

STRUCTURE

14.0 Objectives**14.1 Multiculturalism in Anita Desai's Novels****14.2 Theme of Intercultural Marriage****14.3 Let Us Sum Up****14.4 Key Words****14.5 Books Suggested****Answers**

14.0 OBJECTIVES

The students will,

- Learn the thematic study of *Bye Bye Blackbird*.
- Recognize the multicultural conflict is the major theme in Anita Desai's novels.
- Know the reflection of multiculturalism in the novel with reference to the major characters of the novels.
- Examine the vivid discussion on experiences of Indian immigrants in the foreign land and the theme of intercultural marriage.
- Attempt to assimilate the values of the Eastern and Western cultures through mixed marriages between the Indian and the English.

14.1 MULTICULTURALISM IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

Bye Bye Blackbird deals with the problems of Indian immigrants in the foreign land of England. Before 1960, England had adopted multiculturalism as a policy to attract "strangers" or "others" because England needed unskilled and uneducated workers for its material growth and economic prosperity.

However, England has also accepted multiculturalism as a political weapon to govern people of different cultures and backgrounds. In the postwar period, people from all over the world with different cultures, backgrounds, religions, mentalities, histories and aspirations flocked to England, a land of economic prosperity and opportunity. Thousands of Indians and other immigrants from various countries came to England looking for work in growing industries.

As K.N Malik (1997:91) rightly says:

The immigrants were inspired to migrate by Britain's post-war shortage of labour, its expanding economy and the portrayal of Britain as a land of 'great opportunity' by those who had come to the UK through army and navy connections.

The migration of various non-white groups to England after 1960 had several important consequences. England has started to face some serious problems due to the large influx of immigrants. The natives believed that immigrants as outsiders would invade their culture. Thus, England, being a host country, changed its previous policy of multiculturalism. As a result, large numbers of Asian immigrants were paid less and often discriminated against on the basis of color, origin, caste and religion. This racial discrimination has caused constant resistance. Furthermore, England has begun its policy of not welcoming and respecting "other" foreign cultures in its traditional British culture.

In Anita Desai's novel, *Bye Blackbird*, we see a constant move between the oriental and occidental culture. According to the Orientals, occidental culture is more balanced and unrivaled which is portrayed by legitimate reasoning, resilience, progress, modernism, autonomy and harmony. Nonetheless, Occidentals accept that Orientals are crude, dark, savage, vicious, aficionado, immature, customary and conservative. This has made a changeless opponent connection of predominance feeling of inadequacy between the Occidentals and Orientals. In power relations, Occidentals have set Orientals at the outskirts and kept up their centrality at a global level.

Edward Said (1991:42) believes that:

Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine. If the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to note how in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction.

Anita Desai has effectively delineated Asian immigrants' issues, particularly those of Indian immigrants in England. The outsiders from Asian nations were known as 'blackbirds' in the place where there is white individuals. In the novel, she presents blackbirds as marginalized, separated, dismissed and undesirable outsiders remaining in a nation that has not embraced and acknowledged them sincerely. The novel opens with the appearance of Dev, Adit's companion, in England. Adit is an Indian immigrant, married to Sarah, a British young lady. Their inter-racial marriage welcomes conflict between two societies Oriental and Occidental. She is sandwiched and squeezed between two diverse social powers. By making the character of Dev, Anita Desai has indicated

Indians' negligence for and disregard to British culture. At first, he is upset and troubled by the racial discrimination of the British people towards Indian immigrants. By wedding a dark Asian, Sarah has broken the social conventions and codes of British culture, which is as far as anyone knows better than and more refined than different societies.

Adit, the protagonist of *Bye Bye Blackbird*, leads a stable life as an immigrant in London with his English wife Sarah, a female protagonist of the novel. Adit is first fascinated by Western culture and then disillusioned by it. Initially he regards England as a "land of opportunity" (19) and material prosperity. Thus, we see Adit being very critical of everything Indian. He says:

"Nothing ever goes right at home - there is famine or flood, there is drought or epidemic, always"(129).

