



Existentialism in Anita Desai's Bye-Bye Blackbird

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's "Bye-Bye Blackbird" delves into profound existential themes, reflecting the challenges of cultural displacement, alienation, and the struggle for adaptation experienced by Indian immigrants in England. Desai adopts the role of a silent observer, meticulously examining the intricacies of life and human psychology. Through her narrative, Desai not only highlights the experiences of individuals like Dev and Adit but also offers a broader perspective on the plight of all Asian immigrants, referred to as "blackbirds," grappling with the complexities of immigration.

Keywords: Blackbird, existential, alienation, immigrants, cultural displacement, loneliness.

Objectives:

This paper intends to explore the intricate challenges and dilemmas faced by Indian immigrants, with a particular focus on its characters. It seeks to examine the racial obstacles that could emerge as significant challenges in the future amidst the era of globalization.

Introduction :

Existentialism represents a rejection of societal norms and constraints that limit human freedom. In literature, it underscores individuals' accountability for shaping their own identities, choices, and aspirations. Ultimately, it asserts that humans bear full responsibility for their own existence.

Existentialism emerged as a significant philosophical movement primarily after the Second World War. Often associated with prominent figures like Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, existentialists perceive human life as inherently absurd. They assert that individuals are shaped by the choices they make and emphasize themes such as alienation, loneliness, suffering, and the existential anguish of existence in literature. According to existentialist thought, humans are isolated beings navigating a world devoid of inherent meaning, moving from one state of emptiness to another amidst a landscape characterized by waste, anguish, and abuse.

Methodology:

Analytical method has been used to study existentialism in Anita Desai's 'Bye-Bye Blackbird'.

Discussion :

Anita Desai's "Bye Bye Blackbird" delves into profound existential themes, reflecting the challenges of cultural displacement, alienation, and the struggle for adaptation experienced by Indian immigrants in England. The novel also explores various dynamics of the East-West encounter between Asian immigrants and the British, including the complexities of marriage. Desai examines existential concerns through the lives of three key characters: Dev, Adit, and Sarah.

Dev experiences a sense of isolation in London as he is perceived as an outsider by the natives, despite other Indian immigrants becoming accustomed to the condescending treatment. He arrives in London to pursue studies at the prestigious London School of Economics and gains some familiarity with the city through reading works by Dickens, Lamb, Addison, Boswell, and Dryden. His initial contact is with Adit, who has settled in London with his English wife, Sarah. However, as Dev navigates cultural differences and seeks employment, he encounters various experiences and shocks. The disparity between his expectations and reality widens, leaving him feeling alienated, particularly when subjected to derogatory terms like "wog," which make him feel unwelcome and undesirable.

Dev is a contrast to Adit. He is not sentimental but intellectual and disillusioned man and not a romantic either about India or about England. He is acquainted with realistic conditions everywhere. He had come to England for higher studies and for impressing the British professors by eastern wisdom. He is dissatisfied by Indian conditions. He felt satisfied when he got a job in London and found new horizons of freedom.

Anita Desai adeptly captures the absurdities of Dev's life in England and its inherent lack of meaning with poetic and humorous prose. Dev's profound yearning for diversity and richness remains unmet in England, where he perceives everyone as living in secrecy and isolation, behind closed doors and drawn curtains. This environment evokes nostalgia for India within him.

Adit and Sarah also face the crisis of identity. Adit seems to be a romantic admirer of England and the west in the beginning, but he is emotional and sentimental. He tolerates the humiliations that come from the white people. In the earlier part of the novel he seems to be very fond of England- as he says of England's green and grisly land, "I love you as only a babu can."

Initially, Adit is content and unperturbed by the treatment of being seen as an outsider, failing to grasp Dev's emotional turmoil. However, his interactions with his in-laws and former lodgers trigger a shift within him. Gradually, he begins to feel nostalgic and yearns for his homeland of India. Adit's homesickness intensifies over time, leading him to yearn for the vast landscapes, wilderness, and the beauty of Indian

sunsets. This longing for an Indian sunset reflects his deep longing for the familiarity and comfort of his native land.

"The long lingering twilight of the English summer trembling over the garden had seemed to him like an invalid stricken with anemia, had roused in him a sudden glamour to see again an Indian sunset".

Amidst the bustling Oxford Street, Adit is consumed by a profound desire to witness scenes reminiscent of India: a leisurely-paced bullock cart, a street vendor with adorned monkeys, or the vibrant procession of a wedding accompanied by a brass band. His nostalgia brings 'an illness, and ache' in him and it makes him suffocate and feel fed up with the narrow life of an Indian immigrant in England. He says to his friend, Samar;

"Sometimes it satisfies me this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label Indian Immigrants, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle."

Adit, akin to an existentialist, views himself as an outsider, feeling disconnected and lacking a sense of belonging. He navigates through London in pursuit of a place where he feels he fits in. While the contrasting emotions of Adit's somber affection and Dev's passionate aversion are not explicitly depicted, Adit finds solace in the upbeat sentiment expressed in the following line.

"Pack up all my cares and woes, Here I go, singing low, Bye-Bye, Blackbird." Adit tries to understand his own plight in the English country. He says, "My mother-is-lazy, hates and despises me. Dev makes fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore I am angry; I am hurt." At last Adit decides to return to India. Through Adit's return Desai has given a ray of hope that Indians may come to their homeland someday.

Sarah is the leading female character in the novel. She is romantically in love with India. She must have read and heard stories about India and Indian life. She dislikes the English people's love of privacy and reserve. Her marriage with Adit shows her love of Indian life and culture. She tolerates her fellow citizens' humiliations to her. She makes a search for identity and reconciles herself to her lot of a wife of an Indian with whom she is in love. To hide her secret, she remains cut off from her own society and becomes aloof. She does not like to be teased as "hurry hurry Mrs. Scurry" by children. Adit also feels that she is lonely as he once marks. All anguish, it seems to him, of loneliness then it became absurd to all by his own name, to call her by any name. She had become name--less-- She had shed her ancestry and identity-- She too comes under the spell of rootlessness. She is hung between the two different societies- Indian and English. She is uncertain of her identity, feels totally lost. She feels she is playing two roles: She is sandwiched between the two races and decides to leave England with her husband like a true Indian wife. Adit is in search of his own self and he is totally unaware that his decision hurts Sarah. The blackbird here stands for the temptation and gloom that it creates. That way, the novel ends in love of India on Adit's side and a brood, but vague international love and joy on Dev's side. One can see that along with the problems of adjustment and accommodation, the quest for identify too engages the attention of the novelist.

Conclusion:

Thus Anita Desai develops the theme of existentialism through the characters of Adit, Dev and Sarah. Mrs. Desai's little India in England draws attention to noticeable haunt for Indianness in English self. Adit is a romantic admirer of the British and the West, and Dev is sceptic by nature who has a realistic notion about everything. Being a sceptic Dev usually sees the darker side of everything both of England and India in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Anita Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme in this novel is the existential predicament of an individual which she shows through uncompromising couples very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. She is a mute observer and perceives everything mutely, minutely and delicately. Her characters carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She turns inward into the realities of life and analyses the depths of human psyche with a view to bring out its mysteries, turmoil and chaos. By placing Indian immigrants in a fictional world Desai focuses not only on Dev's and Adit's problems as immigrants but also on all the blackbirds i.e, Asians who face this problem of immigration. Desai shows the racial predicaments which may pose a big challenge in future in England.

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