

## EXISTENTIALISM IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD

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### **Abstract:**

Anita Desai is one of the very perceptive women writers of India. In almost all of her novels she has tried to depict the existentialistic dilemma of the modern man with a microscopic concentration and lyrical attitude. *Bye-Bye Black bird* (1971) delineates the predicament of Indian immigrants in England as reflected by their agonizing contention with the problems of acclimatization or adjustment brought about by displacement. It images the movements in the consciousness of each of its major characters - Dev, Adit and Sarah-as each of them confronts a crisis of identity caused by their existential exposure to situations which develop in spite of themselves. The novel, significantly, has been described by the author in an interview with Atma Ram that of all her novels it is "most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation"<sup>1</sup>, which explains its being charged with a certain intensity of feeling that may be ascribed to her not having distanced herself from what is projected. Most of Anita Desai's Characters live apart from the excitements and the turmoil of modern India.

**Keywords:** Extentionalism, dilemma, immigrant, epiphanic, xenophobia.

### **Introduction:**

It is said, "Home is where your feet are" but it equally demands the involvement of heart with that land on which we rest our Feet. Simply by standing on a particular land, it is difficult to consider that land as our home. It is the emotional involvement of the heart with that land which creates a home for us. It would be proper to say that by enlarge, the problem of nation and identity begins after migration and mobility, the problem get solved, when our heart is emotionally attached to that new land. The problem of nation and identity should also be viewed from the psychological angle. It is a problem related not only to the area of political or social boundaries. It involves in it a great deal of human psychology. It is a psychological fact that a person would feel and experience a kind of oneness and affinity when he comes across some other people of the same type of culture or language. But modern man's emigration to different parts of the world has made it difficult to come across the same type of people. Naturally his psyche makes him feel that he is

different, unsafe and having no tie to the place on which his feet rest. With that begins his struggle to settle and establish himself in that new place which involves a great psychological preparation on his part. A time comes when he tries to part with his original self and identity by the way of merging with the culture of that place. Of course it is a difficult process, just like killing one's own self and getting a new form. But the merging is also not that easy because the counterpart-the other culture-should also be ready to accept and approve the newcomer as one of them. Even if the merging takes place and a person is accepted by the counterpart, some and again he is reminded of his original identity and culture. That is the reason why even after the total merging, there remains one hidden desire to go back home.

Anita Desai in her novel *Bye-Bye Bird* very effectively deals with theme of extentionalism, Identity crisis and alienation. The novel opens with the arrival of Dev, a Bengali youth seeking admission into the London School of Economics, for higher studies in England. To support himself he tries to get a job and after repeated failures which are extremely frustrating, he manages to get the job of a salesman in a bookshop. Dev's humiliating experiences in London turn him into an Anglophone-experiences like a peddler's refusal even to tell him the price of a Russian icon stating "oh very much. I wouldn't even name the price to you"<sup>2</sup>, ostensibly under the impression that he is too poor an Indian to be able to afford it. Further, he finds it intolerable to be insulted and called openly 'wags' and 'Macaulay's bastards's and to be discriminated against as reflected in the signboards of the lavatories at the London Docks, viz., 'Ladies', 'Gents' and 'Asiatics'. Dev experiences a kind of cultural shock and tells Adit, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted"<sup>3</sup> He is depressed by the 'tube', finding himself virtually suffocated inside the Clapham underground railway station.

Furthermore, he is unnerved by the silence and seeming emptiness of the houses and streets of London as he cannot understand "the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut..... of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking and their throats from catching cold..."<sup>4</sup>. Resenting the

snobbery of the English, Dev denounces the obsequious attitude of the Indian immigrants who bear all the insults affronts to their self-respect just to say on in England. He calls his friend, Adit, a “boot-licking today, spineless imperialist-lover”<sup>5</sup>, ignoring Adit’s protestations of his being happy in England.

Significantly, as Dev starts wandering in London like a tourist, he begins to shed his prejudices and inhibitions when learns to appreciate the brighter aspects of the English scene and life.

