

PRETENSE OF THE IMMIGRANTS IN ANITA DESAI'S BYE BYE BLACKBIRD

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ABSTRACT

One of the main themes of Anita Desai's 'Bye Bye Blackbird' is immigration. The Indian characters who have migrated to England undergo insult and humiliation from the English people. The severe cold reception and the abuse of the host country could leave any newcomer depressed or rebellious. Then how do the immigrants survive this hostility? What helps them in holding on? My paper attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the psychology of these characters. The characters in the novel can be seen exhibiting a strange attitude towards the insults they are put through. They attempt to take light of the ungenerosity by laughing off and making fun of it. The confession of the main character, Adit at the end of the novel reveals that all the time they had been faking fun and laughter. Hence, they chose a peaceful midway to deal with this situation i.e., trying to take light of it.

KEY-WORDS: Pretense, laughter, immigrants, diaspora, insult

According to the United Nations, Indian diaspora is the largest with 18 million migrants across the world. This could be considered a powerful reason for the evolution of 'Indian Diasporic Literature' that is wide and large. It consumes a significant portion of Indian Literature. It can also be believed that 'Indian Diasporic Literature' placed Indian English Literature on the global picture. Since Indian Diaspora is voluntary, it is not as violent and traumatic as forced diaspora. However, the mental agony is not invisible.

Simply defining, 'Diasporic Literature' is literature that focusses on the characters living in a foreign land whose thoughts often revolve around their native land, culture, family and friends living back home. And these thoughts are always nostalgic and melancholic.

These reflections arise from having to live distantly from their homeland and the inability to adjust with the new community or the reluctance of the host society to absorb the immigrants into their culture. Then how do they survive this embarrassment, uncongeniality and impolite hostship is the question.

In my paper, I am going to focus on that startling or strange behaviour of the immigrants in this novel where they tend to take the abuse, the biased comments and insulting remarks lightly or at least pretend to take light of them and analyze the psychological reasons behind such an attitude in Anita Desai's novel, 'Bye Bye Blackbird.'

Anita Desai who started writing fiction in the early 1960's is considered one of the most notable Indian female writers of all time. She wrote at a time when the backdrop of Indian English Literature was predominantly overshadowed by men. Desai with her themes like feminism, marriage, isolation had carved her presence in an indelible manner in the history of Indian English Literature.

'Bye Bye Blackbird' is Anita Desai's third novel that explores themes of immigration, estrangement, displacement and adjustment. The novel is divided into three parts viz., "Arrival", "Discovery and Recognition" and "Departure" with three main characters Adit, Dev and Sarah. Adit Sen is a Bengali who has migrated to England leaving behind his loving family in search of a decent job. He appears to be a jolly Anglophile whose wife is Sarah, an English woman. Dev, a new immigrant who joins them is quite sober and is contradictory to Adit. We see Sarah trying hard to cope up with putting two faces – a dutiful wife at home and the wife of an immigrant outside. While Sarah's is a flat character who is the same throughout the novel, Adit's and Dev's are round characters that undergo a massive transformation in terms of their attitude towards the adopted country.

In the beginning, the immigrants seem to be enthralled by the charm and freshness of the new nation. But it doesn't take much time for the magic spell to come down. Once they experience the sharp pangs of racism and separatism caused by the host people, the reality that they are unwelcomed visitors dooms upon them. Nostalgia pervades their minds. What once looked charming now looks gloomy.

Truth dooms on them and the wonder and awe for every petty thing is substituted by comparing and contrasting the two nations, cultures and even people. The constant racist remarks, abuse and discrimination hurled against them make them shrink and it leads to shunning of others' (host people) company and brings them closer to the people from their own community who also do share similar experiences. Thus they create their own comfort zones and are reluctant to come out of it.

Within these comfort zones, they meet frequently and have parties where they cook Indian food, celebrate native festivals, listen and sing native songs and even play native jokes in native slangs thereby creating a microcosm of their native country where they could feel 'belonged' and not separated. Thus they try to fill the vacuum left by having to live far away from their homeland. These frequent gatherings cheer up the immigrants.

In this little time that they spend in their 'microcosmic homeland', they wish to spend it delightfully as a break from the distress outside. They spend time playing jokes on each other, sharing experiences in the new country with the new people which is natural. But this group of friends indulge in some unreasonable entertainment where they amuse themselves with the insults, the indignity and the insensitive treatment by the natives. What is startling is these jokes have an enraging touch of bias, racism and even abuse. Still they seem to revel in it. They laugh their hearts out leaving the readers in disbelief and suspicion. We are dumbstruck by the way the immigrants are laughing their heads off over the disgrace they are put through.

