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Home, Exile and Hybridity: A Post-Colonial Reading of Anita Desai's Bye-Bye Blackbird

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Abstract: Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* canvases the psychological and cultural dislocation of Indian immigrants in 1960s Britain. This paper attempts to examine the text through a post-colonial lens, focusing on the diasporic experiences of Indian immigrants in the then Britain. By exploring the disheveled concepts of home, exile and hybridity, the study analyses how national identity is constructed and deconstructed within the domestic and public spheres. Through the characters of Admit, Dev, Sarah, this paper demonstrates that "home" is not a fixed geographical location but a fluid, highly politicized psychological state. Anita Desai argues that the immigrant condition is not a binary opposition between East and West. It is actually a condition where identity is repeatedly negotiated. The research highlights how the immigrant experience equivocates between the desire for assimilation and the inescapable reality of cultural alienation, ultimately revealing the profound psychological toll of displacement.

Keywords: Psychological, immigrants, home, exile, hybridity, identity, assimilation displacement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is an Indian diaspora writer writing in English. Desai's primary focus as a novelist is the exploration of feminine psyche. Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, published in (1971) marks a significant thematic departure from her usual focus on the internal domestic landscapes of Indian women, turning instead to the external and psychological landscapes of the South Asian diaspora. Set in London and the English countryside, the novel captures the complex realities of first-generation Indian immigrants navigating the post-imperial center. The 1960s world saw mass immigration to Britain from former colonies like India. Desai explains the condition of the Indian immigrants through the portrayal of two characters: Dev and Admit. Admit Sen embraces British life and English wife but Dev experiences acute cultural alienation. The text operates as a profound exploration of spatial and psychological dislocation, where the borders of the "nation" are fiercely guarded, both culturally and physically, forcing the characters to grapple with what it means to belong. By reading the novel through the post-colonial frameworks of exile and hybridity, this paper argues that the domestic space—the home—becomes the primary site where the national identity, racism, colonial history is intimately contested and negotiated.

Research Objectives:

The primary objectives of the paper are-

- To analyses the shifting and unstable definition of "home" for both the colonizer and the colonized in a post-imperial context.
- To examine the psychological dimensions of exile, including both the external displacement of immigrants and the internal alienation of the native.
- To explore how Home Bhabhi's concept of "hybridity" functions as both a survival mechanism and a source of profound cultural tension for the characters.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, textual analysis of Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. It utilizes post-colonial literary theory—specifically drawing on Home Bhabhi's theories of hybridity and the "Third Space," as well as Edward Said's writings on exile and the "Other." The study attempt to uncover how the novel constructs colonial discourse. Through close reading of character development, the paper bridges theoretical concepts of diaspora with the lived, textual realities of Desai's characters.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical reception of *Bye-Bye Blackbird* has extensively categorized it as one of the early foundational texts of Indian diasporic literature in English. Critic Menasha Mukherjee considers the novel as 'a novel of expatriation' focusing on homesickness and cultural shock. Jabir Jain categorizes the novel as Desai's 'London novels'. Scholars such as Mena Belliappa have noted Desai's shift from existential feminism to sociological realism in this text, highlighting its focus on racial prejudice and immigrant alienation. Critic Ushas Banda comments that Audit's wife Sarah's displacement mirrors that of Audit's. Post-colonial critics often focus on the duality of the immigrant experience—the "push and pull" of the motherland versus the host country. Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the character of Sarah, analyzing her through feminist and post-colonial intersections to understand how cross-cultural marriages disrupt stable national identities. This paper builds on existing scholarship by treating the concept of the "home" as a direct, allegorical substitute for the "nation."

4. HOME, EXILE HYBRIDITY IN BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD

The Illusion of Arrival and the Concept of 'Home': In the post-colonial immigrant experience, the concept of "home" is inherently unstable. At the beginning of the novel, Admit Sen embodies the archetypal Anglophile; he believes he has successfully claimed England as his home. He revels in English culture, geography socio-economic stability, actively rejecting India as chaotic and inadequate. He also marries Sarah, an English woman. He performs 'English'-pubs, tweed jackets, BBC accent etc. For Admit, home is an adopted construct, a deliberate distancing from his post-colonial origins in favor of the imperial center. However, Desai systematically deconstructs this illusion of arrival. Audit's integration is revealed to be superficial—he is tolerated rather than accepted. Audit's national identity is often negotiated. The concept of the home as a national sanctuary collapses when the Indo-Pakistani war breaks out. The geopolitical crisis acts as a catalyst, tearing through Audit's carefully constructed English identity and inducing a profound, visceral homesickness. He realizes that a true "home" cannot exist where one is perpetually viewed as the "Other." His eventual decision to return to India demonstrates that "home" is intrinsically linked to national and cultural origins that the adoption of a foreign nation as home is often a fragile psychological defense mechanism that cannot withstand the pressures of historical and ethnic realities.

