



**MISSING THY HOMELAND:
RELEVANCE OF INDIAN CULTURE AS REVEALED IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE BYE BLACKBIRD**

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ABSTRACT

Indian culture is no wonder a dynamic appeal to young and old alike for its wonderful features like sculpture, movies, art forms, literature, lifestyle and so on. It has attracted the westerners for its calm and reposed nature and gives them an urge to learn more about its historical settings. Bye Bye Blackbird is a beautiful novel by Anita Desai where the immigrant characters speak highly about the beauty of their native soil and in the event miss it deeply. The culture of India is expressed so highly in the novel and the turning point is when the immigrants return to their mother country leaving behind their job and other good things everybody would dream in a foreign land. Such is the beauty and divinity of India and the novel Bye Bye Blackbird discussed in this paper promises to provide a feast of culture. The paper also exposes the negative traits such as superstitious beliefs, political evils and religious enticements followed in India but the positive elements exceed them.

Key words: Dynamic, Reposed, Superstitious beliefs, enticements.

Introduction

....he thought with momentary bitterness of the cup of tea that would have been brought to him if he were in India now, by a mother fresh from her morning prayers, or a servant boy scorched and sooty from a newly made fire...It was the first lesson his first day in London taught him:he who wants tea must get up and make it (8)

The lines above make a sharp contrast between the protagonist's homeland and the land of his dreams. Dev who is one of the chief protagonist in the novel Bye Bye Blackbird is disgusted by the events happening in London where he goes to pursue his higher studies. He stays with his





friend Adit Sen who is also an immigrant working in London. Adit Sen is married to an English Lady named Sarah and a series of differences crops up between them too. Each find difficult to cope with one another due to their different cultural backgrounds. Gopal N.R opines thus “The post-colonial phase of the relationship between India and England has brought about many perceptible changes which Sarah and Adit are not exactly able to realize. As a result they develop a mythological image of each other’s culture. These images carry their own continents and islands in various combinations and permutations which verily Sarah, Adit and Dev are images when multiplied by the phenomenon of recurrence become archetypes. The Indians who are collectively represented by Adit and Dev in two different experiential modes carry the archetypal feelings of the whole lot of Asians who have either migrated to England or are going for short visit to the country which once colonized them”(179).

Anita Desai, the master creator of the novel has beautifully expressed the conflicts arising between the two countries using lively experiences and imagery. She depicts the circular journey of a deprived soul searching for a perfect life and a reason to live or not live in England. The novel is well knitted with a tangible storyline and some very beautiful and unpredictable twists and turns making the readers feel as if they live in the country of England. The end of the story gives a beautiful twirl to the story: Adit the man who loved the country dearly leaves for India and Dev who came from India with a detriment of going back at the earliest possibility settles down in England.

The culture of India is efficiently juxtaposed with the culture of London and Ms. Desai presents their polarities in a strong but affable manner. She uses careful dialogues to see that both the positive and negative qualities get along equally well with both the countries. Though she points out the flaws of both England and India she proves her point that the culture and country remain the same, ie the west has its own ways different from the Indian habits and nothing can be done to change its roots. The change has to occur with the person who decides his dreams.

The importance of Indian culture is felt well by Dev when he finds people insulting them because they were immigrants. The same people are received with much warmth and attention and are even given good respect when they arrive in India. He also feels uneasy when he sees pets being treated as one of the members in the household. Sarah talks about her pet cat as “They make very good insulators” (11). Adit never likes pets and says his mother would die of heart attack when she comes to know of it. Sarah reminds Adit about the sacred cows in India. But Adit finds no point in her treating cows and cats alike.





It was disgusting for Dev when he finds three kinds of lavatories in the docks of London ie Ladies, Gents and Asiatics. When asked by Adit why he had shut his mouth by queuing at the Asiatics, He replied “Of course. I wouldn’t step into a dirty white man’s lav if you paid me to. I wanted to show them I preferred the Asiatics’(19). Dev never wants to live in a country where he was insulted and unwanted. He just wants to study and return home as an England returned teacher. He felt everything was beyond his Indian imagination and experience. He found frozen food packets in supermarkets, well-groomed dogs on leashes, trim nylons on women’s stout legs and shops doing easy trade by selling everything at high prices. Adit had different reasons to love England. He says “I like the pubs. I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom! I like reading the posters in the tube-oh, I must take you to see my favorites, two of them hanging side by side-. “Beware of VD” and “I got it at the Co-op”. Do you get that kind of fun on your way to office in Calcutta? (20). On listening to his friend’s long lecture he calls him ‘boot-licking toady. Spineless imperialist lover’. ‘You would sell your soul and your passport too, for a glimpse at two shillings, of some draughty old stately home’(21). Adit convinces his friend to take things in an optimistic manner and see London as a land of opportunities.