We notice this peculiar kind of entertainment in the very first gathering of the friends. The members in this group are Adit, Sarah, Dev, Samar, Bella, Jasbir and Mala. In this gathering, Mala shares a terrible experience her child went through in the name of a joke.

“Mala.....merely lolled against a cushion, only too grateful for a respite from housework, and told a story about her small son whom she once watched being chased up the stairs by a gang of English children, screaming at them in despair, “I’m not black! I’m not black! – I’m grey!” Mala laughed with a gay, clanging sound at her son’s wit.” (Desai 29)

The reader is left in a dilemma whether to laugh at it really or feel sympathy for immigrants and in particular, the immigrant offspring! The reply given by the boy is definitely witty but being chased by a gang of ‘other’ children is haunting. The mother instead of jumping to her child’s rescue, merely stood and watched! Moreover, she found it funny and was narrating it to her friends. To one’s surprise, none from the group at least paid any heed let alone expressed their disapproval. The negative psychological effects on the mind of this young child are left out of the picture.

We try to comprehend the reasons for such a behaviour. Why did she find it funny? Why did the other friends ignore it? Is she too used to it that she feels it is natural? Or as an immigrant, does she feel helpless to take things in hand and react? Or did she choose to alleviate and laugh it off instead of brood over?

After Mala, Samar narrates a similar experience. He was waiting in the queue when it started drizzling, so he opened out his old Calcutta umbrella – big and black, Hunter brand. Then a fat red man hissed “It’s not raining”. Samar in an attempt to imitate him was sporting a hearty huntin’ and fishin’ man’s accent. When Samar reiterated that it was indeed raining, he heard the man say, under his breath, “Bloody Pakistani.” Samar dissented “Dammit, I heard him, I did.”

Let us have a look at how the other members reacted. To quote from the novel,

“Jasbir and Adit roared. They slapped their thighs and threw themselves back into the sofa cushions and then jumped up to dance around the room, patting each other on the back and coughing.

Dev said, “You’re hysterical, the two of you.”

“So speaks the great new leader of the abused and the downtrodden!” shouted Adit, raising one arm above his head in salute.

“You clowns, why don’t you stop it? Why didn’t you hit him with your umbrella, Samar? You said it was a Hunter brand umbrella.”

“It is. That’s why I didn’t dare hit him – it would have broken in two and I would have got wet.”

The others laughed but Dev said “Why didn’t you use your shoes then? Your fists? Anything. Why do you let him get away with it?” (Desai 30)

The words, “Bloody Pakistani” are too racist to ignore like Samar did or laugh at like Adit and Jasbir. Dev goes through what exactly each reader does. He is totally jolted by the abuse but to the contrary Adit and Jasbir were roaring with laughter like the audience of a stand up comedian.

The same question arises again. Why did Adit and Jasbir (the old immigrants) find it funny whereas Dev (a new immigrant) found it awful? What is the reason for the difference of reactions between Dev's and that of Adit and Jasbir? Why did Samar take the assault so lightly as one takes a mosquito bite?

Have these kind of abuses become so common and congenial for them? Do they bear with it because they are powerless to fight back? Or did they choose to laugh it off instead of brood over, thus becoming a spoilsport in a cheerful locale?

Adit, Jasbir, Samar and Mala have been living in this uncordial environment for quite a considerable time. They also might have felt the same way Dev did in the beginning. But how long could one remain sensitive to the same kind of adverse attitude. This is a phenomenon that is not going to end anytime soon. By now, they had attained an intelligibility that they have to live with it if they want their goals to be achieved.

This intelligibility could be the reason for their not retaliating as well as for taking light of it. When the same kind of humiliating experiences keep happening time and again and when the people on the receiving end realise that there is no escape from this, they either choose to become depressed or become rebellious or attempt to ignore them by laughing off.

Depression nourishes when one does not have company or friends who share the same feelings or could empathize with them. But here is a group of jolly friends who do not seem to have even a bit of sadness considering their stay in an unwelcome environment though they go through similar hostile reception from morning till night. Since they have company and have chosen, all by themselves, to stay in a foreign country with motives of advancement in careers and better pays, it is unlikely for depression to approach them.

So, whenever they meet, they try to make the best use of it. If only one person in the group faces this mistreatment, the aura of gloom would surround but in this case, each has a like story to share. Hence, they chose to tease each other over who's more taunted than become depressed.

