

Immigration Identity: Alienation – Locale and Reconciliation

B. Chandana

Abstract: The novel is a medium for a perpetual quest for reality and identify in any ambience. The greatest challenge before the Indian English novelists is to seek and assert identity. The displaced person's quest for identity is a commonplace theme in modern fiction, but it has a special pertinence in the Indian context. *Bye, Bye-Blackbird* captures the confusions and conflicts of an alienated person more exhaustively. This novel is the most rooted in Anita's experience, according to her claim. The tension between the locale and the immigration bird in the novel involves issues of isolation and possible accommodation that one has to face in an alien world. Attitudinal differences between the protoginists Dev and Adit – problems of Immigrants – how they are faced and solved. Tension between cosmopolitanism and ignorant provincialism are elaborately discussed here. Sarah's psychological problem is truly rooted in her cross cultural marriage. The moment she notices Adit's interest in Indian culture. She loses her rest in life. She feels alienated primarily in cultural matters of life. However unlike Maya and Momisha, Sarah never thinks of death or suicide to get over her psychological problems. Desai presents Sarah as a balanced, considerate and rational character.

Keywords: Indian English novelists, psychological problems.

The novel, as Lionel Trilling puts it, is a perpetual quest for reality. After World War I, Indian English novel became more realistic and less idealistic. After 1950s, however, the interest of the Indian novelists shifted from the public to the private sphere. Their main objective is the delineation of the individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms.

These novelists renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man. Therefore, they engaged themselves in a search for the essence of human being^{*}. Indian novel in English has become a primary instrument of art to unfold the emergence of the self as historical entity and has highlighted aesthetically designed conjunction between the self and society. The greatest challenge before the Indian English novelists is to seek and assert identity. The displaced person's quest for identity is a commonplace theme in modern fiction, but it has a special pertinence in the Indian context.

Another significant problem is alienation which is confronting the modern man. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of generation gap, the anti-war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, the compartmentalization of our lives, the stunting of personal development, the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life and so on. The 20th century—especially the post-war period—has seen an age of great spiritual stress and strain. It has been rightly called "The Age of Alienation". Edmund Fuller remarks that in our age "**man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and racism but from inner problem..... a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence**"¹

Bye, Bye-Blackbird captures the confusions and conflicts of an alienated person more exhaustively. Replying to a questionnaire, she (Mrs.Anita Desai) herself said that "of all my novels it is most rooted in experience."² The tension

* C.Paul Verghese, *The Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English*, P.125.

¹ *Man in Modern Fiction* – (New York –Random House, 1958).

² Atma Ram – Anita Desai – *The Novelist who Writes for Herself* page 40.

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences

Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp: (14-18), Month: March – April 2016, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

between the locale and the immigrant bird in the novel involves issues of isolation and possible accommodation that one has to face in an alien world. Dev, the protagonist of the novel, has some intellectual pretensions and has come to study at the London School of Economics, arriving well in advance to make all the right approaches. By right approaches he means approaching the Professors and impressing them with the subtle complexities and the deep wisdom of the Oriental mind. 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 very unobtrusive and however superficially, to belong”.(page 208)

This is the core problem where the quest for identity arises. Though the characters are ordinary human beings, they have to face and confront the problems of an alien atmosphere, culture and ambience. The novel traces the various phases through Dev and he finally comes to accept his new home. Each phase in Dev’s reconciliation suggests a psychic situation involving cross-cultural contacts and the impact they have on individual sensibility. The contact between the locale and the individual begins right from Adit’s house, who had settled in London with his English wife Sarah. Dev’s reactions to Sarah’s cat and Sarah’s uninhibited pattern of cultural differences that expands as Dev moves out looking for a job. When Sarah moves to wash up the dishes Dev finds her equanimity of expression unbelievable. Anita Desai narrates the various experiences that Dev undergoes and the culture shock they give him. Dev’s tensions are due to the fact that he finds himself in an unfamiliar world, for it was a familiar world as revealed herein:

“He passed the palm of his hand slowly over the scarred tabletop and bowed his head just a little, acknowledging the past introduction which had imprinted itself so finely, so imperially on his mind that it was simple enough to pick up acquaintanceship after all these years, in the sound assumption of future familiarity. Nothing in his past twenty two years had resembled remotely this world he had entered by stepping through the door of the King’s Arms this world of beef-soft, plum-thick semi-darkness and its (soft, hazy, thick) characters. Yet it was known, familiar, easy to touch, enjoy and accept because he was so well prepared to enter it – so well prepared by fifteen years of reading the books that had been his meat and drink, the English books that had formed at least one half of his conscious existence” (**Bye, Bye-Blackbird**, page 11).

