Asian Review of Social Sciences (ARSS)
Vol.2.No.1 2011 pp 32-38
available at: www.goniv.com
Paper Received :04-03-2011
Paper Published:17-04-2011
Paper Reviewed by: 1. Dr.B. Shanthini 2. R.Rajeshkumar
Editor : Prof. P.Muthukumar

THEME OF ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *BYE-BYE, BLACKBIRD*

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Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She represents the welcome "creative release of the feminine sensibility" which began to emerge after the World War II. A novelist of considerable merit, Desai has enriched the tradition of the Indian novel in English. Her innovations got make her "a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction." She is an artist of a high order, and her concern for human lot has imparted profound appeal to her novels. She is highly dissatisfied with most contemporary novelist's way of writing novel. She voices her feelings in an article on "Woman Writers". With all the richness of material at hand, Indian woman writers have stopped short---from a lack of imagination, courage, nerve or gusto---of the satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism or the lyric responses that alone might have brought their novels to life. The last few years of their articulacy, they have been content to record and document". Desai would not be satisfied merely with uncritical, prosaic documentation of social reality. Her real concern is nothing less than exploration of human psyche.

Desai excels in writing psychological novels. She would, however, call them "purely subjective." "It has been my personal luck," she confides "that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends on observation rather than a private vision." It is this private vision" that she tries to encapsulate in her novels. Her writing reveals inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. As Iyengar points out, "Her forte is the exploration of sensibility---the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease" in a sterile set up. In an interview, however, Desai denied to have deliberately tried to "incorporate any aspects of the "modern sensibility" in her

novels. "Of course I do write of the contemporary scene," she is said to have added, "and therefore the characters must contain the modern sensibility." The predicament of the modern man does seem to be one of the dominant interests of the novelists. Probably the most recurrent theme in her novels is "the hazards and complexities of individuality, and the establishing of individualism" of her characters.' Few Indian writers in English have surpassed Desai in respect of psychological delineation of the protagonist.

Alienation is the process whereby people become foreign to the world they are living in. The concept of alienation is deeply embedded in all the great religions and social and political theories of the civilized epoch, namely, the idea that some time in the past people lived in harmony, and then there was some kind of rupture which left people feeling like foreigners in the world, but sometime in the future this alienation would be overcome and humanity would again live in harmony with itself and Nature. Marx had a specific understanding of the very sharp experience of alienation which is found in modern bourgeois society. Marx developed this understanding through his critique of Hegel.

According to Hegel, through their activity, people created a culture which then confronted them as an alien force. But for Hegel human activity was itself but the expression of the Spirit which acted through people. In the first place, Marx insisted that it was human labour which created culture and history, not the other way around; in other words spirit was a human product, not the other way around.

"Subjectivity is a characteristic of subjects and personality a characteristic of the person. Instead of considering them to be predicates of their subjects, Hegel makes the predicates independent and then lets them be subsequently and mysteriously converted into their subjects.

In Bye-Bye, Blackbird, Anita Desai explores the existential problems of adjustment, belongingness, rootedness, exile, etc. Dev, Adit, and Sarah, the three important characters of the novel, come to reckon their reality in three different ways; but none of these is able to do it completely. The question of being an exile in one's own land is raised through Sarah who has chosen to marry Adit in order to fill certain gaps and chasms in her life. But it is very doubtful whether she succeeds fully. However, her life-affirming attitude and faith in making sincere efforts for assimilation into an alien culture are clearly perceptible in her decision to come to India with Adit and Sarah also emblematizes the effort of reducing tensions due to racial discrimination. Dev's decision to stay in and Adit's decision to leave London symbolize the dialectical character of the possibility of healthy coming together of different cultures which can be beneficial for both. Anita Desai, referring to this novel, has observed: "I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem."I think basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging, that is why exile is never been my theme."

Bye-Bye, Blackbird is an authentic study of human relationships bedeviled by cultural encounters. Of all novels of Desai, this one is the most intimated related to her own experiences. She told an interviewer that "of all my novels it is most rooted in experiences and the least literary in derivations." She held: "*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is my closest of all my books to actually---practically everything in it is drawn directly from my experiences of living with Indian

immigrants in London." The novel captures the confusions and conflicts of another set of alienated persons. It has rightly been maintained that in the novel "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." Dev the chief character of the novel has some intellectual pretentions and has come to study at the London School of Economics, arriving "well in advance to make all the right approaches." He is, however, confronted with an initial problem of adjustment in a foreign land. He remains, we are told.

