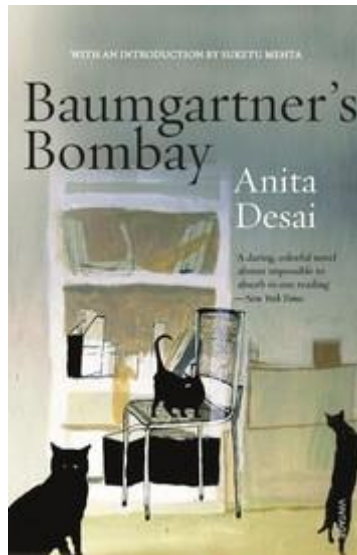


**Sufferings of the Uprooted Individuals:
A Study of Anita Desai's Novels
Bye-Bye, Blackbird and *Baumgartner's Bombay***

Mrs. V. Krishnaveni



Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the most remarkable women novelists, whose novels are concerned mainly with social and political themes of the East-West Encounter. Her serious concern is with the cross-cultural consciousness of her characters. She gives a graphic picture of the theme of immigration and alienation of the uprooted individuals in her novels *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Dev in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and Hugo Baumgartner in *Baumgartner's Bombay* become victims of these feelings of alienation. In the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), the major character is Dev. The novel is based on the theme of immigration of native Indians who went to England; it deals with the theme of coloured immigrants in the U.K and presents their difficulties of adjustment there, as well as the sufferings of those who return to the native land, which is often complicated by inter-racial marriages. These uprooted individuals, Dev in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and Hugo Baumgartner in *Baumgartner's Bombay* have constant identity crises and suffer from exile, alienation and humiliation largely on account of racial and cultural

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prejudices throughout the novels. This paper tries to capture the poignant moments of suffering and oppression that seem to crush the spirit of the immigrants.

Keywords: *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Immigration, Indians, England, inter-racial marriages, racial prejudices, cultural differences, uprooted individuals

Introduction

The three successive parts of the novel trace particularly Dev's corresponding responses to London; the locale of the town, seen primarily from his point of view, reflects his new identity. The novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), consisting of seven chapters, alternatively focuses on the past and present of the two isolated Germans without family and country. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist, is the central character and the other is a female cabaret dancer, Lotte, whose presence is of secondary importance. But the stories of these two characters run parallel. The plot of the novel has a quest-motif, in which the readers find these two characters trying to establish their identity in an alien land. But their quest and journey through emptiness and isolation ends tragically. The tragic isolation leads Hugo Baumgartner to death when is murdered by a young German and the other lives on to suffer in loneliness. After the death of Lotte's oldest friend Hugo Baumgartner, there was no one to accompany her.

Exile and Cultural Alienation

The theme exile and cultural alienation is common in the twentieth century literary scene. Lost, lonely, drifting characters parade before the readers and their mechanical march points to the absence of meaningful relationships in the era of technological development and global interaction. Exile and cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon. Anita Desai gives a graphic picture of the exile and alienation of uprooted individuals in her novels. Desai reads the minds and understands the fact they are suffering from alienation. Her characters in the novels *Bye-Bye*, *Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* become the victims of this kind of terrible emotional pain.

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Identity in Multiple Ways

Anita Desai's narratives explore the question of identity in multiple ways. They stress upon the individual's anguished attempts to seek fulfilment through the achievement of desires related to just one aspect of their lives, and highlight their immaturity in seeking to define themselves through a single perspective. These protagonists assume identities to be fixed and unalterable, and consider rather idealistically, that only an external action can radically change their situation, enabling them to assume the personality of some new, desired person as more capable of dealing with the problematic nature of existence. Many of them seek to replace the 'perceived self' by the 'ideal self', but make no conscious efforts to analyze their situational or characteristic predicaments. Therefore, they emerge in these narratives as characters lacking in self-esteem and self-assertion, withdrawing into themselves to retain their sense of self and to preserve their identity. They overcome their basic anxiety and insecurity by imprisoning themselves in a uni-dimensional perception of both themselves and their world, not realising that the self is a dynamic entity and its development is necessarily related to an interactive relationship with the world.

