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## DAISPORIC ELEMENTS IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE -BYE BLACK BIRD

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### Abstract:

*This research article is an attempt to find out Diasporic elements in Anita Desai's novel Bye- Bye Blackbird. While close reading of the life of Anita Desai and her novel, we come to know that this novel is related to her own experiences and in this article I would like to focus on Anita Desai and her interest in Diasporic elements.*

*The success of the novel as a literary genre depends upon a range of factors like the skillful interweaving of plot and character, interesting shocks and surprises in the plot, the roundness and flatness of the characters and narrative techniques of the author himself and perhaps more importantly the theme. Here I discuss the issues of alienation, lost of identity and accommodation that the immigrants has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world in the novel Bye-Bye Blackbird. It proves Anita Desai as a famous and strongest writer of Indian Diaspora.*

### INTRODUCTION

The word Diaspora suggests the idea of dispersal and fragmentation. Literally the word Diaspora is a scattering carrying within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee.

Many Indians migrated to different countries of Asian and pacific regions. For example, during the British Raj, labourers went from India to Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and Pacific states to work in the plantations and mines there. The diasporic community is varied and complex. Bhiku Parekh comments that:

The Indian Diaspora is one of the most varied, representing 'half a dozen religions... seven different regions of India... nearly a dozen castes.'

[Jasbir Jain, edit, writers of Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice, [Rawat Publications: Jaipur and New Delhi, 1998], p.12]

It has shown a great adjustability as it has double act of migration – from India to West- Indies and from there to metropolitan centers; it means from India to Africa and then to Europe or America on account of social and political reasons. As we know, human movement has always taken place as nomads, hunters, traders, cultural carriers, soldiers, and conquerors. Indians too have migrated since the dawn of history. And there is evidence of Indian migration to Africa and central and Southeast Asia as traders, Brahmin priests, Buddhist monks and adventures. Here Parekh compares the diasporic Indian with the Banyan tree.

The diasporic Indian is “like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.”

[Ibid, p.12]

Yet this multiplicity of home does not bridge the gape between 'home'- the culture of origin; and 'world'- the culture of adoption.

However Indian migration has been entirely peaceful and has left a tremendous cultural and

civilizational impact evident even today. Nearer our times people of Indian origin begin to migrate in significant numbers only in the nineteenth century as indentured labour. Today there are over 20 million people of Indian origin spread over hundred and thirty –eight countries. They speak different vocations and professions. But they have Indian origin, cultural heritage and a deep attachment to India. They are known for their resilience and hard work. In several cases, they have made tremendous sacrifices even actively participating in their independence movement. But there are two obvious reasons of migration and that is extreme poverty and unemployment on the one hand, and force migration for the development of plantation and agricultural economics of the colonies under Western control on the other.

As Diaspora is basically an experience of dislocation and re-location, we must keep both the directions of dislocation and re-location. Further I would like to focus on the two fold structure of Indian Diaspora that is out of Indian Diaspora and Into- Indian Diaspora. The out of Indian Diaspora is very rich with a long history. It would be instructive to look at the long history beginning with the mythical and fictional references to people moving out of India after the Mahabharata war. But history of Into-Indian Diaspora is much more complex and interesting for example, in 4th century B.C. the Greeks came into India, they settled down here. And in the 2nd century A.D. or even earlier, the Jewish migrations into and settlement on the southern west coast of India. These Jewish people have peacefully lived here. Thus the Jews came in and then the Parsis. In the 8th century, in this very Gujarat the King telling them that you can live either like lemon in the milk or like sugar in milk. The Parsis have lived like sugar in milk, speaking the language of the people, eating their food, and yet retaining their identity. And then the Turks, Afghans and Moghuls who came, conquered and settled down. Then the British, the permanent aliens came, who could never feel at home in India. And last of all, the Tibetan into-India-diaspora happened and that has engendered a revival of Buddhism in India.

Diaspora is not mere scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys; an experience determined by who travels, where, how and under what circumstance. Experiences are shaped by economics positions, personal skills and political relationships between country of origin and of adoption. Reception and Acceptance in the country of adoption do not work on purely humanistic consideration. The host countries immigration laws, legal system and cultural openness are all equally important.

“Anita Desai has been touted by “British Writers” A. Michael Martin as “one of the preeminent contemporary Indian novelists” even referred to by many as the Mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. Her meticulous depictions of modern Indian life, combined with an elevated level of linguistic skill that frequently enters the poetic realm, secured her a place of honor in the pantheon of Indian authors.”