> One of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like Strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong. (208)

The absurdities of Dev's existence of England and its drab superficialities have been recorded by the novelist with accuracy and detachment in a poetic and humorous language. Dev's longing for living with its variety and multiplicity remains unsatisfied in the new atmosphere where "everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding." Ti is a world which makes him nostalgic about India---the India of familiar faces, familiar sounds and familiar smell. Dev is particularly with the treatment accorded to immigrants in England. They are openly insulted, so much so that they are not allowed to use a lavatory meant for the English; "the London docks have three kinds of lavatories---Ladies, Gents and Asiatic." He gives vent to his feelings candidly when he tells Adit: " I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted." The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets to London make him uneasy: "The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut . . . of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues" remains incomprehensible to him. He finds even a thickly populated place like London "utterly silent, deserted---a cold wasteland of brick and tile." Dev's alienation and spiritual agony are objected in his hellish experiences in the London tube:

> Dev ventures into the city. He descends, deeper and deeper, into the white-tiled bowels of Clapham tube station. . . . The meaning slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down---like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison. (63-64)

What Dev disliked most was the immigrant's sheepishness and abject loss of self-respect. "The trouble with you immigrants," said Dev to Adit, "is that go soft. If anyone in India told you to turn off your radio, you wouldn't dream of doing it. You might even pull out a knife and blood would spill. Over here all you do is shut up and look sat upon." But when Dev begins to wander about in London, observing its various attractions and allurements, a slow change creeps into his attitude:

> And so he walks the streets and parks of the city, grateful for its daffodil patches of q sunshine. . . . He is intoxicated to think that of all the long programmers of music, theatre, cinema and art exhibitions that he sees in the papers, he can choose any to go to on any day at all. . . . It is a strange summer in which he is the

> bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sight-seer all at in succession. (94-96)

In his uncertainty, he develops a schizophrenic attitude to English. He is agonized when he has to face "a tumult inside him, a growing bewilderment, a kind of schizophrenic that wakes him in the middle of the night and shadows him by day." [96] Ultimately, however, Dev loses self-control and is caught under England's spell. He changes places with Adit, whom he derided as "Boot-licking toddy" and "Spineless imperialist-lover." [21]

Surprisingly, enough Adit's attitude to England also undergoes a profound change. He longs to go back to India. His nostalgia for his country is intentioned by his experience of visit to his in-laws, which was "marred by tactlessness, by inane misunderstandings, by loud underlining of the basic disharmony of the situation." [199] His feeling acquires a threatening dimension, giving him the feeling of " an illness, an ache." He frankly admits to be "a stranger, a non-belonger" in England, "hunted out by the black sensation of not belonging." [206] He would be delighted if he saw by any chance a eccentric, unruly and unplanned anything Indian at all." He accuses his English wife , Sarah, of xenophobia. He says: "You'll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your dull, boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable." [220] The hypotonic charm of his English education and English wife being over, he is fortunately able to extricate him from the quagmire and go back to his homeland. But very few immigrants are lucky like him. There is no dearth of easy victims. The novelist comments: "England had left Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realized that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev" [261]. The same story is repeated over and over again.

Another character that deserves mention in his content is Sarah. Although her plight has not been treated in detail, there are certain significant clues to her problems, which, when collated, present a very lonely and helpless person. She is culturally alienated and her marriage to a "wog" obliges her to keep "to the loneliest path" and walk "drawing across her face a mask of secrecy." "Those who glanced at her ---made aware of her by the violence with which she turned away from them---felt apprehensive, but, since she was a stranger, gave it no thought." [34] Her main problem is to know her identity in precious terms. Her married life being what it is, she begins to play roles to hoodwink people and even herself. She would knowing too well that she is parading "like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own." [41] This acting out of roles tells upon her nerves and she feels "so cut and slashed into living, bleeding piece". By the time they move to live in a new house, Adit retires from Sarah's life as well. [164] Herself puzzled by her husband's bewilderment, she begins to have a clear idea of her miserable life:

> "It was as though she had chosen to be cast out of her home, her background, and would not be drawn back to it, not even by her husband. . . She and began to drift, round and round, heavily and giddily, as though caught in a slow whirlpool of dark, deep water." (170)

The matters become still worse when we see that even Adit was unable to apprehend the reason of her anguished loneliness and "sat back, silent, shocked by that anguish" of hers.

Spelling [34] out Sarah's crisis, the novelist continues: "anguish, it seemed to him, of loneliness---and then it became absurd to call her by his own name as she had shed her ancestry and identity". [34] Everything else being gone, she is left with stark loneliness. Sarah's eagerness to know her real identity and her failure and consequent disillusionment have been succinctly presented in the novel:

> "Who was she---Mrs.Sen who had been married in are and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head's secretary. . . Both these characters were frauds; each had a larger, shadowed element of charade about it. . . ." (38)

But could she ever come to grips with reality? People like Dev and Sarah, born under the spell of rootlessness, are not made for such things. The "unreality" about their life swamps the "paper walls" of their fort "turning them soggy, making the pages float away on dim waves," (38) and, despite all their questionings, they are not going to get rid of their predicament. Sarah represents, in a sense, all immigrants' wives who have their own problems of adjustments when placed in the contexts of cultures at loggerheads. Their fate is worse than that them, he has at least "some positive destination." (22) However embarrassing sometimes the position of people like Sarah can be!