Ontological Insecurity, Alternation and Anguish of Uprooted Individuals

Exile and cultural alienation are the most imposing themes in Desai's novels. As an expert, Desai portrays the ontological insecurity, alternation and anguish of uprooted individuals in her novels. Her analyzation of this problem is prevalent in most of her works. She remarks on her conclusions as:

“This has brought two separate stands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and European culture which I inherited from my mother.” (Desai, Anita. *The Book I Enjoyed writing most. Contemporary Indian Literature*, xiii, 1973, 24)

Anita Desai's preoccupation as a novelist has been the exile and alienation of people. Each of her novels presents one or two memorable characters. Unlike most of Indo-English novelists, Anita Desai does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Her concern for the character's alienation enables her to offer an unexpected

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glimpse into the state of the deeper psyche of her protagonists. She says in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, and it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No,” who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (1)

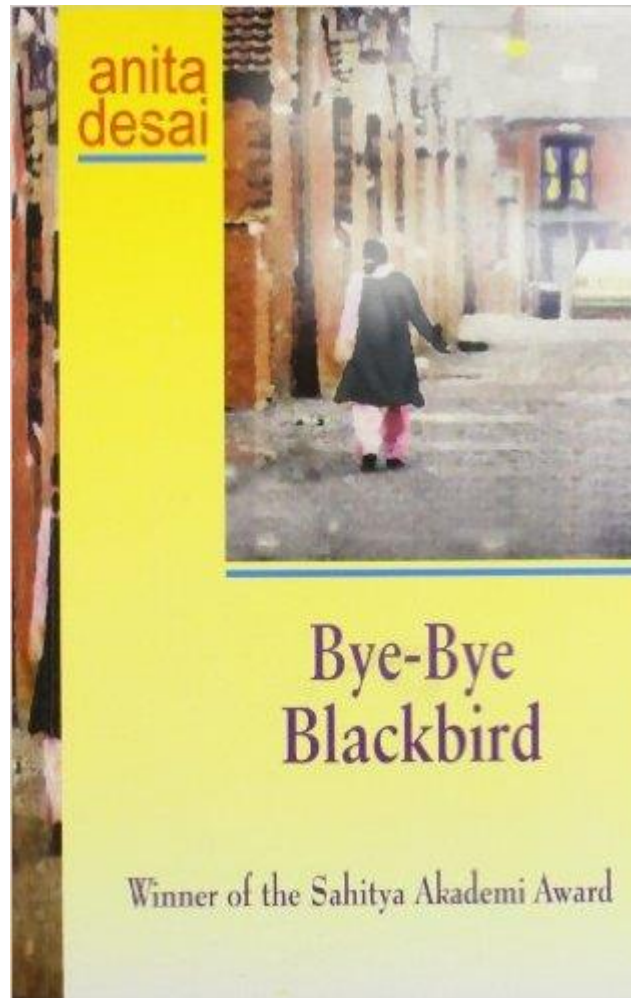
Multiculturalism

Desai has also written about how multiculturalism opens the realms hitherto unknown, and leads to freedom of women and also how women have to face institutionalized misogyny which is quite prevalent, although covertly in a lot of countries. Her themes include vast cultural similarities and dissimilarities that exist throughout the world, both in the East as well as the West.

Portraying the Diasporic Sensibilities

Anita Desai is sensitive in portraying the diasporic sensibilities in the characters Dev and Hugo Baumgartner in her fiction, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Though the novels vividly represent emigrant situations, and the treatment of different issues related to diaspora, they significantly contribute to diverse interpretations that are characteristic of the postmodern milieu. Search for identity is the predominant theme with many writers all over the world. In most of the literary works of Anita Desai, alienation and search for identity is central. Desai's novels and short-stories explore almost every perspective of the East and the West, of the majorities, and the minorities, of feminism and bigotry. She seems to have captured the very essence of human existence in her stories. Her characters make supreme sacrifices to attain their true calling, they rebel, struggle, win, and loose. These are ordinary people caught between tradition and modernity, sometimes these men and women appear to be the nowhere people who belong to nothing.

Problem of Immigration in the Novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*



The portrayal of the migrant life and diasporic condition has been one of the most discussed issues of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Like India, the United Kingdom is also an example of the 'melting pot'. The cross-cultural interactions are very well portrayed by Desai in the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. There is a definite distance between the British mainstream society and the marginalized Indian immigrants. Mostly Desai's novels deal with the emotional trauma of the Indian immigrants, who face racism frequently but have to put up with it, in order to live and survive in the country, which they have decided to call home.

Social, Cultural and Racial Displacement

In Anita Desai's third novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), the theme of alienation is explored from a different perspective and dimension. The novel is about the condition of Indian

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immigrants in England, their social, cultural and racial displacement. It explores the issue of identity, love-hate relationship of the immigrants towards their adopted land, their sense of alienation, their several attempts to adjust and integrate into an alien society, and their final realization that total assimilation to a foreign culture is an impossibility. Anita Desai is concerned here with the socio-psychic experiences of the Indian immigrants in England.

