

Probing the Internal and External Conflict in Anita Desai's *Bye Bye the Black Bird*

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 25 May 2019

Keywords

Conflict	Consciousness,	Fear
Psychosis,	Existentialism,	Psychic
Turmoil,	Matrimonial	Silence,
Psychology		

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai occupies a unique position as an Indian English writer. Her fiction pioneers the exploration of human psyche. Her narrative technique prompts the reader to delve deep into the inner realms of her protagonists. There is a constant struggle between the conscious and the unconscious, between desire and reality that dictates the entire action or inaction of her central characters. This individual psychological struggle may also be caused by the social, cultural or traditional norms that influence the social institutions of marriage and family which ultimately defines and dictates an individual's role in a given situation. Any analysis of Anita Desai's fiction depends on the reader's ability to probe the traits that define the prominent shades within a psychological monochrome. Her fiction mainly illustrates the internal drama of human life. This paper intends to probe the internal and external conflicts in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*.

1. Introduction

Internal and external conflicts in literature are usually defined in relation to each other. Some texts, where nature or society is portrayed as antagonist or hindrance, focus on the external conflict; while on the other hand, the texts wherein the psychological conflict plays upon the characters themselves, focus on the internal conflict. External conflict relates to a problem, antagonism or struggle that takes place between a character and some outside force. Internal conflict refers to a character's struggle within, for example Hamlet's struggle is an internal struggle. Shakespeare portrays the external circumstances to correspond with the internal struggle of his protagonist. Similarly, in *Bye Bye blackbird* Anita Desai aligns the internal with the external conflict to highlight the struggle of her characters.

Bye Bye blackbird deals with the issues of Indian immigrants in London and their complex situation, during the 1960s. The novelist blends the real and the psychological aspects of her characters and their satiation. This internal and external conflict is presented through the three prominent characters- Dev, Adit and his wife Sarah. The novel depicts the external conflicts of the main protagonists and its effects, causing psychological dilemma. These three protagonists face the dilemma of probing their identity. Dev and Adit face humiliation due to their colour and are pained to be referred to as Black by the White British. Sarah, on the other hand, faces discrimination for marrying a non white, Adit. Each one of these characters is rooted in a different background. Their identity, gained through nationality, race, colour and social class, hinders their prospects. They seem to visualize themselves as misplaced, within the social structure of England which serves as a background to the novel.

When the novel opens, Dev has just arrived in London from Calcutta to study Economics. He was staying with his school friend, Adit Sen, who has been in England for several years and seems to be well settled there with his English wife,

Sarah. He experiences humiliation as an immigrant, faces psychological predicament and finally begins to consider whether to leave England or to prolong his sojourn there. It seems that he finds his existence unstable, insecure and tortured emotionally and intellectually. Anita Desai records the absurdity of Dev's existence in England and its drab superficiality in the first part of the novel. Even Adit's love for England is superficial. After his engagement to Sarah, he goes back to India in the hope of settling there, but lack of better financial prospects drives him back to England. In spite of his professed love of England, he is an Indian at heart and plans to go to Calcutta and visit his parents, but that desire remained temporary. He realizes that his love for London was only a false desire, an attraction which intensifies in him a sense of alienation and a craving to return to India. Sarah, Adit's English wife, married him with a hope of filling the hollowness of her life with the exotic and romantic world of her husband. Thus Adit's romance for England and Sarah's romance for Adit have similar origins. Both Adit and Sarah struggle simultaneously, against the society and their own inner psychological conditions. But their struggles are different, as they appear and affect both on an individual level. As a result, Adit decides to leave England and Sarah decides to leave with Adit. In this way the internal and external conflict in the novel ensues from the characters' struggle to align with the opposing social norms and personal psychological conditionings. Their inability to adjust in a confronting social atmosphere is not a failure but a process because the novelist chooses to end the story at the airport where Sarah agrees to migrate to an unknown country just as Dev and Adit had migrated to England, with personal aspirations.

Dev present a different case as his struggle is distinct from that of Adit and Sarah. He finds himself totally misplaced in England due to his inability to reconcile with English norms and conventions. It is difficult for him to adjust with those who insult him for being a black Indian immigrant. The external conflict erupts as Indian migrants were not accorded equal rights and respect. This inappropriate treatment by Englishmen leads Dev

towards alienation in a strange country. This constant consciousness of inferior feeling leads him to a self crisis. The entire novel, in a way revolves around such conflicting situations. He experiences a lack of sympathy and warmth among the British, who do not care even for their neighbours and continue to live like strangers. This external conflict leads the psychological condition of inferiority complex and loneliness in the novel.