> They had learnt exactly how much of this foreign world was theirs to tread and had given up their early attempts made out of curiosity and a desire to join, to interpret jokes which seemed to depend entirely on such matters as a Bengali's accent or a Punjabi's eating habits or a Bihari's intellectual limitations, of which they naturally had no experience or comprehension. (28)

It is this incomprehension which leads such persons to rootlessness. People like Dev and Sarah cannot belong to a world. It is their nature and destiny to hang between the two worlds, Indian and European, and be torn by their conflicting loyalties. Bye-Bye, Blackbird had immense possibilities of being a great novel of profound psychological delineation. It is pity that the novelist could not fully make the most of the opportunity given to her by the story. The interplay of the characters, their cultures and motives, the crisis faced by each one of them and the resultant problems of disorientation have not been given as much attention as they should have been. For this reason, the novels, but the problems contained in the first few pages of the novel have not been fulfilled.

It has been maintained that in her novels Anita Desai has moved from alienation to a "mythic acceptance" of life and its myriad problems." However, even the last novel possesses lineaments of existential novel and continues to unravel the problem of alienation, in its various forms, candidly and closely and describes its individual and social effects without mincing words. These novels present, like the earlier once, the essential tragedy of modern India, which the novelist sees as the loss of the truly human beneath the welter of impersonal social forces.

Bye-Bye Blackbird and see how Anita Desai has dealt with this complex problems of alienation. The novel is mainly woven round two groups of characters, Adit Sen, his English wife Sarah, the Indian friend Dev; and Jasbir-Mala, Sammar-Bella. A careful reading of the novel sows that there has been no problem in the rehabilitation of Sammar a Doctor, and his

sweet wife Bella, Jasbir, an Anesthetist and his good solid Punjabi wife Mala. They enjoy their weekends. They visit clubs and Coffee houses. Neither their sensitivity nor Sanskaras nor the local conditions create any distance and distaste in their rehabilitation in Clapham.

The problems arise with the rehabilitation of Adit, Sarah and Dev, the new arrival with the view to studying in the London School of Economics. After coming to England Adit worked in different capacities in a post office, in the sorting office. Then he joined camping equipment business. He also worked as a teacher, and finally accepted a little job at Blue Skies. He is happy with his job and expects to be Director one day. He also finds himself lucky to have Sarah as his wife. We can see happy state through his expression as follows:

> "I am happy here. I like going in to the local for paint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day …. I like being called a wog. I like the pubs. I like the freedom; Social freedom …. Oh, I think gold, Dev, gold—everywhere—gold like Sarah's golden hair" (pp. 18-19).

On the other hand, he holds quite opposite view of India. Sometimes back before being engaged to Sarah, he had been to India for job. Bit in four months' period he could find only 'a ruddy clerking job' at the salary of two hundred and fifty rupees and possible rise to five hundred after thirty years. Besides, he hated the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench-and the boredom in India'. He is also sure of the fact that "nothing ever goes right at home—there is famine or flood, there is drought or epidemic, always", while in England, the rain falls so softly & evenly . . . . The sun is mild, the earth is fertile. The rivers are full. . . . This suggests the smooth completion of the deconstruction and reconstruction phases.

In Bye-Bye, Blackbird, the image of city occurs in a different perspective. It points to the void of existence, which is mutely repulsive and incomprehensively cold. The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London make Dev uneasy. The hollowness of the city bewilders him: ". . . the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents --- the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut --- of guarding their privacy --- It remains incomprehensible to him. It never fails to make Dev uneasy to walk down a street he knows to be heavily populated and yet finds it utterly silent, deserted --- a cold wasteland of brick and tile"(70). Acutely tormented by the agony of silence and solitude in the city, he develops disgust for London. He becomes a rebel like Nimrod, the artist rebel in Voices in the City. The Waterloo station severs as an image to reveal the emotional estrangement of the black-birds. The lone and solitary image of the station --- all smoggy and hazy --- objectively projects the isolation of the blackbirds in England. In that hazy atmosphere, none could see the smog. None could even hear the other. Alienation ---- physically and emotional --- persists throughout. The melancholic haze of departure and the anguish of separation seem to have seized every word and feeling of the couple:

> "As in an old film, the dialogue was blurred, almost Inaudible, merely an accompaniment to the scene --- Words snatched away and sank into the haze of departure, the fog of preconceived absence."(257)

Nirode as a "broken bird" in the awiary, alienated in his own way and subdued and silenced by the fever and fret of life: "Lying on a mat in his tin-shed room, so solitary of a roof-top splattered with pigeon-dropping and million cigarette stubs that speak of nights of insomnia and despair… (125-126)

Anita Desai has thus delineated in the novels the problems and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. She excels particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels. She represents therefore "a set of new attitudes and themes" associated with modern Indian novel in English. In the last two novels the problems of the alienated self have been confronted and resolved in a positive way.

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