

Cultural Clash and East West Encounter in Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird*

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A good number of writers have written volumes about the East-West enchantment and disenchantment. Anita Desai, an eminent novelist of artistic perfection, has also her preference for the east-west theme in her fiction. India versus England concord and discord in her novel *Bye Bye Blackbird*, fascination for the west is demonstrated in this novel through two Indians, Adit and Dev. The fascination for the East is illustrated through Sarah and Emma. Disenchantment is epitomized through Adit and Dev. The manic emotional structure is supported by characterization and is also functionary to the theme and life view which is never an end in itself.

Love for England is exemplified through love for the English society, its employment opportunity and its economic, social and political freedom. It is also a love for English literature, History, Architecture. Museums, Monuments, churches, Art and Painting, picture galleries, topography, rivers, valleys and vegetations. Hate is illustrated by English women and children which is directed to Indians and Asians. Indian hatred is manifested through British colonialism, exploitation of EastIndiaCo, Macaulay's policy of cultural

infiltration and servility in education, militancy and superiority complex. London is the center of Western culture.

British fascination for India is in Kamasutra, Indian paintings, art, instrumental and vocal music, yogic systems and its practitioners, Indian swamis, and samadhis. During the early part of Adit's stay in England with the Millers, we see for Sanskrit language, scriptures, and recitations. The concept of Indian womanhood, self-surrender, silent toleration, Indian Dishes, garments, ornaments, and decorations stand for the East and particularly India. Desai has once again presented India through British females and their view points.

In *Bye, Bye Blackbird* Adit and Dev are I the major part of the novel. Both of them are the two poles of the thematic burden of enchantment and disenchantment of England. Adit analyses his fascination for England in the following way: “*I like the pubs, I like the freedom/a man has here –economic freedom/social freedom/...and I like the Thames. I like old Ma Jenkins who cleans my room....And I like the weekend at the seaside. I even like the B.B.C.*” We don't see the dark aspect of Adit's love and the bright aspect of Dev's hatred but we have their cheerfulness:

*“Pack all my cares and woe,
Here I go singing low,
Bye, Bye Blackbird.”*

There is a sound basis for the British and European fascination for their rich tradition of art and painting. Dev is also impressed by “*the English have a genius for preserving the beauty and keep it somehow fresh and vivid, miraculously safe from the ravages of time and decay, so that it affects generation after generation in precisely the same manner –and even outsiders from the far corners of the world.*” When Adit, Dev, Sarah go up to the Harrow Hill, they are pleased by the sight of the Church and the tablet on which is engraved Byron's ode. Another object of fascination for Eastern people is the British

architecture with all its subtle complexity and grandeur. The novelist has portrayed the architecture perfection of Albert Memorial in her poetic style – “ *it's ballooning grotesqueries, its fantastic black magic brew of marble, bronze, mosaic, black and white and colors, all down out, beaten and billowed, out into the most fearful shapes recall to him similar nightmares of stone and marble in India.*”

An object of fascination is also the rich British countryside. It is very simple, beautiful and glamorous. Adit desires to see the English country dances, thatched cottages, chestnut trees, trout streams, and daffodils. He feels- “*And here there is no death at all. Everything -animal, vegetable, minerals- is alive, rich and green forever.*” This beauty of the English countryside is contrasted with Indian climatic extremes, natural calamities such as drought, floods, famine, an epidemic. For Adit things are really better in England. He praises- “*Here the rain falls so softly and evenly never too much and never too short. The sun is mild. The earth is fertile. The rivers are full. The birds are plump. The beasts are fat. Everything so wealthy, so luxuriant-so fortunate.*” In love with Sarah, Adit is in love with England. The climax comes, when he reaches Sarah's home.

Adit understands well the line of reconciliation between these two different cultures –the Eastern and the western. He knows their natures and background: “*It was the magic of England –her grace, her peace, her abundance and traditions- and susceptibility of the Indian mind to these elements, trained and prepared to understand and appreciate these very qualities.*” Here is sarcasm and irony underlying his analytical thought, but he has no dilemma now. Though there is a pompous demonstration of the power of the British Empire in London, it appears very simple to Adit's mind. His iconoclastic bent of mind is elated by the English country, nature and its beauty. While delving deep in English country he feels the pangs of disillusionment with the West. It is also in Mrs.

Roscommon- James's dislike of her daughter 's marriage with an Indian. This disillusionment being contagious Adit examines his own plight in this context- *"My mother-in-law hates and despises me. Dev makes un of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore, I am angry. I am hurt."*The fact is that the illusion Adit has been nourishing so long is by and by ebbing out.

Adit is an incurable romantic adorer of the British and the West. Dev is a realist about everything who believes in oriental wisdom. He has developed sound digestion and he is in a position to provoke hostile reactions in Dev. When called *"wog"* by a whiteboy Dev sharply reacts and addresses him as *'paji'*. Sarah is Britishers disenchanted with England and its life. She terms it *'Storms in a teapot.'* The the theme of East-West discord is apparent in the following statement: *"Two civilizations at loggerheads. Period of transition. Awful responsibility. The future. The point is does the commonwealth really exist? If so, why doesn't everyone use the same law?"* During night teddy boys in London try to assault Asians, they have to move armed in self –defense. Sarah has married an Indian so the children scream at her saying *"Hurry, hurry, Mrs.Scurry!"* Sarah finds a little shaky among white women to marry an Indian. Julia sniff comments, *"If she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?"* Basically, there is a difference between Sarah and Adit, but this difference sinks in their love. Differences inhabit and ways of life supplements the root cause of discord. Anita Desai has presented a beautiful analysis of both the Indian and English temper; *"Orientals we don't really believe in watches. We are romantics. We want time fit in with our moods."* The English people have been clock watchers since birth and have coordinated everything to time, but it appears monotonous and mechanical to the Indian mind.

