



## Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird*: A diasporic hot soup of cultural conjunction

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### Abstract

Anita Desai belongs to bicultural heritage of postcolonial India, because her father was a Bengali and her mother was a German woman. A brilliant example of multi-cultural environment, her writings amply exhibit the effects of multi-culturalism on the psyche of the protagonists. She has authored many novels like *Cry, the peacock*, *Voices in the city*, *Bye Bye Blackbird*. Apart from emphasis on cultural mixing and its effect on the psychology of her characters, she also focus on the attendant theme of alienation faced by immigrant characters. Western culture, also referred to as occidental culture, is based on materialism and is totally different from eastern culture. The western culture is composed of nuclear families, people open minded but full of aggression, who give preference to their own happiness, and don't like any interference even by parents in their lives. The way of living, eating and the lifestyle of these people are totally different from Eastern people.

**Keywords:** east, west, culture, conflict, civilization, spiritualism, materialism, alienation

### Introduction

Eastern culture is a mixture of diversities like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and so many religions. Culture of East can be referred to as rich and full of diversity. Edward Said calls this as oriental culture. It has various languages, religions, traditions, rituals etc. It is a common understanding that Eastern people give more importance to spirituality. They are more spiritual than western people. One more feature in this culture is that they very much like to live in the joint family. Joint families, faith in God, religious values, sacrifice of an individual happiness for common purpose are the main features of this culture. Two or more generations of a family live in one home. People who belong to East take decisions for their children who have no right to interfere in parents' decision. It's a compulsion for the children to accept their parents' decision whether they are happy or not. One more important aspect in the eastern culture is that they give much value to arranged marriage.

Although there are several differences, yet, the effect of Western culture can be easily seen on the Eastern culture. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British colonization influenced the eastern people. When British people came to India and established their colony in India, they showed their superiority on Indian people. But they could not get the better of Indian ethos. However, leader manipulated by the Britishers accepted their superiority. And, it did have an impact on the living styles and communication style of the people, although internally, they remained the same. Both the cultures have some intrinsic values, attended by some negative traits as well.

This clash of values also underlines the generation gap between the people. As we are adopting the modernity, our thinking about culture is changing. In the modern age, new generation is more influenced by the western culture. Younger generation of eastern world thinks that it is better for them if they complete their higher study from a foreign county. Old

people were not interested in the western culture. They like their own native culture.

The East West cultural divide has found reflection in the literature as well. Mainly, contemporary English literature very much influenced by this. East- West culture, Cross culture, encounter of East West cultures are the main themes of recent literary works. Arun Joshi, Ruth Parwer Jhabwala, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rabindernath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, E.M. Forester, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and so many other writers have taken East West culture as the main theme of their works. They showed the reflection of other cultures on the native culture. Anita Desai is one of those writers who explores the ideas of matching and mismatching of these two cultures.

According to R.S. Sharma, "Anita Desai's gift as a prose stylist are now acknowledged. What is perhaps overlooked in the process is the fact that most of her problems as a fiction writer begin with her insistence on too much style on too small a canvas."

*Bye Bye Blackbird* is the third novel by Anita Desai and published in the year of 1971. In this novel we see the meeting of oriental culture and occidental culture at the very first in the novel. Adit Sen is impressed by western culture. He thinks that western culture is superior to his own culture. He likes the way of living of the English people. He always tries to be equal to western people. He was a teacher by profession and finally he accepted the job in Blue skies. He is enjoying the sense of new cultural closeness. He is satisfied with his job and happy with his English wife. Adit says : "O England's green and grisly land, I love you and only a babu can" (*Bye Bye Blackbird*:130). But internally, he likes his culture. He remembers the Indian food and Indian songs. The situation of Adit and Sarah is changed in the duration of the time.