Novel in Three Parts

The novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is in three parts: 'Arrival', 'Discovery and Recognition' and 'Departure'. The novel opens with the arrival of Dev, the chief character, who has intellectual pretensions and has come to study at the London School of Economics, arranging well in advance to make all the right approaches. He is, however, confronted with an initial problem of adjustment in a foreign land. The novelist has recorded the absurdities of Dev's existence in England and its dull superficialities with accuracy and detachment in a poetic and humorous language. Dev's longing for living with its variety and multiplicity remains unsatisfied in the new atmosphere where "everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding". **(BBB 64)** It is a world where people live silently and invisibly, the world, which makes him nostalgic about India – the India of familiar faces, familiar sounds and familiar smells.

As the plot develops, one can find him turning into a completely disillusioned man. He feels estranged in London from both Indians and English men. There is a lack of sympathy in English men, who do not, recognize their neighbours and treat them like strangers. The silence and hollowness of London disturbs Dev and makes him uneasy and alienated. He finds himself insulated and isolated. He realizes that the Indian immigrants rush to the west and in the process miss their own mother land very deeply. He feels extremely suffocated in the Tube station and considers himself, "like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison". **(BBB 57)**

Dev's contact begins from Adit who has settled in London with an English wife. He is confronted with the major problems as Dev moves out in search of a job. He finds it difficult to adjust with silences and the emptiness of it – the house and blocks of flats, streets and squares

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and crescents – all. He never wants to live in a country where he is insulted and unwanted. He calls Adit, his friend a “boot-licking pudgy and a shameless imperialist-lover”. (BBB 19) Searching for an identity in an alien culture, Dev feels lost and suffers from alienation.

Dev becomes a victim of alienation as his conception and perception are at variance with the reality of his experiences. He compares and relates everything to India. He goes through the different phases of the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sightseer, all at once in quick succession. Kalpana S. Wandrekar’s observations aptly sum up Dev’s alienated status. “Dev’s experience in England makes him neurotic because he is unable to attach meaning to his experience. He is aware of this state of chaos and confusion in him caused by the outside pressure.” (152) Dev takes his final decision not to return to India and not to lead the way of the masses there. He slowly and steadily adapts himself to the new environment.

Dev’s friend Adit Sen, a young man from India lives in England with his English wife Sarah. After coming to England Adit worked as a teacher, and finally accepted a little job at Blue skies. He is happy with his job. He feels now a sense of cultural affinity. This closeness, however, does not obliterate the sense of his cultural identity. He appreciates the landscape of England. For him England is fertile, luxurious and prosperous. At times Adit even groans: “O England’s green and grisly land, I love you as only a babu can”. (BBB 130) But the scenario changes in the last part of the novel. He secretly longs for Indian food, music and friends. A sudden clamor has been aroused in him, like a child’s tantrum, to see again an Indian sunset. Even on the out-spread hair about Sarah’s shoulders he could see the Indian landscape. Even when he thinks of a brief visit to India, the images of Indian food, dress and music are predominant in his mind.

Adit is disillusioned with England. The England he loves so much in Part I and Part II of the novel is looked down upon in Part III. Despite having been settled there for quite some years, he is still a misfit. Adit feels himself a stranger in England, and realizes his alienation from the English people. He frankly admits to be “a stranger, a non-belonger” (BBB 210) in England. He takes a boat back to India with his wife. Adit’s quest for identity is stimulated by his individual

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motivations and attitudes, his whims and caprices. Hence the quest is not disinterested censure. It is disillusioned, nostalgic and humorous. His nostalgia mitigates his cultural-shock in an alien land. His mood keeps changing, depending on the identity of Sarah.

In the beginning, Dev was fully determined that he would not stay in England where he has to bear all the insults, and said vehemently to Adit “I wouldn’t live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted”. **(BBB 17)**. Later on, there was a slow change in his attitude.

The life of an alien appears to be enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then he hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision. **(BBB 86)**

Anita Desai presents a clear reversal of attitude of the two expatriates. Adit, the man who loves it, leaves it for good and decides to settle down in India, contrary to Dev who had come to England with a purpose to pursue higher education and was determined to go back, settle down here. But at the closing page of the novel, the readers find a change in Dev, the English hater who stays back in London being employed and living in his friend Adit’s place. When Adit and Sarah bid him goodbye, he calls out, “Bye-bye Blackbird”!

