

BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD : DISCOURSE OF AN EXPECTANT MOTHER

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Anita Desai's third novel, has received a bit less attention of the critics, because of its thinness in texture and sparse imagery. Even when the novelist was asked if she was quite happy with this novel, she squarely admitted, 'No, that's one of the books I'd like to disown' (Anita Desai in Jasbir Jain 1987 : 13). Anyway, the critics like Usha Bande, Rajib Sharma, R.S. Sharma, Kalpana Wandrekar have undertaken its study. The theme of alienation in it has been focused on by Sandyarani Das (1996 : 84). R.S. Sharma, on the other hand, calls this novel a dramatic poem, as it employs the metaphor of voyage or quest to suggest "a pattern of action where each soul, after initial shock, puzzlement and anguish, discovers its own natural condition. The trisection plan of the novel, 'Arrival', 'Discovery' and 'Recognition and Departure' also seems to suggest this pattern" (Literary Criterion 1979 : 48). Again, Kalpana S. Wandrekar has considered it 'as a symptomatic study of schizophrenia' (R.K. Dhawan (ed.) vol. III Set I, 1991 : 148). All these readings are not feminist ones and therefore silent about woman's status in a cross-cultural marriage.

However, I would explore the novel in order to resurrect the subjugated knowledge of an English married woman about her identity crisis in a cross-cultural marriage. Besides, the novel can be further read as constituting an anti-colonial national discourse whose purity stands to be subverted by a discourse of an expectant mother, invoking hybridity.

Before I discuss the text, I would like to throw some light upon the relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism which, I think, would not be out of place.

As in his book *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) Ashis Nandy writes :

The colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonised societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and the outside, in structures and in minds (A. Nandy 1983 : XI)

What is clear from the definition is that colonialism is historical and psychological processes whereby the West attempts systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the 'non-West'. Nandy's psychoanalytic reading of the colonial encounter avowedly evokes Hegel's paradigm of the master-slave relationship.

Hegel's brief but influential notes on 'Lordship and Bondage' are framed by the theorem that human beings acquire identity or self-consciousness through the recognition of others. Each self has before it another self in and through which it secures its identity. Initially, there is an antagonism and enmity between these two confronting selves; each aims at the cancellation or death and destruction of the other. Hence, and temporarily, a situation arises where one is merely recognised while the other recognises. However, the proper end of history requires, as Hegel expects, that the principle of recognition be both mutual and universal. But the peculiar human history of servitude, or the historical subordination of one self to another, belies the Hegelian expectation of mutuality. The master and slave, as Hegel maintains, are initially locked in a compulsive struggle-unto-death. This goes on until the weak-willed slave, preferring life to liberty, accepts his subjection to the victorious master. When these antagonists finally face each other after battle, only the master is recognisable. The slave, on the other hand, is now a dependent 'thing' whose existence is shaped by, and as, the conquering other. But if history is the record of failure, it also bears testimony to the slave's refusal to concede the master's existential priority. The slave then behaves like the slave figure in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* who makes such a revolutionary pronouncement :

I lay claim to this being which I am, that is, I wish to recover it, or more exactly, I am the project of the recovery of my being (Sartre 1969 cited in Leena Gandhi 1998 : 17)

This paradigm pertains to what postcolonialism as a condition of knowledge attempts to resist, resist the colonialists' so-called civilizing mission.

In the decolonising process, the total rejection of the colonial culture in favour of the pre-colonial national culture is an indirect re-inforcement of the old binaries which secures the performance of the colonial ideology and therefore it is considered to be a necessary evil. Hence the appropriation or 'subversion-from-within' is deemed to be the most effective strategy. It evokes 'Caliban paradigm'. Caliban learnt the master's language only to curse him. So in the postcolonial context, anti-colonialism is shaped by a complicated relationship of debt and defiance to colonialism's civilizing mission. It proposes a western critique of western civilization. In pursuing the terms of this critique, the postcolonialism inherits a very specific understanding of western domination as the symptom of an unwholesome alliance between power and knowledge. This no doubt refers to Foucault's notion of discourse, as elaborated in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1979). This gives an indication of the postcolonialism' relationship with post-structuralism.