[Www. Questia. Com/literary- criticism]

Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She has been known as a literary genius both in India and abroad. She was determined to be a writer, and it was prose, mainly fiction. Her stories appeared as favorite pieces in the children magazine. She has lived in Calcutta, Chandigarh, Delhi and Pune and as a proof all her novels set in one the other of these cities. She is familiar with the contemporary Indian milieu, from which she derives the background and characters for her novels. 'Writing is a necessary to me; I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, to feel, and to realize at the highest pitched. Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth.' [WWW, Questia. Com/Literary-Criticism]

Bye- bye Blackbird is most intimately related to her own experiences.

She herself confesses that “the book I enjoyed writing Most: their [immigrants'] schizophrenia amused me while I was with them and continued to tease me when I returned to India. I wrote it in an effort to understand the split psychology, the double loyalties of the immigrants.” [Gupta. R. K. The Novels of Anita Desai, A Feminist Perspective, Atlantic publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2002. Pg.194]

India came to be known as a land of innumerable Gods and Goddesses, Maharajas and snake charmers. On the contrary, the knowledge of British in India was given by businessmen, travelers and workers of East India Company. British came to India in seventeenth century and when they left the country in the middle of the 20th century, they left the mixed memories. The relationship between British and India became that of the colonizer and the colonized or we can also say that of the master and slave.

This gave them an opportunity to live in the land of their dream which fulfilled their material desires. Therefore from the beginning, the image of Britain in the minds of Indians and the image of India in the minds of the British was, by and large, ideal and romantic. Anita Desai's Bye- Bye blackbird deals with the same problem of acculturation. It explains a story of love in the background of the immigration. Adit and

Dev in the novel *Bye –Bye blackbird* are Indian immigrants in Britain and they suffer from many cultural shocks and degradations. The major reason for such problems is a romantic Image which the Indians have had of England and vice versa. The clash is between a romantic image and a real image of India and Indians in England and British and Britishers who come to India. The best example is Adit, he is first of all fascinated by British culture and then disillusioned. On the other hand, Adit marries a lady named Sarah who is fascinated by India. Without knowing whether Indian family system would accept her or not, she marries Adit. This is again a clash between continent and Island and vice versa. At the end of the novel, Adit returns to India in search of his roots.

Moreover this novel also deals with the theme of xenophobia or dislike for the foreigners. It is natural for a man to have confrontation with the alien culture of the country he visits, and giving birth to problems of interpersonal and by implication, socio- cultural adjustment. But when such cultures are of a different nature the problem becomes all the more complicated. This confrontation has been called the east - west confrontation.

“The East is east and West is west and the twain shall never meet.”

[BhatnagarM.k. [edit] *Indian writing in English*, v –I, Atlantic publishers and distributors, New Delhi-2001. pg.173]

*Bye –Bye Blackbird* is a piece of truly objective observation.

“Of all my novels *Bye- Bye Blackbird* is most rooted in Experience and the least literary in derivation.’

[Ibid]

The title of the book *Bye- Bye Blackbird* is directly concerned to the theme and signifies that London has said good –bye to one blackbird –Adit but has offered a cuckoo's nest to another and that is Dev. The novel presents the difficulties of adjustment there and of those who return to the mother land.

The novel divides into three chapters viz, Arrival, Discovery, and Recognition and Departure. Adit is the chief protagonist in the fiction who has been settled in London, 'the land of Opportunities. Dev is his friend who has come to England and still cherishes hatred for Britain and Britishers who suppressed his country while ironically, at the close of the fiction, Adit leaves England for good and Dev remains behind. The plot of the novel is well knitted and the story takes some very beautiful and unpredictable twists and turns and at times, the sensitive and imaginative readers find himself amidst the Londoners, facing the humiliation of their taunts while enjoying the fresh morning air of countryside as well.

In the beginning of the novel, we see Adit critical of every thing India. The only reason is that Adit's experiences in India were not very pleasant and he portrays its pictures to others as he tells them that during his visit to India, he

“Only notices the laziness of the clerks and boredom of it.”

[Desai Anita, *Bye –Bye Blackbird*, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, 2006, pg. 50]

Adit is proud of his blind admiration of England. Love, admiration and loyalty, he has so much to offer to England and in return he feels that he has every right to enjoy and celebrate. Ironically, all his worship and trust on this land of liberty, eccentricity and individualism, he realizes that England can provide him neither of these. Wherever he goes, he becomes the victim of racial discrimination. And he is constantly regarded as not only a second grade citizen, but also as intruder and also to stand in separate lavatory queue for Asiatic or to be called 'Wog'. And he has to get on with it as long as he wishes to stay in England. The dialogues between Dev and Adit explain his helplessness.