Adit's discussion with his companion Dev shows his underlying interest for British culture. As an Asian foreigner, he brutally criticizes the Indian lifestyle yet acknowledges British culture. As per his opinion, while the West advances self-governance and opportunity, the East is the exemplification of limitations and impediments. What stands apart about him is a sort of interest with an apparently prevalent culture that is characteristic of his colonial hangover. If his own country symbolizes a passive and sluggish life, the British society is vibrant in all its aspects: ". . . here there is no death at all. Everything - animal, vegetable, mineral - is alive, rich and green forever" (129).

It shows Adit's obsession with Western culture that separates him from his "local" culture. Adit has been completely shaped and transformed to meet England's expectations. The other reasons for Adit's admiration for England are social, political, and bureaucratic. So, he points out that there is no bribery in England. He feels "the magic of England - her grace, her peace, her abundance and the embroidery of her history and traditions" (157). Also, England employees, unlike their Indian counterparts, are not lazy and he does not have to worry about the delay of trains and buses.

Adit's fascination with British culture is not so questionable, but the way he views his "local" culture is not acceptable in light of multiculturalism theory because multiculturalism recognizes cultural equality, recognizes differences, and disapproves the dominance of one culture over the other.

Adit is too critical of his own fellow countrymen in England. His rude comments on Dev's behavior and his Indian thinking demonstrate this fact:

"If anyone suggested going to the coffee house, it was you who pointed out that no one had money. If anyone thought of going for a moonlight drive, you pointed out that there was no moon and none of us had a car. You think black by habit" (19).

While admiring the history and poetry of the West, Adit seems to forget the fact that the British used them to increase their hegemony and maintain their central position globally. They have been able to project the idea that the western is good and desirable and when the idea reaches the servile attitude of people like Adit; the task of white men, colonizing the mind of the Third World, becomes easier.

Dev, Adit's friend, involves England for studying at the London School of Economics. Initially he's averse and reluctant to the concept of staying on in England as an immigrant. But regularly a slow change takes place in the mindset of Dev. His preliminary encounter with British people and their tradition brings disappointment and discontent.

The cultural differences expand when Dev moves about in search of a job. He undergoes diverse reviews and cultural shocks. The distinction among expectation and truth upsets him and makes him aware and insecure. As he says, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted" (17). He wishes to go back to India as an "England returned teacher" (17). He comes all the way to London for a proper education. But in London, he feels to be an unnamed stranger facing various sociocultural problems. In his desperate mood, he calls Adit, his friend "a spineless imperialist-lover"(19). He openly calls London "a jungly city"(10), where people live in their own cocoons without any social concern. Every encounter in London prompts Dev to compare the differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Oriental-Occidental). He observes the neighbors' silence, "- their radios, their quarrels, their children are all kept behind closed doors" (56).

It is true that there are hundreds of Third World immigrants in London who willfully forget the value of their local cultures in the glow of the western city. But Dev could sense the loneliness that lurks in the glow of the city. Dev's confrontation with Western indifference, unlike Adit's case, is the sudden realization that her culture is complacent; worries about personal problems and the pain of others. Material prosperity and the superiority complex took away the emotions of love and concern for others, thus minimizing the importance of multiculturalism. What Dev witnesses in England is the lack of social harmony and the stratification of cultures

Here, the comparison between eastern and western cultures is not so important, but cultural differences should be positively recognized if they do not harm peace and social harmony. After all, each culture has something new and valuable to share with others, but sharing cultural differences does not have to lead to social disintegration and disintegration. As a social theory, multiculturalism is based on the basic

idea that each culture represents only a limited range of worldviews. The help of other cultures is necessary not only for a better understanding of the world, but also to enrich one's own culture and broaden the horizon of common understanding.

Thus, multiculturalism prioritizes cultural pluralism and raises awareness about the dangers of cultural dominance. However, even Dev doesn't seem to fully understand the value of multiculturalism. He allocates himself the role of a cultural ambassador to India:

I am here, he intoned, as an ambassador. I am showing these damn imperialists with their lost colonies complex that we are free people now, with our own personalities that this veneer of an English education has not obscured, and not afraid to match ours with theirs'. I am here ... to interpret my country to them, to conquer England as they once conquered India, to show them, to show them. (123)

His scorn for the Englishman's 'white' superiority consciousness is understandable. His assertion that English language and literature was white man's weapon for colonizing the Indian mind is also justifiable. But his desire to colonize the cultural thinking of the west is essentially wrong, for multiculturalism does not rest on the principle of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. His contempt for English "white" superiority is understandable. His claim that the English language and literature was the white man's weapon to colonize the Indian mind is also justified. But Dev's desire to colonize cultural thinking in the West is fundamentally wrong.