However, in the discursive practices like literature, the dynamics of the 'Caliban paradigm' are seen to generate a host of creative anxieties among anti-colonial literary practitioners. Often mention is made of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1936) in which the adulteration of English is made through its use in Indian spirit. 'If Rao's mimic mode subverts the authority of imperial textuality, it also forecloses, once and for all, any appeal to an authentic or essential Indianness', (Leena Gandhi 1998 : 151). Thus positioned as the iconic emblem of an indeterminate 'hybridity', the anti-colonial nationalist writers eagerly absorbed into a critique of Third-world cultural nationalism. And because of their multicultural affiliations, the postcolonial writers like Bharati Mukherjee (1940), Salman Rusdie (1947) tend to give stress upon hybridity that struggles to free itself from a past which emphasised ancestry and valued the pure over its threatening opposite the 'composite'. Like them, Anita Desai too has multicultural affiliation. Her father is a

Bengali, mother a German. This, as she says, 'has brought two separate strands 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' (Anita Desai in R.K. Dhawan ed. vol. III, 1991 : 149). This divide at her very roots seems to have made an impact upon this novel. On the one hand, she combats colonial problem and, on the other hand, gender problem at once. The colonial problem she tackles just from two strategic positions : appropriation and abrogation, the former emphasizing multiculturalism and the latter cultural essentialism. But the gender domination in the postnational context she resists through the construction of the discourse of an expectant mother that invokes 'hybridity'. And in invoking the hybridity in the postnational context she asserts her postcolonial feminist position.

In Part I of *Bye-Bye Blackbird* Dev's arrival and his despair in London are focused on. Part II gives an account of Dev's fascination for London and of Adit's disillusionment and difference with his mother-in-law, Mrs Roscommon James. Part III deals with Adit's nostalgia and his abrogation of English culture in favour of essential Indianness. For being pregnant, Sarah also departs England along with her husband perhaps with the hope of getting a better treatment as an expectant mother in Indian Hindu culture. And Dev's anglophobia changes to angophilia. In postcolonial terms, Adit shifts his position from 'appropriation' to 'abrogation' and Dev, from abrogation to appropriation. During the transition of these characters, Sarah's identity is found to be in crisis. However, she intelligently overcomes it by switching over to her husband's side, but not without creating the prospect of overturning her husband's essential Indianness through her child who will have multicultural affiliation as Anita Desai has had.

Dev has left India in order to have a better education in London School of Economics. England, to him, is a material heaven. With full preparation he has come to get himself admitted to it. He is convinced that with the deep wisdom of his oriental mind he would be able to impress the professors. But on the first day after his arrival in London he is shocked to find the cultural differences of the two countries :

It was the first lesson his first day in London taught him : he who wants tea must get up and make it (6).

In India the tea would have been brought in either by a servant or by his mother fresh from the morning prayer. After that he is horrified to find the ill-treatment meted out to the coloured immigrants. He cannot stomach the insult a damson-cheeked boy inflicts upon him by calling him 'wog' (14). He immediately counters it by calling him 'Paji' (*Ibid*). Again, he vehemently reacts to the racial discrimination made at the public lavatories and the lambasting in the bus :

Laugh ... That's all you people do—you lazy immigrants ... You should go mad — when even schoolboys can call you names on the streets, when you find that the London docks have three kinds of lavatories – Ladies, Gents and Asiatics. But what did you do? You laughed (17).

But Adit who is the reverse of Dev ignores all such drawbacks because of the bitter experience he acquired in India at the time of seeking for a job there. He loves this country because he has got what he lacked in India. Instead of a job of two-hundred and fifty rupees in India, here he enjoys economic freedom as well as social freedom. He may be ridiculed as 'a boot-licking toady', 'spineless imperialist lover' (19), and labelled as the provider of the critique of Indian culture, yet he is not totally devoid of Indianness. His inability to 'part with the warmth of shared experience and shared humour, leaving Sarah to pick up empty cups and glasses and full ash-trays and yawn her way to bed' (27), bears testimony to the fact. The quotation in question also shows his indifference to Sarah and his tasting India through his association with other Indian immigrants. His predilection for 'chor chori', 'pokora' and other Indian dishes betrays his Indian self. Actually tasting Indian food in London he tastes India in a foreign country. At his subconscious level he remains Indian, while at his conscious level he is what Dev describes him to be :

Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect (156).