Adit’s wife Sarah had a different problem. She could not discuss anything about her Indian husband in her workplace nor could she display her letters from India, “to discuss her Indian husband, would have forced her to parade like an imposter, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own, although they would have been more than ready to believe her”(38). Her friends compelled her to explain the various ways of cooking curry (an item relished in India) and how close she was to her parents-in-law. Sarah stammered to find an answer to those questions but she continued to be silent as she loved her husband and felt it was the time to make adjustments, an adjustment for a lifetime.

Sarah always had a temptation of India and requests her husband Adit to take her to the country. Adit replies that he will take her once a whole month of leave is saved up. He also gleams and says “My mother will cook hilsa fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sisters will dress Sarah in saris and gold ornaments. I’ll lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up half the night listening to the shehnai and sitar”(49). It is clear from this conversation that Adit loves his country more but economic freedom compels him to stay back in London.

Once when visiting the bazaar in London Dev imagines how it would be if history turns its tables so that the Indian traders would come to England selling their wares. He says “let us abolish the British Railways! Down with Beeching, down with Bradshaw! Let us set up our elephant routes, and let the people travel in camel caravans. Let us abolish the vicarages and rectories and





parsonages and build temples and mosques and gurudwaras. Let us bring across our yogis and gurus, barefoot and robed in saffron. Let us abolish the British public schools. Down with Eton, Harrow and all that bunkum!. Let us replace Latin and Greek with the study of Sanskrit classics and Punjabi swear words. No one shall cook stews any more, or bangers and mash. Let us feed them all on chilli pickles, tandoori chicken and rassum. Let all British women take to the graceful sari and all British men to the noble dhoti..."(63). The above said are instances to show the culture of India with all its finery and beautiful images.

There seem to be enough indications in the novel that even the parental relations are not as strong as they exist in India. This is proved well by Sarah's father when he shows no sign of excitement to embrace his daughter whom he has not seen since previous Christmas. "To his daughter Sarah he was the memory of a well-dressed and portly man of Victorian speech and habits who had tried to cheer her dismal school days by unexpected little treats of muffins and scones at the Got Begot House in Winchester, and for whom he always had a tender, if absentminded, smile when he saw her peeping mously out of the window as he left for his chambers"(145). London also shows signs of children keeping aloof from their parents.

One positive aspect of the Londoners was to stick to time whatever be their work. But the Orientals do the opposite "We don't really believe in watches and clocks. We are romantics. We want time to fit in with our moods. It should be drinking time when we feel like a drink and sleeping time when we feel like sleeping. How is the Englishman to understand that? He's been a clock watcher since the day he was born. Do you know, English mothers even feed their babies and put them to bed according to the clock" (163).

Dev slowly began to change his attitude towards the country and in the pursuit of getting economic freedom he wishes good bye to Sarah and Adit who were on their way to India. The explanation the author gives is "For first time Dev felt the rapture of a Victor and over, a rapture that accompanied him back to London, so that he no longer saw it with the eye of a member of a once –conquered race, or an apprehensive and short –sighted visitor, but of someone before whom vistas of love, success and joy had opened".(230) Adit who once thought of settling down in London slowly began to feel lonely and depressed and the child which was about to be born to him and Sarah was the main concern for him. "As an exile with memories of the reality that had been refreshed now that he was forced to be realistic, and with his growing worries of the changes that had taken place at home since he left"(215). His fatherhood dreams and happiness were overshadowed by worries like "Sarah's confinement, the expense, the problems of raising a child with an English mother be be and Indian child"(216) and so on. He wanted his child to





grow up in an Indian atmosphere and enjoy all its pleasures though economic freedom still evades him. He takes the decision to return to his native place and Sarah who was at the verge of enjoying her new job adjusts with Adit to return to India. Together they wave goodbye to Dev who sings his song

“Make my bed and light the light, I’ll arrive late tonight Black bird, Bye, Bye”(231)

This song proves well the point that Dev may also arrive to India once he feels the need to do so.

As far as Anita Desai’s novels are concerned nothing proves to be more efficient in portraying the life and culture of India as “Bye Bye Blackbird”. This one novel which proves the beauty and splendor of the East is a feast to all the readers. This novel, by highlighting the problems of immigrants, shows the readers how deeply our homeland is missed. We, our own we , find instances of our near and dear ones settled abroad in a foreign country and though they have economic freedom, the longings of love and the cultural atmosphere of India still lingers fresh in their minds.

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