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## The Struggle for Identity in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*

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### An outline of the novel:

In her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai deals with the problem of East-West relationship. She writes about the hostility of the native people towards the folks from other countries, who dwell in their land. She gives a clear picture of the complexes of the easterners in relation to the westerners. She explores social, cultural and intellectual aspects. `Blackbird` used in the title is the immigrant, who says goodbye. Desai highlights the physical and psychological problems of Indian immigrants.

This novel illustrates the perspectives and prospects of people searching for a better life. It makes the reader understand the longing of the immigrants to their mother land. Giving a clear picture of immigrant lives in an alien land, this novel emphasizes the east and west encounters.

It is divided into three parts- arrival, discovery and recognition, and departure.

The story focuses on three characters. Dev, an young man who comes to London for higher studies, his host Adit , a fellow Bengali who has been adapted to the life in London and Sarah , Adit's wife who is an English woman.

### Arrival:

**Adit**, Adit Sen , the chief protagonist considers London as the land of opportunities. He ponders the virtues of the foreign land. He is so fascinated, "I love England. I admire England. I can appreciate her history and poetry as much as any Englishmen."

He feels he is fit for the country, England and adopts their lifestyle. He is proud of his adoration to England. He feels he has every right to enjoy the luxuries. "I have every right to enjoy them – because of my education, my taste, my interest in them. No English men can deny that."

He compares India with England and criticizes Indian traditionalism. His experiences in India makes him go to the extent that he readily criticizes its drawbacks; laziness of people and lack of time sense, not being punctual.

"Nothing ever goes right at home – there is famine or flood, there is draught or epidemic, always. Here the rain falls so softly and evenly, never too much and never too short. The sun is mild. The earth is fertile. The rivers are full. The birds are plump. The beasts are fat. Everything so wealthy, so luxuriant so fortunate."

**Sarah**, the English woman, wife of Adit is a strong lady. She doesn't give up anything for her weakness. She is very open in expressing her love to Adit. She doesn't have any inherent attitudes. She takes up responsibilities. Sometimes she behaves like an Indian wife. Adit likes her for her quietness.

He tells her, "You are like a Bengali girl. Bengali women are like that - reserved, quiet. But you are improving on it - you are so much prettier."

**Dev**, another emigrant comes to England to pursue higher studies. He always criticizes Britain and British people. He has a hatred feeling towards Britain and Britishers.

He hates Adit's reverence to London "If the Britishers were still in India, you would be one of those Babus who used to go crawling after them, drooling if they noticed you so far as to give you a kick."

Samar and Bella are identical to the marriage of Adit and Sarah, Indian marrying an English woman. They are also the victims of cultural mal-adjustment.

### **Discovery and Recognition:**

Adit, who is proud of his passion for England; later realizes that he does not get all the things he deserves. Wherever he goes, he becomes the victim of racial discrimination and is constantly regarded as second grade citizen.

It is clearly understood from Adit's discussion with Dev, "That boy at the bus stop – he called us wogs. You heard him?" He says "I didn't." "It is best to ignore those who don't deserve one's notice."

He also understands that despite his best efforts he would never reach the top post in his office because he is an Indian. The top posts are always given to the natives.

In the beginning he praises London, the Oriental lifestyle but by the end of the novel he realizes that his English self is fading and dying. It is to achieve real life and experience real joy.

Though Sarah is an English woman, she undergoes the discrimination because she marries an Indian. Besides the elders the young ones mock her. At her work place her pupils ignore her and taunt - scream, "Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry." and "Where's the fire, pussy cat?"

The interracial marriage makes them disturb her day-to-day life. She prefers going to big department store where she would remain an anonymous buyer, none knowing her Asian connections.

She tries to keep her relationship a secret from her own English people. This shows the weakness of Sarah. She is submissive in spite of her brought up in an advanced country.

Sarah, has the problem of isolation in her life. "She had abandoned most things out of it when she had married - childhood, family and friends: all the normal ordinary things with which an ordinary person must fill and adorn his life."

She is attracted towards Adit's relations and attachments, pictures and stories, legends, promises and warnings. She tries to fill her life with these colourful things.

The **realization** comes when the three of them visit the village close to Winchester where Adit's in-laws live. They lead a quiet life there. Adit is overjoyed about the tour while Sarah is not and she makes her unwillingness known to everyone. Dev also is not interested but joins them.

They travel with other two Indian friends of Adit. One of them is a Punjabi accompanied by his Punjabi wife Mala. The other is Sameer, a Bengali like Adit and Dev, who has not been able to convince his English wife Bella to come along. Their friends leave them after a day's joy.

Adit, who plans the tour expecting a lot, is being disappointed by the negligence of his in-laws and ends his tour. These feelings make him long for his country.

Lack of sympathy is clearly seen; the neighbours, the English men, behave with them like strangers. The silence and hollowness London disturb 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 badly their own mother land. He feels extremely suffocated in the Tube station and considers himself, “like a kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison”

### Departure:

Adit realizes that he is leading an illusory life in a strange condition by securing a fake identity and yearns for his motherland.

Beyond all these feelings Adit's love for his country is revealed when he raised funds during India's war with Pakistan. He also decides to go to India along with Sarah. For everyone's surprise he moves to India with a hope that no one look down upon him.

He leaves England for good seeking his self identity.

Sarah's situation is dissimilar to other characters. She is almost in an exile in her own land. As the author mentions- this is chosen by her loving and marrying an immigrant. She desires to own a new identity and a new life in India by accepting her husband's decision.

On the other hand ; contrary to his original belief, Dev prefers to stay in England. Deciding not to return to India and not to live such a poor life he joins the tourist bureau in which Adit used to work. He gradually adapts himself to the new environment.

### Conclusion:

Thus the author distinguishes between the busy life in London and the quite secluded life in countryside. It analyzes the adjustment difficulties that they face in England. The characters resemble the inner struggle for identity that every immigrant undergoes. It substantiates the Indian minds - enthralled by the wealth, harmony and power of the rich England despite the social inconsistency in England, being branded a 'Blackbird'.

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