The change that occurs in Dev, however gradual, confronts him with what is essentially an existential choice. He has to decide whether he should stay on in England or return to his native country, which will not be easy, since he is affected with schizophrenia which all Indians abroad are prone according to him. It is the yearning for ‘a place in the sun’ that stems from the feeling of being rootless which Dev like any other immigrant would feel. Dev overcomes it by regarding himself as an ambassador out to show:

*.....these damn imperialists with their lost colonies  
 complex that we are free from people now, with our  
 own personalities that this veneer of an English  
 education has not obscured, and not afraid to match  
 ours with theirs.*<sup>6</sup>

“I am here....” he says, “to interpret my coming to them, to conquer England as they once conquered India, to show them, to show them”<sup>7</sup>, which, though smacking of braggadocio, suggests his having made up his mind not to return to India. He even indulges in a kind of wishful thinking. Dev’s mind, wishful thinking is suggestive of his desperate need to rationalize his decision not to leave England despite his being treated as an unwanted man, which may in part be attributed to the hedonistic streak in him as is endorsed by his own admission: “... All I want is – well, yes, a good time. Not to return to India, not to marry and breed, go to office again but – to know a little adventure, to know, to know –”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Dev, Adit, who has married an English girl, begins to feel nostalgic for his homeland occasioned by the visit of his in-laws, the Roscommon – Jameses, which was “married by tactlessness, by inane misunderstandings, by loud underlining of the basic disharmony of the situation”<sup>9</sup> Further, the outbreak of Indo-Pak war seems to have kindled his innate sense of patriotism making him want to fight for his country in its hour of peril. He even longs for the Indian landscapes, in comparison with which the English ones appear to him anaemic:

*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  
 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.*<sup>10</sup>

Adit soon finds his nostalgia becoming ‘an illness and ache’ with the result that he starts feeling stifled. He unburdens himself to his friend Samar, telling him:

*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  
 burrowing about these grisly side streets, looking for  
 Indian shops and Indian restaurants..... It’s so stifling  
 – all the damned time being aware of one is and where  
 one  
 is. God, I am fed up!*<sup>11</sup>

what Adit experiences is of the nature of an epiphanic revelation of his true condition, which makes him disenchanted with his adopted country. He moves about London relentlessly like a lost soul in a kind of morbid search. For something that would dissolve his feeling of being stranger, a non-believer. It is not surprising that he shouts at his English wife Sarah, accusing her of xenophobia, when she, to please him, dons a sari and a gold necklace on the occasion of their wedding anniversary, jokingly comparing herself to a Christmas tree.

Adit’s growing disgust with the English ways assumes such proportions as to make him decide to return to India with Sarah who is expecting her first child. Adit’s decision is symptomatic of existential despair, which had he stayed on in England would have plunged him into darkness. Though Sarah does not experience any such existential despair as Adit does, she is confronted an identity crisis as is brought out by her musings. Significantly, Sarah’s awareness of her ambiguity or role playing making her engagement with life does not seem to have brought about any emotional crisis in her, since she seeks truth, not any certitude, for coming to terms with life.

It is ironic that Adit, who has “found himself a pleasant groove to fit into with his English wife and the education that he hold, he so repeatedly told them brought him up to love and understand England”<sup>12</sup> should leave England for good, while Dev who has found everything English obnoxious should decide to stay on. As Dev who has come to see off Adit and Sarah watches the train carrying them leaves Waterloo Station, he wonders “what

had made them exchange the garments of visitor and exile”<sup>13</sup>, since “if plans and prophesies had any strength in them at all, it would have been steaming out on the train to catch the boat back to India”.<sup>14</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The cases of Adit and Dev exemplify the different responses that a country evokes in its immigrants, which are essentially psychosocial in that they are related to their attempts at acclimatization involving the play of the autochthon in their lives as the author poetically suggests:

*.... somewhere at some point that summer, England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and dutched at Dev instead England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with her and caught and enmeshed, his friend Dev.....<sup>15</sup>*

Though the ‘action’ in the novel mainly concerns Dev, Adit and Sarah, if feature a few other characters-Indian and English – who, though largely undeveloped, help reinforce its significance through their interaction with the main characters as well as with one another. They are Samar, Bella, Mala, Jasbir, Swami and Krishnamurthy among Indians and Emma Moffitt, Roscommon – James, Oristine Longford and the Millers among the English, whose roles are skillfully inter-wined with those of Adit, Dev and Sarah, so as to present a fascinating scenario marked by a crisis-crossing

of emotional responses to the developing action involving them.

In juxtaposing Adit’s decision to leaves England with that of Dev to stay on, the novel brings out the extraordinary configurations of psychic and social forces which save them from a gnostic plunge into darkness.

**References:**

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10. *Ibid*, p. 199
11. *Ibid*, p. 202
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14. *Ibid*, p. 220
15. *Ibid*, p. 38
16. *Ibid*, p. 261