries of colour and creed laid by white hegemonic structures.

There may be problems of adjustment awaiting Sarah in her new avatar as an Indian wife. But it is definitely more tolerable than the humiliations she experiences in her own country. Therefore, she has decided to face the problems with utmost coolness. She decides to play her role as a wife who can validate the merits of marriage. She leaves the theatre of artificialities (England) and enters the real world (India). Anita Desai has effectively developed Sarah's image as an Indian wife who accepts her husband with all his cultural, religious, social and ideological diversities.

Adit's disenchantment with English way of life is timely. Desai uses his frustration to emphasize the value of one's own cultural identity. Sarah loses her identity in her own homeland, while Adit loses it in an alien land. The mistake he commits is to create a false foreign identity in a hostile surrounding. The shocks he receives from various sources in England save him from damaging his self under the pressure of racial discrimination. His visit to his wife's house and the cold treatment he receives there is unbearable. He discovers that his mother-in-law hates and despises him. He feels "depression pouring into him like lead, hot when it entered in the form of Mrs. Roscommon-James' sniffs and barks..." (176). At one of the gatherings, Bella calls him an Indian', a foreigner and a "dirty Asian'. He realizes that he cannot be a normal human being in England. He even asks:

Why does everything have to come to this – that we're Indians and you're English and we're living in your country and therefore we've all got to behave in a special way, differing from normal people? (187-88)

Adit's problem is living an artificial life in the midst of standardized manners. When he behaves in the most natural way, he is branded as a

dirty Asian. The values of his culture do not get any respect among the white men. Confronting to the pretentious and unreal way of English life is a serious problem. The sense of alienation and marginalization becomes so acute in him that he realizes his mistake of being an anglophile all these years. The feeling finds expression in his decision to leave England with his wife. He informs her and asks her if she will follow him:

I can't live here any more. Our lives here – they've been so unreal, don't you feel it? Little India in London. All our records and lamb curries and sing-songs, it's all so unreal. It has not reality at all, we just pretend all the time. I'm twenty-seven now, 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 pretence, Sally. Now it has to be a real thing. I must go. You will come? (203-04)

It is surprising to witness this transformation of Adit. Anita Desai carefully politicizes his experience by bringing it in the broad context of colonization. Thus, she wishes that Adit's shaking off of a hegemonic impact should be ideally the move that every Indian should take. The novelist thus moves from the particular to the general. England is presented as "an aggressor who has tried to enmesh, subjugate and victimize him with the weapons of Empire". The significance of Adit's transformation lies in his successful attempt to break away from all bondages of the Empire. England, Adit's once-golden Mecca has now taken the form of the proverbial colonizer who is opportunistic, brutal and cold. Adit's decision is the revolt of the colonized. It is commendable that Sarah is ready to share his decision to wriggle out of the clutches of the colonizer. Both have suffered on account of their skin colour and inter-racial

marriage. Sarah warmly sympathizes with him, because she has seen his own personality cracking "apart into an unbearable number of disjointed pieces, rattling together noisily and disharmoniously" (200). She takes up the painstaking responsibility of piecing together his crumbling personality. Yes, she has her apprehensions about her new life in an alien land. Yet she is optimistic:

I think when I go to India; I will not find it so strange after all, I am sure I shall feel quite at home very soon. (219).

She consolidates her hope practically by suggesting, "Let's have an Indian meal tonight" (179). Even before reaching India she can compare the life in England with that of India. In her own country, "everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding. They live silently and invisibly. It would happen nowhere in India" (56). Adit still has doubt about her willingness to leave her country and hence he poses the question, "Could you really leave all this, Sally, and go away to India to live?" (83). And her answer is an emphatic 'yes'. So Adit finds a partner in his revolt and the purpose of their rebellion is the establishment of true multiculturalism, which has international dimensions. With her, Adit is going to carry a message:

And how he was going to carry the message of England to the East – not the old message of the colonist, the tradesman or the missionary, but the new message of the free convert, the international citizen, a message of progress and good cheer, advance and good will. (225-26)