According to R.S. Sharma, "It has rightly been maintained that the tension between the local and the immigrant blackbird

involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world.” The story of the novel revolves around the three main characters – Adit Sen, Sarah and Dev. As the novel starts we see the arrival of Dev. He comes in England for the study of economics. We can call him the chief character of the novel. He is a Bengali Indian immigrant in London. He loves his Indian culture and he continuously rejects the acceptance of Western culture of white society. He always feels alienated from both the English people and immigrated Indian neighbors around him. Dev is hosted by Adit sen who is also a Bengali immigrant from India. Adit is a very typical kind of man. Adit and Dev are the immigrated Indians but have a different perception of their being. Dev is not happy when he arrives in England.. He is really disappointed with Adit’s attitude toward nature. Their thinking does not match throughout the novel. When the novel starts Adit is very happy with his setting in England. He is living here with his English wife Sarah. His wife belongs to white society but she enjoys her new adopted culture with Adit. She remains silent and tries to adjust with Adit in his Indian way of life. With the passage of time, she feels alienated in her own country. Her choice of adjustment in two cultures makes her depressed. She is a mature English woman but she fails to adjust in Indian culture. We can see the effect of failure of adjustment on Sarah’s psychology. The novelist explains her character as:

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. (34)

Sarah is different from other women characters in Anita Desai’s novels. She tries to adjust in both cultures but in the end she feels alienated in her own white society. Sarah faces the problems that arrive in her life after marriage. Sarah is totally disturbed by her living in dual culture because she fails to connect with two cultures at one time. The reason behind this is her deep rooted connection with western culture. The marriage of Sarah and Adit becomes a cause of distance between Sarah and her family. She feels disconnected from her parents:

..... felt herself cut loose from her moorings and begins to drift round and round heavily and giddling, as though caught in a whirlpool of dark deep water. (151)

Sarah and Adit are in the same situation of cultural conflict because they show their efforts to adjust in London with adopted culture. Both are stressed and fail to co-ordinate with their culture. To adjust in different culture and meeting of East and West people and their thinking is a mind boggling task for Desai’s characters. Adit thinks that Western culture is totally opposite to Indian culture. He criticizes the beaurocratic system and the laziness of Indian system. He also criticizes that in India, there is no punctuality of transportation because the buses and trains never come on their exact time. So it shows that Adit is completely irritated by the irregularity of Indian working schedule. But when he remembers his past, then he says: “This time I’ll go by air with a bag with full of luxury good.. When I have a whole month of leave saved up.

I’ll go. My mother will cook *hilsa* Fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sister will dress in saris and Gold ornaments. I’ll lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up night listening to the shehnai and sitar.”(48)

Adit’s statements about adopted culture and his own native culture changed with the passage of time. From beginning to the end we feel the psychological effect of dual culture on Adit’s mind. His is also suffering from the same problem as his English wife Sarah. As we have read earlier in the novel Adit is very happy with his new milieu of foreign county. He is enjoying his life in England with his wife Sarah. He is happy with his job and his social relationship.

However, there is always a situation of fight and meeting of East and West between Indian immigrants and white people. Through these two characters –Adit an Sarah, we analyse the matching and mismatching of both cultures east and west. They are deeply influenced by the adopted culture. They live with each other in London homeland but they recall their past memories as well. They are missing their own native culture. Adit decides to go back to India and tells his decision to Sarah. Sarah feels disappointed to hear his decision of leaving England. She thinks that she would have to go with her husband and feels sad because she does not want to leave her roots of western culture. She is very disappointed with her parents’ behavior. At the time of farewell, Christiana asks Sarah about baby, Sarah says “ you mean boy or girl? I don’t mind either. “or do you mean who it will look like Adit or me? I hope it will look like Adit, brown as brown, with Black hair and Black Black eyes.” (224)

Christiana replies, “well, in that case... I suppose it will be better to have the child in India.” After listening these words Sarah feels alienated in her own country. She feels as if she has nothing to do with ‘her’ country. Sarah remains silent because she is not able to understand the rituals of that culture. she also remembers her belongingness to western culture. She tries to follow the tradition of Eastern culture but she fails.