Dev, a representative of Indian immigrants struggles against the cultural hegemony of the British people who have maintained their centrality at the cultural, economic and political levels. The notion of cultural dominance has made them feel superior. The treatment received from the British people by the Indian immigrants shows the cultural breach between the West and the East. Though Indians migrate to the west for the purpose of economic security, they feel disillusioned finally because of the shocks of cultural rootlessness in an alien land.

The Question of Being an Immigrant in the Novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay*

In the novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) there is another full study of male alienation and isolation. Male angst is the major aspect expressed in the novel. The novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* consisting of seven chapters, alternatively focuses on the past and present of the two isolated Germans without family and country. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist, is the central

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character and the other is a female cabaret dancer, Lotte, whose presence gets a secondary importance. But the stories of these two characters run parallel. The plot of the novel has a quest-motif in which the readers find these two characters trying to establish their identity in an alien land.

The novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* opens with Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew living out his final years in solitude in a shabby flat behind the Taj Hotel in Bombay. He has been in India for a period of fifty years and the happiness in the expectation of which he comes to Bombay remains unfulfilled. He is living a solitary life with no one to look after him. The only company is that of cats, which he nurses and loves. Both Hugo Baumgartner and Lotte are sailing in the same boat of isolation in an alien country, among their memories and dreams.

Looking back at the past life of Hugo Baumgartner, the readers find him as a young German who comes to India for starting a life in business. He was forced to leave Germany fifty years ago when the violence had broken out during Nazi Germany. Hugo's father Herr Baumgartner was a wealthy furniture dealer and a man of authority, pride and status in Berlin. The area where Hugo Baumgartner lived was patronized mainly by the Jews. During the time of Nazi Germany, the Jews migrated to other parts of the world and the business of furniture came to a standstill, as the Aryans bought furniture from their own shops and dealers. One night, there was a violence in which Hugo Baumgartner's father was taken by force by some men and disappeared from Berlin. Returning after a fortnight from Dachau, he died leaving him and his mother all alone.

After the death of Hugo Baumgartner's father, the furniture shop was sold to a gentleman from Hamburg who was the friend of Hugo Baumgartner's father. Hugo Baumgartner's school-days came to an end. Because of financial crisis, Hugo Baumgartner had to work as an accountant in his father's shop. At the suggestion of the gentleman from Hamburg, Hugo Baumgartner was sent to India to do timber business and to start a new life. The first place he came to was Bombay. But in the new atmosphere, Hugo Baumgartner got nothing but loneliness

and isolation. Having no company and being a foreigner with no link with the culture of India, he suffered in isolation.

In Calcutta, Hugo Baumgartner stayed in a hotel on Middleton Row and got himself associated with timber business and made trips to Dacca, Assam and the south. There, he met Lotte, a German cabaret dancer, in a hotel. His relationship with Lotte was not new. Like Hugo Baumgartner, Lotte was another alien in India who had started earning her livelihood by dancing since she was ten or twelve. After the meeting, Lotte came very often to his flat and they became friends.

It was only Lotte who kept him in touch with the tongue – but that was not why he went to see her. He saw Lotte not because she was from Germany but because she belonged to the India of his own experience; hers was different in many ways but still they shared enough to be comfortable with each other, prickly and quick-tempered but comfortable as brother and sister are together. **(BB 150)**

Lotte's story was also like Hugo Baumgartner, she had been a tragic story of isolation. She is now an old lady who has lost her youth and charm. Among her many admirers in her young age, Kantilal Sethia, a Marwari business man, was the oldest man with whom she had a false marriage. Kanti's sons by his former marriage treated her with hatred. She was left all alone in Bombay waiting for Kanti to visit her once in a blue moon. Kanti, having a business in Calcutta, came to her for dance and music whenever he was tired of his business-life in Calcutta. At every step Lotte was also made to suffer and to live an isolated life in Bombay. Both the isolated characters, now old, consoled each other.

Even though Hugo Baumgartner stayed in India for more than fifty years, sometimes he would get the dilemma of whether to go back to his homeland Germany. But their quest and journey through emptiness lead to isolation that ends tragically – in failure, frustration and disgust. The tragic isolation leads Hugo Baumgartner to death when he is murdered by a young German named Kurt, for silver trophies, and Lotte remains to suffer in loneliness. After the death of her oldest friend Hugo Baumgartner, there was no one to accompany her. Thus Hugo Baumgartner, a

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wandering Jew all of his life, being an immigrant of fifty years in Bombay, belongs to none and though involved and associated with many, is not identified with any.