“That boy at the bus stop- he called us Wogs. You heard him.”

“I did not.”

'Adit, I saw you turn, I saw your face. You can take that- from a school boy.’

“It is best to ignore those who don't deserve ones' notice.”

[Ibid. 164]

Despite his love and admiration for England, he feels himself as an alien and stranger and his heart is full with nostalgic reveries of his native land. He longs for his home and all the things associated with it. These roots of his nostalgia are hidden in Adit's inward hatred for England and nothing but love for his native country. Another more testimony of his love to his own country is his effort to raise fund during India's war with Pakistan and it is during the war, he took a major decision that he would go to India along with Sarah. Everyone was surprised at his decision and his friend Jasbir makes a comment,

I'd like to make sure you actually leave. I can't believe it otherwise- you, the most pukka sahib of



all, going back to India and leaving all the kala sahibs here.”  
[Ibid.221]

According to the development of the story, Dev is gradually cured of his Anglophobes, while Adit develops an intense nostalgia. Thus we can see how he shifts from being an anglophile to transforming himself into an Anglophobe. Consequently, dev decides to stay in London and Adit resolves to leave for India along with his pregnant wife. When he is returned to his house in clapham, he is a changed man. He is dumb with despair, -

“A look of disbelief that invalids...  
When the disease is still new,  
their pains still unaccustomed.”  
[Ibid.206]

Ironically, it is not Adit who suffer a most but also his wife – Sarah. Further, Desai portrays flashback technique how the marriage between Sarah and Adit happened. This is the romantic image of India and Indians that Sarah had of Adit before marriage. Sarah never thought that she will be passing through such a plight. She had to face identity –crisis. She always avoids questions regarding her husband and family life. But her colleagues in the school are critical and satirical towards her, as a result of which she starts avoiding them.

Her dreams to India and Indians fall to pieces when she had to face reality. Indeed, Sarah's problem is rooted in her cross- cultured marriage. Her frustration is the result of “cultural shock, which Asian immigrants experience in England. Both of them maintain their cultural identities, yet experience a close affinity with each other's culture. But Sarah had a dread of being labeled an Indian where in lies thee crux of her identity.” [BandeUsha, the Novels of Anita Desai, New Delhi: Prestige Book, 1988, pg. 121]

Moreover, the novel rarely presents any scene of love or intimacy to indicate that Adit and Sarah had any fascination for each other. Her weakness which she begs to conceal from others is her wedding with an Indian. She never wants to discuss Adit with any of her English friends and colleagues because she is quite aware of the fact that the English look down upon the Indians. And unconsciously she also feels like them now and then. Even Sarah had to suffer and face discrimination for getting married to an Indian. Further, Adit notices in Sarah “an anguish of loneliness” and also notices the disappearance of her former cheerfulness, vividness, the sure, quick quality of the humour that he had known when he fell in love with her.’ [Ibid.34]

Towards the end of the novel, the novelist shows that Adit does not even care to know Sarah's feelings when he decides to return to India and settle there. He tells his decision and creates suspense in her. She dreads that he may alone return to India and ruin their marriage. As she is pregnant, she is too much concern for her unborn baby. And she comes out of her anguish, despair and dead when he asks her to accompany him to India. Sarah's choice of going to her husband's country fills her with the hope of acquiring 'a new different personality.' thus the chapter of Adit is closed with the circle of his migration complete – from India to England and again to India. More over, finding no job in his own country in spite of a degree from a British university, Adit has returned to this alien country and settled down there. Any how he has found job as a travel agent and he is satisfied with his life in London. But in this alien country he feels humiliation and to which he is subjected. It indicates Adit's character which is suggestive of the 'process of birth.' Adit's development can be compared to the Biblical Myth of paradise; this novel presents a variety of immigrant experiences and this experience is not same for everyone: it ranges from acceptance to ambivalence, acute awareness to unawareness and from loving England to hating it. These immigrants are openly insulted and abused. They are called 'wogs' and are not allowed to use lavatory meant for the English as “the London docks have three kinds of lavatories – ladies, Gents and Asiantics” [Ibid.17]

Finally, the English hater stays in London, in his friend's shoes, being employed in his friend's place and living in his flat. He joined the tourist bureau in which Adit was working previously. It can be easily evinced that Bye – Bye Blackbird depicts the love- hate relationship of the expatriates with England. Anita Desai presents a clear reversal of attitude of these two expatriates. Adit, the man who loves it, leaves it for good and decides to settle down in India. Contrary to Dev who had come to England with a purpose to pursue higher education and was determent to back; settle down here.