Dev, on the other hand, provides us with a critique of metropolitan London and of English culture. From a critical standpoint he decides that he should leave the country where he is insulted and unwanted. Out of bitterness he turns a cynic and hates to be

Macaulay's bastard, yet he cannot conceal his fascination for Battersea power station which 'threw him off his guard, shook him out of his normal attitude of cynical coolness' (53). But his fascination for Battersea power station is couched in 'Vedic hymn to Fire' (54). Tendency to give Indian colour to English material indicates his position of 'in-betweenness'. From now on he begins to use Indian values and scales to judge and appreciate anything of the West. For example, he compares the high streets of London with the Himalayan Mall. In spite of his attempt to 'connect' the two competing cultures of the two countries, he, like Dr Aziz of *A Passage to India*, hears the echo : 'no, not here', 'no not yet'. So, again he develops a psychological resistance to colonialism by constituting an anti-colonial discourse :

Let us abolish the British Railways : Down with Beeching, down with Bradshaw! Let us set up our elephant routs and let us abolish the vicarages and rectories and personages and build temples and mosques and gurudwars. Let us bring across our yogis and gurus, barefoot robed in saffron. Let us abolish the British public school. Down with Eton, Harrow and all the bunkum! Let us replace Latin and Greek with the study of Sanskrit classics and Punjabi swear words. No one shall cook stews any more, or bangers and mash. Let us feed them all on chilli pickles, tandoori chicken and rassum. Let all British women take to the graceful sari and all the British men to the noble dhoti ... (61-62).

What is evident here is Dev's desire to replace coloniality with pure, authentic Indianness.

Again, Dev is critical of English manners of living. The most painful thing to him is the indifference of the English people. Everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding, silently and invisibly. 'It would happen nowhere in India' (56). For this he feels 'like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison' (57). The contradiction in western culture cannot elude his critical look. He traces that in all respects the English people maintain privacy. But in the matter of sex they are quite unselfconscious unlike the Indians who are not in the least bit self-conscious about their persons, but very much so in their relationships. The English people like to flaunt themselves, their sex, their prowess, just the way Indian beggars enjoy flaunting their filth and their mutilations. Not only that, he also notices that the white women, married and

unmarried, like to expose their bodies which the Indian culture strongly discourages. But Adit, who is still a pucca Sahib, differs from Dev in this respect. He does not therefore forget to point out the other side of the Indian culture. He reminds Dev that Indian men and women may not like to do sexual matter in the open park, but they quarrel at home and ‘in India too much goes on in the dark’ (67).

However, the root of colonialism is so deep that it cannot be easily uprooted. Even the critic of the western culture that Dev is, he tends to forget that his convent education gave him as much courage to question it as to internalise its ideology. His recitation along with Adit from Wordsworth shows his fascination for a colonial text :

Earth has not anything to show more fair

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by (67).

So while at the conscious level he is cynic about western culture, at the subconscious one he remains an admirer of England’s countryside and a part of the English culture. His unconscious mind is in search of romantic England, but not the industrial, standarised and regimented England. An oriental and romantic that he is, he, therefore, develops a fascination for the English people and the countryside, the daffodils, the sunshine, the streets, the parks, the piccadilly circus stand and the British museum.

Dev’s newly developed attraction for England and his hارت for English culture put him into the ‘Caliban dilemma’. ‘To stay or depart’ corresponds to Caliban’s learning and unlearning master’s language. However, his resolve to stay in England may be for keeping the wolf from his door. Still he perhaps remembers the insult the icon peddler inflicted on him thinking him to be a poor man. He therefore wants to appropriate the material opportunity the land would provide him. Hence his pronouncement :

I want freedom, not restriction. I want enterprises, not discipline. I want money ... I just want a job ... a real paid job (103)

Long before Dev unconsciously internalised the British romantic ideology through his reading of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning. So once he comes in touch with the countryside of England through his visit to Sarah's parental home, he undergoes a change. He tells Sarah :

There's something about your house that makes one dream golden dreams (154).

He tastes the euphoric sweetness of nature and the magic of England. He now feels he is no longer an outraged outsider.

But surprisingly the Roscommon's house makes an adverse effect upon Adit. To overcome humiliation and uncertainty in England he chose Sarah for company. He liked the quiet and reserved Sarah because she was like the Bengali women and unlike the white women. He might have thought that by marriage he would be one of the white people. But in his in-law's house it becomes patent that he is not wholly acceptable, as evinced in his mother-in-law's unconcealed hatred towards him or in Sarah's refusal to allow him access to her English private world. If unEnglish marriage is not acceptable to the English society, why should he be subjected to that culture? His desire of being an international citizen ebbs away. His education, his feel for British history and poetry fell away from him 'like a coat that has been secretly undermined by moths' (182). Being again conscious of his true identity, he shifts his position from appropriation to abrogation and posits himself squarely against the British imperialist culture. Not only the white men, the white women also appear to be intolerable to him. This is why he now wants Sarah to put on sari instead of English dress. Disagreeing with Sarah's logic that the rain would ruin the hem, he ridicules the English people and their xenophobia by ridiculing Sarah :

You'll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standard and your own dull, boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable (193).