As the novel develops, Sarah’s inner conflict between two cultures can be seen very easily. Differences and similarities of east west culture is one of the major themes of Desai’s novels and her characters aptly play it out. Her analysis of east-west culture is a part of her personal life. She herself experiences the merits and demerits of bicultural environment. She says that as an Indian, she feels like an alien in India. Not only in *Bye Bye Blackbird*, but in her other novels, we see the encounter of cultures.

Anita Desai also describes one more major point in her novels that is feminist perspective. Her women characters are suffering from many difficulties related to their own life which is the effect of society and different culture. Her own experiences are showing through her statement: “This has brought two separate stands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and European culture which I have inherited from my mother.” (Desai, Anita. *The Book I Enjoyed writing Most*. contemporary Indian literature, xiii, 1973, 24).

Anita Desai explores each and every aspect of East West culture and its reflection on her characters especially on her protagonists. Her characters’ personal life, economic status, beaurocratic system, punctuality as so many other aspects have been discussed here. In *Bye Bye Blackbird*, we can see

that all these points effect the psychology of the character. Encounter of east west culture and majority of white people or minority of Indian immigrants effect the psyche of Desai's characters. Diversities in eastern culture become a barrier for an Indian immigrant because they are habitual of this diversity and when they move to western country, they feel unwelcome and treated like an alien in west.

Salman Rushdie said in his book *Identity and Homeland*: "... Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.... (15-16)

As I said in this paper, the novel is divided into three parts-Arrival, recognition and departure. In the first two parts we see the love of Adit for western culture, love for adopted culture and for white society. In the beginning, he considers he is not different from white people. He feels like a part of that culture. He has been living in England from last many years. At first he was very happy with his job and his English wife Sarah. On the other hand Dev is totally different from to Adit. When he comes to England, he is not welcomed by the white society. He decides to go back to India because he thinks that he can't live in a palce where he is insulted and unwanted. Adit tries to console him and proves the superiority of western culture. Dev becomes really disappointed with his changed attitude. He calls Adit a "boot-licking pudgy and a shameless imperialist-lover". (19)

From beginning to the end, readers recognize the changes in feeling of these characters. At first we see that Adit has a positive attitude about western culture but Dev is opposite. He likes his own native eastern culture. But at the end of the novel, we recognize that Adit shows his love for India and also feels that he is an alien in the white society. He is unwanted and unwelcome in the West. On the other hand, Dev who hates western culture and takes the decision to go back to India, changes his decision and finally adjusts in western culture of England.

The novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* is a novel with the story of bicultural people in England. The very word *Blackbird* refers to Indian immigrants who come to England or other western countries. In the novel, we find the change of feelings and statements. The behavioral sense of both these characters is ironical. Anita Desai gave a perfect picture of her characters in her novels. She discussed all the aspects in her novels regarding East-West culture. She explore the one of the most important things: the impact of western people, or the meeting of Indian people with western people is just a meeting of mind. The novel emphasizes that the meeting of these characters is only a meeting of mind. On the other hand, it is also a paradox that Adit and Dev liked the western culture externally but their inner feelings for their culture never changed.

### Conclusion

It can be said that the novel is an authentic statement on the Eastern Western clash of cultures, and establishes the pull of the native culture over the adopted one. The characters like-

Sarah, Adit and Dev face the problems regarding their culture. Adit finally decides to go back to India. His deeply rooted attachment with his own Indian culture grips him and he takes the decision to go back with his wife. Sarah is also in conflict because she also deeply rooted with her culture and white society. But when she realizes the behavior of her colleagues towards her, she is filled with alienation and decides to go with Adit silently. On the other hand, Dev who at first hated western culture finally decides to stay in England with white people. So we can conclude that the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai is a good novel based on east west culture in which we find the matching and mismatching of two cultures. Through the characters of the novel we analyze the condition of immigrants in England and also find the love and hate for one another's culture. Finally, the novel is the combination of mix up culture and with the similar and dissimilar thinking towards East-West world.

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