The other way of response is to become rebellious. A rebellion requires a large group of people who are put to extreme suffering and trauma for a long time. It is not sensible for this small group of friends to rebel in a place where they have come to only to prosper and which was their sole decision to migrate. Their stay in England is not forced. They are free to choose to leave the country anytime. Moreover, they are very small in number. So, they found it sensible not to retaliate those disrespectful verbal attacks.

If depression is a way and to rebel is another, the peaceful midway is to ignore and move on. That is what we see the characters adopting in the novel. But they customize the option of 'ignoring and moving on' by adding the element of unnatural humour. They do this by pretending to overlaugh and guffaw at the insults with the motive of not apparently seeming to be hurt.

We come across another incident. Here, we see all friends together visiting Mrs. Roscommon-James who is Sarah's mother. Her displeasure that her daughter has married an immigrant doesn't go unnoticed. To relieve the tension in the air, the group members again start cracking jokes.

After eating Mala's pakoras at Mrs. Roscommon-James' house, Jasbir shares a story where Samar and Jasbir were tenants in Mrs. Bee's house. When she goes to look after her daughter's children on Friday nights, she

lets them use her kitchen. They used to call their other Indian friends and cook pakoras and alu-tikkis. They shared that it used to be the best meal of the week. And they would wash up and put everything away by the time Mrs. Bee got back.

“But her husband – he was a mean old brute – he used to say the kitchen stank for the rest of the week.”
(Desai 162)

None responded to this remark but just laughed and reached for a fresh lot of fritters that Mala brought to the table in triumph.

This remark could easily hurt any normal person and would restrain them from repeating the action. But here we see the two men unabashedly using their kitchen again. For the question why, the possible answers are, they couldn't put their weekly hearty meal at stake for the sake of dignity. Or they are too jovial to care about the remark. Or they have heard these kind of comments so many times that they chose not to pay heed but ignore and move on.

The uttering of the words “mean old brute” is an evidence that they were offended. We can sense a kind of helplessness of the two characters: they cannot forego a delicious meal and nor can they counterattack her husband's remarks. Out of this helplessness, they pretend to ignore or laugh over the comment.

Towards the climax, we see many questions answered. It shocks us to see that it is none other than the supposed jolly Anglophile Adit who takes it up. We see Samar telling which is the final funny anecdote in the novel. On the occasion of Bella's birthday, there was a small party at her home with the same old friends as guests. In this party, Bella is angry with her husband Samar for stealing a piece of marble on his way to hospital, piled up in a small garden outside an old house that is being pulled down and rebuilt but we notice that Samar totally enjoyed this thrilling experience.

Bella was raging with anger as she asks what would he have done if someone had caught him doing what she calls theft. To this Samar and Adit responded with roaring laughter. This made Bella even angrier. Now, she comes to the crux of the matter and reminded the laughing men their nativity and that they have to be careful. Finally, we see Adit feeling offended!

“Adit suddenly snapped his jaws together and sat up, silenced. His amusement had been faked and now it was over. It had bored him. He simply could not take another minute of it – the falsehood, the fakery, the unnatural strain of it all.” (Desai 215)

Adit who had shown himself as an anglophile and a cheerful man making fun of others till now has reacted in a different way for the first time in the novel. He is fed up now. He could no longer hold it inside. He quietly says,

“Sometimes it stifles me – this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label *Indian Immigrant*, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle. This business of burrowing about those grisly side-streets, looking for Indians in England, all our talk about our own situation – never about anyone or anything else. It's so *stifling* – all the time, the damned time – being aware of who one is and where one is. God, I am fed up!” (Desai 216)

With this outburst of Adit, it becomes crystal clear that all the jokes on each other's insults, the roaring laughters over their humiliations, the taunts, the teasings are just a pretension. All this time they have attempted to pretend as if it did not offend them and that they are very cool guys who can chill over anything. But Adit's revelation proves contradictory to it. They understand the fact that they are unwanted guests here. They also understand their vulnerability and helplessness to fight back. Laughing over their impolite insults gives them a sense of retaliation; a retaliation they found impossible to have face-to-face. So they were intentionally trying to revel and trying to pacify their injured self-esteem.

Since it is their own individual choice to come to England, they tolerate these affrontations. Their motive behind coming to England sustains them through this discomfort. And in this struggle, people like Adit can endure no more, give up and move back to India along with his wife expecting to live with dignity whereas others like Jasbir, Mala, Samar and Dev at the end of the novel are not seen taking any such momentous decisions which means that they are not ready to sacrifice their motives. Hence, they choose to continue to pretend laughter and seeming unoffended.

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