However, if Dev is Desai's spokesperson, then Virgo's outbursts can be seen as her rightful postcolonial position as a writer. Hence, Deva's statements should be seen as examples of exaggeration intended to express his anti-colonial position. They are intended to highlight the pain of submission and hegemony that colonialists feel. This seems to underline the fact that all forms of colonization are in violation of the basic democratic principles of multiculturalism.

The suppressed racial antagonism against the Asian immigrants is a result of the white man's long-established belief that he is superior to the non-white people. Edward Said's attitude to the Orient, as he argues, is shaped by his own people's history of the East. As such, Indians, along with other Asians, face inequality on the basis of colour and race. In such a society multiculturalism does not seem to have a healthy future. There the immigrants feel frustrated, alienated and marginalized.

The repressed racial antagonism against Asian immigrants is the result of the white man's long-held belief that he is superior to non-whites. Edward Said's attitude toward the East, he claims, is shaped by the eastern history of his people. Therefore, Indians, like other Asians,

face inequalities of color and race. In such a society, multiculturalism does not have a healthy future. There, immigrants feel frustrated, alienated and marginalized. These feelings find clear expression in Dev's antagonism towards everything British. To quote K. Jha (2004:161-62):

Bye Bye Blackbird is full of situations in which we find characters struggling to survive the racial onslaught. Racial prejudice often gets expression through the accusation against the coloured immigrants for spreading dirt and filth.

The history of the Orient, as narrated by the historians of the West, is meant to consolidate European centrality and to depict the Third World as the 'Other.' The particular type of racism that is prevalent in England has a historical background. The colonial rule of the British in India gave them a sense of superiority, which will come in handy now when their former subjects migrated to their country. Roman Desai comments on this confident position of the British. As P.K Pandeya (2001:20) puts it:

The novel touches on racial problems and feeling in England. This feeling becomes sharper when it comes to a colonizer nation like England who has ruled over us for a long time. It is not simply white man's burden but also the feeling of superiority by virtue of their being ruler over us.

Color and race discrimination is illustrated in *Bye Bye Blackbird*. The surprising fact is that even white children grow up with a distorted understanding of skin color and racial differences. Then, during a sightseeing tour of London, the student called Dev as "wog". Dev's reaction to insult is sharp, but the point is that the white boys realize that anyone except a white person can be publicly insulted. A little later we find Dev pointing out to Adit that "the London docks have three kinds of lavatories- Ladies, Gents and Asiatics" (17).

In some cases, differences in race and skin color can endanger the lives of Asian immigrants. For example. Mala, an immigrant, explains how her son reacts when he is chased by a gang of British boys.

He shouts at them in despair: "I'm not black! I'm not black-I'm grey!" (26). As Usha Bande (1991:191) argues:

In *Bye Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai tackles issues pertaining to racial and cultural prejudices, adjustment and acceptance, and the subjective and objective views of a historical situation hard to shake off.

The British in Desai novels are so concerned with colors that even the jobs are intended for fair-skinned Europeans. Even more shocking is how people are classified according to their religion. Therefore, during a job interview, the interviewer informs Dev that he cannot be offered a job because he is not a Christian. European employers overlook candidates' qualifications. They assume that the Indians are less intelligent and less competent and that they cannot be offered the full job.

However, it is noteworthy that Desai does not have a constant mistrust of the possibility of true multiculturalism even in England ravaged by racism. Sarah and Adit's marriage illustrates this. By marrying Adit, an Asian, Sarah violated some of the unwritten codes and conventions of the white society. But as soon as the marriage dissolves, she is humiliated not only by her colleagues at the school where she works as a secretary, but also by the students at the school.