Spatial and Psychological Exile: Exile in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is depicted not merely as a physical relocation, but as a paralyzing psychological condition. Dev arrives in England as a cynical observer, acutely aware of the historical weight of colonialism. Unlike Admit, Dev immediately feels the physical and emotional hostility of the London landscape. The cold weather, the closed doors the silent, unyielding architecture of the city serve as spatial manifestations of his exclusion. Dev's experience highlights that exile is a state of severe belonging. He wanders the streets of London feeling invisible, suffering from a deep crisis of identity where he is detached from his roots yet aggressively excluded from his new surroundings. Desai portrays this exile as a "nameless disease"—a melancholic paralysis that strips the immigrant of their agency. The public spaces of the nation (pubs, markets, subways) constantly remind Dev of his marginalization. His initial resistance to England is a defense against this psychological exile, proving that the trauma of displacement lies in the daily, exhausting negotiation of occupying a space that actively resists your presence.

internal Exile of the 'Native': While post-colonial theory traditionally focuses on the displacement of the colonized, Desai brilliantly illustrates the concept of "internal exile" through the character of Sarah, Audit's English wife. By marrying an Indian man, Sarah transgresses the racial and cultural boundaries of her own nation. As a result, she becomes a foreigner in her own homeland. Sarah's exile is deeply psychological and domestic. She lives a fractured existence, constantly code-switching between her identity as Mrs. Sen in her Anglo-Indian home and her identity as an English woman at her workplace. She hides her marriage from her colleagues to avoid their subtle pity and racism, stepping out of her own life to become a reluctant performer in the English social sphere. Her cross-cultural marriage strips her of her undisputed claim to the English nation. She is viewed with suspicion by her compatriots and remains an outsider to her husband's Indian heritage. Sarah's tragic isolation proves that the borders of the "nation" are so rigidly policed that even native citizens face exile if they contaminate the perceived purity of the national identity.

Hybridity and the Third Space: Drawing on Home Bhabhi's post-colonial framework, the Sen household operates as a classic "Third Space"—an intermediate zone where two cultures collide, negotiate synthesize. Admit and Sarah's home is a site of intense hybridity. It smells of Indian spices but is situated in London; it features English tea alongside Indian classical music. However, Desai does not present hybridity as a utopian resolution to cultural conflict. Instead, it is portrayed as an exhausting, unstable condition. The hybridity in their home requires constant emotional labor, predominantly from Sarah, who must continuously adapt to Indian culinary and social customs to accommodate Admit and Dev. The Third Space in the novel is fraught with underlying tensions, as it relies on a delicate balance that is constantly threatened by the racism of the outside world and the historical baggage of the inhabitants. Rather than offering a comfortable new identity, this hybridity leaves the characters suspended in a state of cultural limbo,

belonging entirely neither to the East nor the West.

The Reversal of Roles: Fluidity of Diasporic Identity: The psychological role reversal between Admit and Dev is one of the inseparable aspects of the novel which underscores the extreme fluidity of diasporic identity. The novel begins with Admit as the assimilated immigrant and Dev as the hostile outsider. By the narrative's conclusion, their positions have entirely swapped. Admit, overwhelmed by a sudden, consuming nostalgia and the realization of his perpetual alienation, decides to return to India with his English wife Sarah. Conversely, Dev, who initially despised the colonizer's land, gradually becomes seduced by the beauty of the English countryside and the allure of economic opportunity. He takes over Audit's job, his apartment his role as the resident immigrant. This reversal demonstrates that the post-colonial immigrant identity is never static. It is a continuous process of negotiation heavily influenced by internal psychology and external pressures. Dev's decision to stay is not portrayed as a triumph of assimilation, but rather as an acknowledgment of the seductive, complex power of the imperial center, highlighting how the diaspora forces individuals into constantly shifting strategies of survival.

Racism, Macroaggressions the Boundaries of the Nation: The title *Bye-Bye Blackbird* operates as a racial slur, immediately establishing racism as a central, inescapable force in the novel. Desai meticulously documents the daily macroaggressions that remind the characters that they are not and will never be, true citizens of the nation. From the difficulty of finding housing due to "No Colored's" signs to the uncomfortable stares in public houses, the host nation continuously violently asserts its boundaries. These instances of racism are not merely personal prejudices; they are structural mechanisms used to protect the "home" of the British nation from post-colonial intrusion. Even Admit, in his desperate bid for assimilation, cannot shield himself from being mocked by his English father-in-law or ignored by shopkeepers. The systemic xenophobia functions as a violent reminder of the imperial hierarchy, proving that the end of physical empire did not end racial hegemony. The nation rejects the immigrants' attempts to claim it as home, reducing them to "blackbirds"—migratory, unwanted perpetually alien.

5. CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* remains a poignant, incisive critique of the post-colonial diasporic experience. By examining the lives of Admit, Dev Sarah, the novel reveals that the transition from the colony to the imperial center is fraught with psychological peril. The text deconstructs the myth of a welcoming, multicultural society, showing instead how racism and cultural rigidities enforce strict boundaries around the concept of the nation. Through the profound spatial and internal exile experienced by its characters the exhausting reality of living in a hybrid "Third Space," Desai demonstrates that the search for "home" is the central tragedy of the immigrant experience. Ultimately, the novel posits that home is an elusive construct, easily shattered by the enduring legacies of colonialism and the stark realities of racial exclusion.

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