He recognizes the faces that he had encountered in his reading. The unfamiliarity does not matter. Later it is the gap between the expected and the immediately received that keeps disturbing him. The self-consciousness that it generates creates a crisis of identity for him. The novel resolves on this crisis of identify. The crisis is not peculiarly Dev’s own, it seems to have a larger dimension. If it engulfs Dev, it also engulfs Sarah, the English wife of Adit. If Dev is called a “Wag”, she is called Mrs. “Curry”.

Anita Desai says:

“My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its insignificance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths. Till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world”^{**}.

The fiction of Desai adds a dimension to Indo-English Writing.

Though apparently dealing with cross-cultural contacts, the novel **Bye, Bye-Blackbird** – is not about racial conflicts or tensions. Desai selects a microscopic minority of educated Indian immigrants to dwell on the interaction that takes place between the locale and the individual sensibility. The novel is about the alienation and accommodation of the immigrant in a world which is alluring and appalling at the same time. It does not bring into fictional context the larger social, religious and political aspects of the immigrant question. Rather it deals with the self-awareness of the educated Indian immigrants, who keep wavering between acceptance and rejection of a world they have been educated to admire and love and which they find, on an actual contact, either to be strange or to be hostile. The milieu that the writer selects is rather narrow but it is a milieu she is most familiar with. She renders the peculiarities and absurdities of its existence in an alien

^{**} Quoted by Shyam M. Asnani: “Anita Desai’s Fiction. A New Dimension”. In Indian Literature. Vol XXIV No.2 March-April, 1981 pp.44,45.

world with accuracy and detachment. The dull and drab superficialities of the Indian immigrant's existence in England come alive in Anita Desai's poetic and occasionally humorous prose. Turning inward her fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind. Shyam Mr. Asrani points out: "Under the impact of the new pressures of the scientific and technological advancement, the world around us shows signs of the disintegration of the individual. It is therefore imperative that the modern Indo-English novel should seek new techniques to articulate these newly experienced inner and outer realities". (ibid)

Coming back to **Bye, Bye-Blackbird**, Anita Desai excludes the larger immigrant community which appears only peripherally in the novel. It will be useless and futile to look for the kind of racial interaction that one finds in Forster's **A Passage to India**. The situations that Anita Desai narrates are too stereotypic to be fictionally attractive. Similarly Dev's street encounters, his failure to find employment, his disgust with the English ways of the immigrant Indians are too familiar to be interesting or exciting. But they are essential to the design of the novel and point out those bitter and hard realities that keep the immigrant disturbed and wavering in his choices.

Instead of focusing on the racial encounter, the novelist deals with the tension between cosmopolitanism and ignorant provincialism. The novelist sees the roots of violence and injustice in the persistence of this ignorant provincialism which is based on prejudice and which keeps people divided and hostile to one another. We can notice this violence, latent and operative, both in English and the Indian characters. Because of this broad understanding of social conflict and violence, Anita Desai displays remarkable objectivity and moderation in her treatment of the racial and cultural encounter between the English and the immigrant Indians. She alludes that it is in the conversation that goes on after the T.V.Show, **Stranger in Bradford** is over.

The characters, a mixed group, start discussing the immigrant status and soon digress into the area of prejudice with shy references to one another.

"This provincial bantering grew more and more heated, the jeers louder, the taunts more obscene all the four men participating in with violence and ribaldry. Mala, the Punjabi wife, laughed too, able to follow the nuances of communal and provincial prejudice and myth, language and custom. But Sarah and Bella sat in stiff silence, their Anglo-Saxon faces are impressive. They had learnt exactly how much of this foreign world was theirs to treat and had given up their early attempts, made out of curiosity and 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. Bella, thrusting out her little chin, sometimes burst into giggle. She herself had been brought up on jokes about Singy Scotsmen, wily Welshmen, drunken Irishmen and Cockney backchat, and could faintly comprehend a similarity of humour planted on soil so different grown in a climate so extreme that it had undergone a radical change, retaining just a faint accent of resemblance" (p.28).

Characters in Indo-Anglican fiction in most cases are convincing and they represent their background genuinely. The theme of alienation has been dealt with more persistently and unflinchingly by Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Arun Joshi and quite a few characters, apostrophe thoughts and deeds are motivated by their rootlessness. The alienated person is stock figure in Nayantara Sahgal's novels. She deals with problems caused by a changing order. The new philosophy presented in them 'calls all in doubt' including one's own identity and roots. Her first novel *A time to be Happy*, projects the predicament of Sanand Shivpal, the son of a rich man. He is a typical product of India public school, an executive in a mercantile firm and a good tennis player. Most of his problems are the problems of a west-educated boy. Returning to India and encountering in himself the conflict between the two sets of values. Sanand's rootlessness culminates in self-pity. Towards the end of the novel, however, he comes to have a healthy respect for tradition. He declines the firm's offer of visiting England, for he would like to go there as an individual instead of as the carbon copy of an Englishman. Also he marries a Professor's 'un-anglicized daughter' Kusum and learns Hindi and swimming. This type of reaction and response can be found only in some characters in the novels of Anita Desai.