Narrative Techniques Employed by Anita Desai in the Novels *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*

Desai's technique is connected with her choice of the subjective mode, a choice apparently made to avoid some of the problems likely to arise from writing about India and Indians in the English language, as a way of bridging the gap between cultural and lingual situations. Her achievements are aptly summed up by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book *The Twice-Born Fiction*. She, taking a note of Desai's language and style, relates the novelists' manner of narration to the elements of her protagonists' personalities. She believes that Desai's style shows a strong individuality. About her language she observes that it is marked by three characteristics, sensuous richness, a high strong sensitivity and a love for the sounds of words. (189) R.S. Sharma said, "Anita Desai's gifts as a prose stylist are now acknowledged. What is perhaps overlooked in the process is the fact that most of her problems as a fiction writer begin with her insistence on too much style on too small a canvas." (92-93)

Anita Desai's characters are in an adult stage in the beginning of the novel but then she goes backward to describe their childhood and its associations. The past life of the protagonists plays an important role, as the present consciousness of the characters is a result of their past experiences. Therefore, the plot moves with the modulations of memory. The hero becomes a wanderer through space and time. In fact, it is like digging up a tunnel, in a sense like going back. This process is one of trying to relive the past. She explores a very tiny section of this territory and this is an interesting technique than covering a large area. She uses flashbacks and interior monologues in order to build up a situation. Her novels are a psychological release.

The action moves from past to the present and vice versa. The characters moving in the present are constantly looking back at the past, observing and evaluating themselves in the perspective of time. Through a highly controlled use of split narrative and flashback, Anita Desai makes the readers see the world from the perspective of childhood. The juxtaposition of the past

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and the present, the near and the remote, the subjective and the objective, while suggesting the theme of continuity in change, also keeps the readers alive to the changing dimensions of reality. The contrasts that Anita Desai suggests between these two perspectives are central to the aesthetic design of the novel.

Desai uses flashback technique as a pattern in so far as there are journeys into the past and into the childhood and one is changed being at the end of the journey. In both the novels, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Desai uses the flashback technique. In the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, the protagonist Dev, thinks of his past memories where he felt once comfortable in his homeland, while he now feels isolated and insulted by the people of the host land. In the novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*, whenever the protagonist Hugo Baumgartner feels isolated even after his stay of fifty years in the host land, he relishes his childhood memories – of his mother's love and comfort.

Desai also wants to give the readers a perfect Indian background. So, she has used different fictional techniques according to the demands of the story. She has made use of poetry in German language. Many Hindi words have been used in order to give a perfect Indian background - the use of German language in *Baumgartner's Bombay* is not offered in translation into English. Anita Desai's excellence lies in nature description, flashback scheme, unmasking the mental trauma of the female psyche and such. She uses the stream of consciousness technique, contrasting characters and uses symbolism with highly effective use of language. The readers can also find in her major novels, different techniques; she has made use of Indian words, German poetry and a few nursery rhymes. Mainly, she portrays dilemmas and doubts of 'misfit' female characters, who do not want to be heroic, but are struggling all the time. The readers can find them struggling for what they do not have - for love, affection, attention, acceptance, recognition or appreciation. Her novel focuses on the inner climate of sensibility, interplay of thoughts, feelings and emotions which is reflected in the language syntax and the imaginary aspects of existentialism that form the total frame work of her stories. A modest attempt has been made to make a comprehensive study of the novels of Anita Desai.

Conclusion

Thus, Desai has wonderfully portrayed the dilemma of uprooted individuals through the protagonists Dev in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and Hugo Baumgartner in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The experience of exile which begins as a condition of living often becomes a condition of mind as in the case of Hugo Baumgartner. Cultural displacement makes the major characters Dev and Hugo, and the minor characters Adit and Lotte alienated and lonely in spite of their attempts towards adjustment. They suffer from problems such as the loss of identity, alienation and humiliation, largely on account of racial and cultural prejudices. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Adit, the immigrant, once comfortably settled in England becomes homesick for India and returns to India. While Dev, the immigrant born and brought up in India, though with the desire to return to India, finally decides to stay back in England. Hugo Baumgartner, the immigrant in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, an uprooted Jew is not accepted anywhere, neither in his country of birth, Nazi Germany, nor in his adopted country India. Thus he is a real 'nowhere man' – belonging neither to Germany nor to India. He too has got the dilemma of going back to his home land Germany but, unfortunately his life is brought to a sudden end by a young man Kurt, the man from his own native land. Thus the above study has focussed on the problem of immigrants, their dilemma, their alienation, their physical and their mental crises in an alien land.

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