Dev is shocked to find two old men befriending Adit for chestnuts who turned out to be beggars. English people's habit

of keeping all doors shut for privacy but it gives a general impression of silence and emptiness. He turns down this exhibitionism; *"I think those people are really a bunch of exhibitionists... they like to flaunt themselves, their sex, their prowess, just the way our beggars...enjoy flaunting their filth and their mutilations ...if these people catch your eye, they leer exactly the way our beggars do."* This shocks an Indian sensibility where lovemaking is purely a private affair, presenting an example of a sheer contradiction in the culture of East and West.

Britishers exploited India as a colon for long. Their church and religion seem to give a sense of tyranny and imperialism than spiritual relief. Desai easily reacts to them- *"Dev has an easy feeling that these are no temple of Christ, but temple dedicated to the British Empire. They seem not to celebrate the Christian concept of God so much as the British concept of God, King, and country."* Dev is shocked at the British peddler's rejection to let him know the price of Madonna and child. He considers him a shabby Indian and a pauper. His disenchantment widens to see the English countryside. He thinks it romantically hollow and without any adventure and discovery.

Dev feels a sense of ecstasy, which is rather unusual, whereas Adit has a feeling of despair- *"The abundance and beauty growing so green about him had filled him only with curious anger and sorrow."* He has been made an object of ridicule by Dev as a British adorer. But he indecorous treatment of his English mother-in-law gives place for his homesickness and he starts remembering India.

The third section of *Bye Bye Blackbird* is the tale of a return to home with wife after adventures abroad. Adit is happy to return. He embraces Sarah – *"His embrace signified only that the first shock of the memory of its starkness and poverty was beginning to end, he was beginning to see its wild, wild grandeur, its loneliness and black, glittering enchantment."*

Dev had earlier realized that he was an outsider. Now Adit has the sensation of not belonging to England. Indian food dishes allure him. He expects to visit Puri and Darjeeling. He now came to the conclusion that *“entering a store, he felt he could not bear to see one more place, expressionless British face.”* The Indo-Pak war awakens the national sentiments in Adit and he makes effort to raise funds to support Indian Government Knowing that the war may end soon. His love for the homeland increases and he decides to return to India. He tells Sarah to put on Indian garments and ornaments. He also tells... *“But I must be an IndianI have got to go home and start living a real life.”* His wife Sarah is pregnant and the possibility of different hardships in Indian climate conditions for childbirth cannot stop him. He decides, *‘My son will be born in India.’*

We see that the rush of Adit 's emotion for the homeland does not affect him. He is yet reconciled to England and the English way of life and he makes the best of it. In his final thoughts, Anita Desai strikes a balance between the East and the West, the colonial past and the democratic present, though it is difficult to ascertain its genuineness. The following words can be examined in this connection – *“And now he was to carry the message of England to the East –not the old message of the colonist, the tradesmen or the missionary, but the new message of the free convert, the international citizen, a message of progress and good cheer, advance and goodwill.”* Desai maintains a parallel ebb and flows in the thematic pattern.

The fascination for Indian, the Indian way of life and the mysteries of the Orient is continuously brought into bright relief throughout the novel. Side by side has presented the awareness of the stark conditions of India. The opening section of the novel gives the Indian fascination theme which reaches maturity in Adit's rejection of the West in India's favor.

Sarah is a lover of India. The various pictures on the stamps have given her glimpses of Indian life and that has given her inspiration to admire India. Emma is her co-sharer.

She is in love with Tagore's poetry and his script. She confirms the Indian spiritualism and yogic system followed in England and the British learning at the feet of saints and yogis of India. Both Sarah and Emma are fond of Himalayan flowers, bandits of Rajasthan, henna patterns on the palm of ladies perfumes of attars, food items and music of Bismillah Khan and Ravishankar.

Anita Desai describes how British females, having read the famous Indian scientific book on love, the dream of making the romance of Kamasutra with Indians in England. The love affair between Christine Longford and Adit is remarkable here. She introduced Adit to English female sex. The novelist satirically digs at the shallow tourist knowledge of British females about India. Sarah turns down Mrs. Miller's advice to first go to India and know its climatic condition though Mrs. Miller knows that Sara is very close to India and Indian life.

Enchantment for Indian theme is based on mysteries associated with various aspects of Indian life. Disenchantment with Indian theme is very weak and is based on misconceptions of visitors and tourists. They consider India a country of beggars and paupers, of dead and dying, also of famines flood, droughts, and epidemics. The weakness of this theme appears deliberate and planned later on Indians in England suffered from an inferiority complex. *Bye Bye Blackbird* achieved a thematic victory on the basis of equality, dignity, and love for mankind which leads to the East-West concord.

Adit loves England. He likes its history, poetry and historical events. Differences of a province, race, caste, class, myth, language, custom and general culture inside India are frequently mentioned and the peculiarities of Punjabis, Bengalis and Bihari's are also there in the novel. The novelist dwells upon the famous theme of India's unity in diversity.

The thematic and the plot pattern in the novel is based on the characters of Adit and Dev, two Indians living in

England. Action in the novel is what they do and the place is where they move out especially the border area of London. Adit is always elated by one idea or the other and he is inspired by the lines of the song he sings. He is now tolerant to the humiliation of the white people. His enchantment of the West disappears giving him the place to return home. In this return what he finds is his wife Sarah.

REFERENCES

Desai, Anita. *Bye- Bye Blackbird*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks,1984.