The second chapter of **Bye, Bye-Blackbird** shows the concealed hostility that Sarah has generated among her colleagues by marrying a 'wog'. She is greeted by expressions like "Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Curry!" and "where is fire, pussy cat?" on the roads (p.37). She walks drawing across her face a mask of secrecy. In her marriage she had become nameless, she has shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity.

Anita Desai focuses on this disturbing aspect of loss of identity that immigration necessarily involves. The pathos of a culturally alienated girl is movingly rendered in Sarah's life. She repeatedly reminds us of her loneliness and alienation.

“.....when she briskly dealt with letters and bills in her room under the stairs, she felt an imposter but, equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit's records or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat. She had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles—and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, and her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Staring out of the window at the chimney-pots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would never be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world—whether English or Indian, and she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth” (p.39).

Anita Desai seemingly shows prejudice to be the most potent cause of social and individual violence and suggests through the contrasted structure of its episodes that prejudice is universal. It is not the monopoly of a particular community or society. The characters in the novel—both Indian and English, go on expressing their prejudices and predilections most of the time. Consequently there is a great deal of talking in the novel which some critics or even readers find annoying or boring. In this connection, B.Ramachandra Rao point out:

“Two of the three main characters are the very talkative Dev and Adit Sen. They talk and talk and talk. There is a great deal of argument, attitudinizing, mounting of hatred for England, expression of love for England”***.

The author has no choice than to communicate these prejudices through dialogue as the characters aired their views only verbally. The irony with which Anita Desai treats racial and cultural prejudices is superb. She reveals their hollowness without being intemperate or loud. The reader can clearly understand when prejudice prevails over reason, the human situation tends either to be comic or pathetic. The very repetitive and stereotypic nature of prejudice proves its irrationality.

An equally unvarnished treatment of the theme of loneliness can be found in the novels of Arun Joshi. In her interview of Joshi's first novel, *The Foreigner*, Meenakshi Mukherjee described its hero, Sindi Oberoi, “as a perennial outsider”. (Quest 60 Jan-Mar 1969 – p.101) He is always lonely and ill at ease in the world in which he has to live. He belongs to no country, no people. Born in Kenya of an Indian father and a British mother, both of whom died early, he is brought up by his uncle. Oppressed by a desire to find “the meaning of life” he starts gathering miscellaneous experiences. He goes as an engineering student to Boston. There he meets June at a foreign students party. When they have been together for some time, June suggests that they get married. But Sindi tells her: “We are alone, both you and I that is the problem” (P 126). He is in fact, trapped in his own lone loneliness, which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He wonders:

“In what way, if any did I belong to the world that roared beneath my window. Somebody had gotten me without a purpose.....perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya, or India, or any other place for that matter? It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went” (*The Foreigner* – p. 61).

Anita Desai also treats this theme in her novels, especially, the **Bye, Bye-Blackbird**. As the novel progresses, the metaphor of the immigrant or the alien expands to include all humanity caught in a world where choices are almost impossible to make. The novelist leads us into this world through her characters, who are all deeply involved and entangled in self-made images. Either they distort what they see to save their own predilections or they invent where nothing exists to satisfy their own dreams and fancies. Emma, the old neighbour of Sarah, is one such character. She has a dream of India – (She had a lover there when she was young) which she seeks to realize by forming “a little Indian

*** B.Ramachandra Rao, *The Novels of Anita Desai*; New Delhi – Kalyani Publishers p.47

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social SciencesVol. 3, Issue 2, pp: (14-18), Month: March – April 2016, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Club” (pp. 44-45). The limitations of this fancy she realizes only after the party and the music recital. Thus, the novel dwells on distortions both comic and tragic, that are caused by a prejudiced perception of reality.

Anita Desai is keenly sensitive to the locale. This is evident in her almost vivid recreation of the London scene. But the interaction between the locale and the individual self awareness which we find in the novel *Voices in the City* is not present here in the same intensity. The characters move against a background that draws them but leaves them dissatisfied. They do not enter into it totally as do the characters in the earlier novel. The voyages they have made into this alien land through imaginative literature and liberal education distorts their perception of reality. The novel keeps revolving or moving between these two layers of experience. The gap between the imagined and the real is the chief source of tension in the novel. The theme moves and revolves on this tension. The polarization of characters is based on their responses to the locale.

□ □ □