Another conflicting situation of Dev in the novel is the humiliating treatment accorded to immigrants in England. While travelling in a bus he feels humiliated due to the conductor's attitude towards him. The external landscape becomes the internal climate of these characters trapped in psychological despair. The gap between the real and the imagined increases his psychological agony. His inner conflict intensifies with his acceptance and rejection in the novel. It renders him emotionally and intellectually tortured. London makes him aware of his otherness, that he does not belong to the world that he takes to be the source of his consciousness. His suffering emanates from this conflict between experience and mental perception and suffers because he keeps on oscillating between his choices. He lives in uncertainty, denied, rejected, and finally develops a schizophrenic attitude towards England. But this process exemplifying his struggle renders a different result for him when compared with the situation of Adit and Sarah. In the final part of the novel, he seems to have won over his conscience and is slowly drawn into the London life. He makes adjustments with the conflicting situation and finally realizing his shortcoming, he decides to stay back in England. Through these characters, Anita Desai explores the psychological theme of maladjustment, isolation and alienation.

Adit Sen has confronted similar conflicting conditions in the novel. Like Dev, he becomes aware of his otherness after his visit to his in-laws and leaves England as a patriotic Indian. Dr. G.D. Barke has rightly said: 'Adit though lives and admires England, loves everything that is English appreciates her history and poetry, feels the thrill about Nelson's battles, Waterloo, about Churchill all, and yet all this break like a soap bubble at the first touch of reality. He must have not loved England less but then he loved India more.'¹

He is a young man from India who resides in England with his British wife, Sarah. There is also an element of conflict in values. In India he does not find a job in spite of a degree from British University and migrates to London and settled there getting a job as a travel agent and has been gradually satisfied with life. Adit experiences some conflicts with Englishmen in England, as he is humiliated by calling him 'wog' and always pretends not to hear it. On the surface level, he declares that he longs for Indian things like music, food and friends. The conflict between his own Indian culture and alien British culture affects him in his life. After marriage to Sarah, he has to face many difficulties in his own life. Like many other immigrants, he stayed in his disillusionment with an alien culture. In addition, he tries to find reconciliation. He finally realized that, he is an Indian and can never breathe the English air freely dawns on him at his in-laws house. This longing suddenly grows intense during his visit to Sarah's parents' house and Adit, from then onwards, feels stifled and starved in the alien land. He makes

up his mind to leave for India to lead a real life devoid of all pretences. Adit sings:

**O'England's green and grisly land, I love
You and only a babe can (Bye bye,130)**

Sarah is a victim of the conflicting situations in her own country. Unlike, Maya, Monisha and Sita she does not lose hope in marriage. She accepts life with both its pros and cons. She exercises her choice of freedom and marries an Indian immigrant; Adit Sen. She is the only female protagonist in Anita Desai's novels who does not evade the marital reality with psychological pangs and elusive desires. She encounters her psychological conflicts with better practical maturity when compared to other female protagonists in Anita Desai's novels. She encounters more of external conflicts in the form of external western cultural double standards. Adit's conventional attitude and her own parent's restlessness along with the social set-up in England add to her struggle. The conflict between Sarah and Adit surfaced after their marriage as both of them belonged to different cultural backgrounds. Their different subjective attitudes, social background and perceptions shape their marital life. She is not able to cook Indian food to the entire satisfaction of her husband, most of the time. And, both of them have difficulty in adjusting to each other's problems. After marriage, her resolve turns into aloofness. She loses her zeal and becomes apathetic in her own country. She feels an inner void. But at the same time, unlike most other female protagonists in Anita Desai's novels, Sarah agrees to accompany her husband when Adit decides to return to India for good. Meenakshi Mukherjee is of the view that: 'She is displaced in her own country and her identity crisis will never be solved even if she goes back to England.'²

Her conflicting situation is aggravated due to her immersion in a strange culture and causes a breakdown in communication, misreading of reality just as it did when Adit migrated to England. Like Adit, she too feels depressed because she cannot fully involve herself in an alien culture but as the novel does not develop her aggrieved state it should be conjured that like Dev in England, she too must find peace with herself and her adopted home.

To sum up, Anita Desai in the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* amicably deals with the psychological theme of alienation and isolation. The novel may also be seen as one of the early attempts in analysing the Diasporic concerns of migration on first generation immigrants and their socio-psychological struggle. Anita Desai very dexterously aligns the two dichotomous trajectories of internal and external conflicts. The internal and external conflicts, in the novel, work as mirror images that reflect and complement each other. It revolves around psychological issues such as adjustment in a new world, discrimination, estrangement, racial discrimination and nostalgia for homeland. The effects of migration, relocation and consequent adjustment in an alien culture, on Dev, Adit and Sarah, are the focal point of the novel.

At last we can say that *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the theme of internal and external conflict. The novelist analyses this existential predicament by delineating realistically the situations of three major characters Dev, Adit and Sarah, who

struggle and find individual solutions to a problem that appears to be common to all three of them but in reality is not.

Work Cited

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