The novelist depicts Dev's dilemma, agony, and sense of isolation through the latte's instructive responses to the London life and in this respect Dev reminds of Nirode of 'Voices in the City', who also reacts in a similar manner to the claustrophobic atmosphere of Calcutta. He is in dilemma whether he should accept England as he finds her or rejects her because she finds to confirm to his image of England. Dev's dilemma makes him forget his original purpose of coming to England. He feels frustrated and grows

envious of Adit's job and position. Here Desai portrays the various aspects of Dev's distraught the psychic state through the language of images and symbols.

Desai is concerned not only with the space but the spatial [place] effects on the inner psyche of her characters as she comments,

“Whereas there is concern with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation.” [Gupta. R. K. The Novels of Anita Desai, A Feminist Perspective, Atlantic publishers and Distributors, 2002. Pg.103]

All the characters pass through the cycle of attraction, hostility and frustration. Erich Fromm, a reputed critic, argues in *The Same Society*:

We are free from two conflicting tendencies – from bondage to the freedom and another to return to the womb.” [Ibid]

To free himself from social and economic bondages, Dev leaves India for seeking material freedom. The transformation in respect of Dev and Adit towards the end of the novel looks abrupt, for they reverse their role.

Bye –Bye Blackbird presents “a heroic, although unsuccessful effort to show the whole gamut of Indian immigrants in England.”

[Gupta. R. K. The Novels of Anita Desai, A Feminist Perspective, Atlantic publishers and Distributors, 2002. Pg.104]

Moreover, Meenakshi Mukerji states about Anita Desai's style, “Her language is marked by three characteristics: sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness and a love for the sound of words.”

[Bhatnagar M.k. Indian Writing in English, v-I, [edit] Atlantic publishers and Distributors-2001, pg.186]

Desai in her several novels makes use of poetry to convey the meaning effectively. Most probably the title of the novel itself is alien from poem and the poem is quoted more than once in the novel.

“Make my bed and light the light,  
I'll arrive late tonight.  
Blackbird, bye-bye.”

[Desai Anita, Bye- Bye Blackbird, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi 1985, pg.224]

On the surface level the line refers to Dev's farewell to Asian immigrants in London. The poem is written in different places in the novel with different intentions. Desai is carried away by the music in words. In *Bye-bye Blackbird* the sound of words is used to echo the sense:

“The drum, the trombone and the electric guitar that assaulted them with their persistent monotone of best – thrum, thrum, thrum...” [Ibid.22]

Here we find Dev's anti England and his desire to establish superiority of India over England. Adit marries Sarah an English girl and by doing so he incurs the anger and racial clashes of the white society. After marrying a black or brown Asian, Sarah has broken all the social code of London. It is because of ill-matched marriage she is a subject to taunts and scoffs not only her colleges but even of young pupils of the school where she is a clerk. She is fed up with putting on faces. She wants genuineness and that would come when she leaves England for good at the novel. By contrast to,

“Identity in a caste society has a fixed sense of social placement.”

[Gupta. R. K. The Novels of Anita Desai, A Feminist Perspective, Atlantic publishers and Distributors, 2002. Pg.106]

Sarah's identity crisis has been described more than once in the novel which makes her alien. The question always arises in her mind, who is she? We find two examples of it in chapter II of the novel. After her marriage she faces identity crisis: She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear. Or could only someone who knew her, knew of her background and her marriage, imagine this? Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name that she seemed, with sudden silver falling of the light of glamour, to an unusually subdued and thoughtful Adit?” [Desai Anita, Bye- Bye Blackbird, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi 1985, pg.33]

If a girl marries in a same culture, it is very easy to adjust to her new home and family. But inter-culture, inter-religious and inter racial marriages cause hardships and adjustment problems which are not easy to have victory.

Thus, the novel sumps up with phrase Blackbird bye -bye uttered by Dev. The question arises in our mind that is it that Dev is bidding good bye to Adit only or is it to his Indian self?

“Mrs. Desai vividly projects the prison, Physical and psychological- in which the colored immigrant in Britain is caught, both the difficulties of adjustment there and those of return to India.” [Gupta. R. K. *The Novels of Anita Desai, A Feminist Perspective*, Atlantic publishers and Distributors, 2002. Pg.195]

Finally it proves that, in the novel “the tension between the local and immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world.” [ibid.166]

Thus, “The novel is about the alienation of the immigrants in a world which is alluring and appalling at the same time....It deals with the self-awareness of the educated Indian immigrants who keep wavering between acceptance and rejection of a worldthey have been educated to admire and love and which they find, on an actual contact either to be strange or to be hostile.”

[NeeruTandon, *Anita Desai and Her Fictional World*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2008, p.121]

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