When her own country disowns her, she makes her home in a country that England subjugated. In this she is joining the ally of the other and thus rises in revolt against the white assumptions of hegemony and superiority. Thus her marriage is a challenge while at the same time it is her means to blend the Occident with the Orient and thus suggest the possibility of multiculturalism that crosses the artificial boundaries of colour and creed laid by white hegemonic/dominant structures.

When her own country refuses to do so, she settles in a country enslaved by England. In this she joins the ally of the other and thus rebels against the white premises of hegemony and superiority. Therefore, her marriage is a challenge and at the same time it is her means of merging the West with the East and thus suggests the possibility of multiculturalism, transcending the artificial borders of color and beliefs established by the dominant culture. The present study of this novel simply shows how multiculturalism works in various ways to address some of the sociocultural problems that create waves of friction and hostility in the world.

14.2 THEME OF INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGE

Bye-Bye, Blackbird, seeks to assimilate the values of Eastern and Western cultures through mixed marriages between Indian and British. The novel seems to shed light on some possible solutions to problems related to intercultural issues. This reflects the positive attitude of the writer towards portraying an intercultural subject. In *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* Inder Nath Kher (1992) comments:

She calls for meaningful participation in inter-racial/intercultural dialogue to promote racial harmony and mutual accommodation of each other's difference (s), without which the individuals or the society will not be able to realize their full potential. In the context of

multicultural societies, Desai seems to be saying that the shared perspectives and loyalties, of people lead to growth for all, whereas the indifference, violence or hostility of the host societies towards their invitees simply retards this worthwhile goal (8).

In the novel, the intercultural theme of marriage is studied through the marital life of Adit and his English wife, Sarah.

Sarah had married Adit in the hope of bringing into her bored and ordinary life certain changes - new and exciting ones. Her parents and the society do not approve it and cannot accept her alliance with the (Indian) immigrant. Even small children of her community make fun of her by calling her names, "Mrs. Curry". As a consequence, she visits her parents or her friends on rare occasions for fear of being sneered at by her own people. Her Indian connection makes her uneasy and awkward in dealing with people at her work place because she is not confident enough to acknowledge her association with India and is thus estranged from her own society in her own country.

Sarah married Adit in hopes of making some exciting changes to her boring, ordinary life. Her parents and society disapprove it and cannot accept her union with an immigrant. As a result, she occasionally visits her parents or friends, fearing that the people will laugh at her. Her connection with India makes her feel awkward and uncomfortable in dealing with people in the workplace because she is not confident enough to admit her connection to India and is therefore estranged from her own society in her own country.. A critic, Asha Susan Jacob comments:

Even without getting transplanted physically to another Culture, Sarah loses her identity in her own native soil. (138)

Sarah deliberately avoids personal contact with her colleagues and only maintains formal relationships with them. This is because she fears that they may ask personal questions about her Indian husband.

The Indian husband seems to be quite satisfied with his English wife. This is because the wife has tried her best to adjust to the Indian ways of her husband. Adit says to Dev:

'She's used to being woken up. These English wives are quite manageable really. You know. Not as fierce as they look - very quiet and her working as long as you treat ' them right and roar at time regularly once or twice a week?(29).

Sarah tries to adapt to her husband's habits. And she struggles with her alienation by playing the role of her Indian husband's respected wife and an Englishwoman who works in an English school. She tries to get

satisfaction in her world. In such a world she enjoys talking to people like land lady about her Indian husband, his custom and tradition. Other than that, Sarah struggles to feel comfortable in the company of her husband's Indian friends and acquaintances, but cannot join them in their conversations, jokes, laughter and music because she hardly understands them.

Adit's marriage to Sarah is a true fulfillment of his passion for England. As a member of a different culture, he differs in many ways from his English wife: for example, Sarah does not mind protecting her food from her cat sniffing at it, and Adit's appetite is reduced when he thinks he is eating dirty food. When Sarah cannot cook Indian food for her husband, her husband cooks himself. As a result, the husband spends most of his time in the kitchen. Despite all these differences between English husband and wife, due to their different cultural heritage, the couple enjoys married life. English relatives hate Adit, do not accept him as their own and do not include him in their family circle. English society despises him. And he realizes that he is not from England. So he wants to go back to India, where he really belongs. This feeling of nostalgia upsets him; and influences his life in England. He begs his wife to leave England and accompany him to India.