Their new message bears the multicultural principle of peaceful coexistence. Significantly, Adit who returns to India as a cultural ambassador has no grudge against the country of the white. Anita Desai does not wish to suggest that multiculturalism is impossible in England. The activities of the character Emma, an English lady, illustrate this fact. She is an ardent fan of Indian culture. Very early in the novel, we read about her decision to start a club:

A little Indian club to which my Indian friends could come on Wednesday afternoons – I choose Wednesday because it always rains and strangers would be happy to have somewhere to go and have something to do. They could meet some really interested, intelligent English people and tell them, teach them about India. (41-42)

She addresses Indians as her friends. She has recognized the value of Indian spirituality and has decided to "give lessons in Yoga too" (42). The club has no materialistic concerns because, according to Emma, "there will be no money transactions at all in my club" (42). She wants the club members to learn from famous Indians:

Then, when famous Indians visit London – philosophers or painters or musicians – we shall invite them to come and address the Little India club (42-43).

Emma is at least making an attempt to recognize the value of another culture – the culture of a former colony of her own imperialist country.

Matriarchal value system is not something that is not well appreciated in India. Yet Anita Desai's Sikh lady upholds the merits of matriarchy. The lady is generous and munificent. Her prime intention is to enable the immigrants from India to feel at home in the strange land of England. She is well aware of the pains of the rootless immigrants. Her matriarchal dominance is positive and encouraging. On one occasion she admonishes Dev for not seeking her help:

And you did not come to us for help? What is this – are we not neighbors? Am I not like your own mother? It is bad you have not thought of coming to me and calling me mother. I am here to be mother to all our poor Indian boys lost and alone in this cold country. And my sons – such strong young men – can't they help you? Each one of them has a good job, a good pay. Every week they bring their full salary to me. I divide it into three parts – one for their own pockets for they are my sons and I must keep them happy, one for the household, and the third, the largest, for our family and our land in Punjab. (118)

She shows the concern, warmth and love for Indians. While seclusion, privacy and fear of the other characterize western life, here is a lady who encourages people to maintain fellow feeling and mutual concern. She, too, upholds the merits of cultural accommodation.

We come across such instances through which Desai underscores the greatness of multiculturalism, which is essentially Indian. Yet she has no illusory belief that the fabric of Indian multiculturalism is strong. Rather, she seems to assert that multiculturalism is possible only when the parties involved have the readiness to forget and forgive. She also seems to believe that multiculturalism can be maintained only with difficulty. The picture of India outside is rosy and romantic, but it is not really so. Desai makes Adit say it for the knowledge of Sarah who is going with him to India with much hope:

... that romantic India in which all flowers were perfumed, all homes harmonious and every day a festival. She's not going to live in a maharaja's palace, you know. She's going to live in a family of in-laws, a very big one, and learn their language and habits. (213)

The family she is going to is a microcosm of the culturally diverse India. It is large, there are people with conventional and modern viewpoints and there are also chances of friction. Yet such large families still survive; they show how this difficult balance of diversity is maintained. Like these families, India too has maintained the balance of cultures, religions, sects, beliefs and opinions although it has been occasionally made upset by intolerant groups. Shedding of ego, adjustment to unknown set-ups and respecting others sentiments are the essential factors that have contributed to the continued existence of multiculturalism in India.

The two different cultures – Oriental and Occidental have been compared quite properly by Anita Desai in the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird*. While dealing with the theme of multiculturalism, the comparison of two cultures is not important, but cultural differences should be considered positively

for maintaining social health and strength. After all, there is no one culture which is perfect, but each culture has something new to share. Multiculturalism not only supports cultural pluralism but also respects uniqueness and distinctiveness of each culture. Therefore, cultural conflicts have no place on the agenda of multiculturalism. The analytical study of this novel simply shows how different layers of cultural conflict can add to the multicultural aspects of the novel.

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