He grasped her knee and shook it. 'You will come, Sarah?
You see why I must go?' (203).

And Sarah agrees with him. The outbreak of the Indo-Pakistani War in 1965 aroused patriotic sentiment in Adit; and tells his pregnant wife that their child must have been born in India; and heightens his desire for his country and his people. Finally, Adit and his wife leave England for India to settle down in her native place for a 'real life' there for a 'real life'.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-1

Select The Appropriate Option

1. In the novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* the word "blackbird" is used for
 - a. London native
 - b. Americans
 - c. Indian immigrants
 - d. None of these
2. Who decides to live in London at the end of the novel
 - a. Dev
 - b. Adit
 - c. Sarah
 - d. All of the above
3. How Dev feels when he saw the empty streets and houses of London?
 - a. Happy

- b. Confused
 - c. Uneasy
 - d. Excited
4. To whom the people of London want to say goodbye?
 - a. Americans
 - b. Natives
 - c. Indian immigrants
 - d. None of these
 5. Anita Desai belongs to
 - a. Jammu and Kashmir
 - b. Kerala
 - c. Karnataka
 - d. Uttrarakhand
 6. *Bye Bye Blackbird* highlights the idea of
 - a. Feminism
 - b. Racism
 - c. Patriotism
 - d. Marxism
 7. The white color of cake may refer to the
 - a. Asian
 - b. English people
 - c. Men
 - d. Women
 8. The British _____ behave the way the British people do.
 - a. Men
 - b. Women
 - c. Pets
 - d. None of the above
 9. Which of the following critic represents the idea of Orientalism?
 - a. Karl Marx
 - b. Sigmund Freud
 - c. Jacques Lacan
 - d. Edward Said
 10. The background the novel is set in
 - a. 1950's England
 - b. 1960's England
 - c. 1970's England
 - d. 1980's England
 - e.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-2

Write The Following Shortnotes

1. Theme of Intercultural Marriage in Anita Desai's Novels.
2. Multiculturalism in Anita Desai's Novels.

14. 3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we studied *Bye Bye Blackbird* with reference to multiculturalism and inter cultural marriage. We have understood how

multiculturalism works in various ways to address some of the sociocultural problems. Moreover, we have also studied intercultural marriage with reference to the marriage between the Indian and the British. The novel seems to shed light on some possible solutions to problems related to intercultural issues.

14.4 KEY WORDS

Multiculturalism "Multiculturalism" is the coexistence of different cultures that includes racial, religious or cultural groups.

Orientalism style, artifacts, or traits considered characteristic of the peoples and cultures of

Occidentalism relating to the countries of the West.

Colonization the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area.

14.5 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Desai, Anita; Bye. Bye, Blackbird, (Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1995)
2. Desai, Anita, 'The Book I Enjoyed Writing \lost'. Contemporary Indian Literature, (X111. 4, 1973)
3. Chakravarti Aruna, Ruth PraverJhabvala: A Study in Empathy and Exile (Delhi:B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1998)
4. Inder Nath Kher, " The Immigrant Experience in Anita Desai's Bye-Bye.
5. Blackbird" Bye-Bye. Blackbird The Journal of Indian Writing in English.5.2 (1992) 8.
6. Jacob Asha, "In Their Alien World: Bye-Bye, Blackbird and Baumgartneer's Bombay." The Fiction of Anita Desai: Vol 1 Suman Bala and D.K. Pabby (New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 2002)
7. Krukreti Sumitra, " Love-Hate Relationship of Expatriates in Anita Desai's Bye-Bye, Blackbird," The Novel of Anita Desai: A Critical Study, eds. Manmohan K. Bhatnagar and M. Rajeshwar (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2000)

ANSWERS:

1. Indian immigrants
2. Dev
3. Uneasy
4. Indian immigrants
5. Uttrarakhand
6. Racism
7. English people
8. Pets
9. Edward Said
10. 1960's England