Here it is pertinent to note that the anti-colonial nationalism wants to mould the females in accordance with its norms, but when it fails to do so, it then despises them, with the result

that an animosity between post-colonialism and feminism crops up. This is why Sarah, without keeping silent, refutes him :

I never thought that, you imagine these things yourself and try and put them in my mouth (Ibid).

However, the outbreak of India-Pakistan war hastens Adit's decision to return to his own clan. He throws away the grab of a pukka Sahib. 'Little India in London', all records, lamb curries and sing-songs no longer appear real to him. The only real thing is departure from England which he loved more than his wife. He realises that whatever it is, India will be his natural condition. He resolves on returning to India against all odds, resisting thereby colonial culture by a new awareness of nationalism and racism.

Dev, in the meantime, has got the job of a salesman. Certainly he would try to fulfil his desires :

Not to return to India, not to marry ... *but* to know a little freedom, to indulge in a little adventure, to know, to know (emphasis mine) (123).

Now the question is why does he want to know more and more? Perhaps his will-to-knowledge is for power. He has perhaps learnt from his education that the dominant form of power can be resisted by producing an alternative form of knowledge. Perhaps keeping this view in mind, he wants to acquire more and more knowledge with proper enjoyment of economic freedom. In other words, he wants to counter the West with its own tool. Thus the odyssey of Adit and Dev can be construed as the shift from the appropriation to abrogation and from abrogation to appropriation. If Adit espouses cultural essentialism, Dev also multi-culturalism. This, no doubt, gives an indication of the indeterminacy in the text.

But from this indeterminate post-colonial position the novelist shifts to a determinate post-colonial feminist position in order to construct the discourse of heterosexual femininity and that of an expectant mother. The agent of both these discourses is Sarah whose identity is in crisis due to cross-cultural marriage. The novelist has also delineated other minor

female characters such as Mala, Bella, Ratna and the old Punjabi lady in order to show the customary contrast between East and West.

Sarah is oriental in gentleness and submissiveness, though of anglo-saxon origin. She perhaps was conscious of the repressive western patriarchal culture in which she was nurtured. Its set rules and rigid norms bored her in such a way that out of disgust she could not but say :

Ninety nine out of every hundred people here live lives exactly alike (127).

Even the perfectionism in her parental home was not to her liking. Her consciousness of the repressive western patriarchal ideology brought in a crisis in her life. To overcome the crisis she directed her attention to another patriarchal society which was less rigid, standarized and regimented. But it was not to her realization that sidestepping one crisis she was inviting another crisis by marrying an immigrant.

So after marriage Sarah finds her identity in crisis. She cannot bridge the gaps of the two cultures, more so for the language bar that makes communication with Adit's little India rather difficult. She finds her tastes different from Adit's. Notwithstanding her living with Adit, she suffers from aloneness. In playing two socially imposed roles – the role of Adit's wife and that of Head's secretary – she loses her real self. In any of these roles she cannot find the essence of her femininity. Problem crops up before her as she finds herself inadequate to her own British society, and, on the other hand, Indian culture appears to be insufficient for her. She does not make any attempt to connect her with India because she apprehends if Adit leaves her, she will be another Miss Moffit. However, we get an indication in her parental home that she is not willing to retain her English self. So as the opportunity comes, she, with a little hesitation, capitulates to Adit who grows determined to leave England. We hear Sarah confess :

It was her English self to which she must say goodbye. That was what hurt – not saying goodbye to England, because England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance from her, but always with the scope of a return visit. England, she whispered, but the word

aroused no special longing to possessiveness in her. English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already (221).

What is noticeable is that however oppressive and repressive one's culture may be, one does not normally want to relinquish it, until it does not become compulsive or the situation does not demand. It is Sarah's pregnancy that compels her to bid farewell to her English culture. Perhaps she has somehow come to know that the expectant mother is given good treatment in Hindu culture. Motherhood, she anticipates, will be a joy there whereas it is painful in English culture.

Her unsaid anticipation is perhaps true. As Sudhir Karkar argues, the young Indian wife's situation in terms of family acceptance and hence emotional well-being, changes dramatically once she becomes pregnant. The prospect of motherhood holds out a composite solution for many of her difficulties. The psychological implications of her low social status as a bride and a newcomer; the tense, often humiliating relationships with other in her husband's family; her homesickness and sense of isolation; her identity confusion; the awkwardness of marital intimacy; and thus, often, the unfulfilled yearnings of her sexual self—these are tangled up in a knot, as it were. With the anticipation of motherhood, this knot begins, almost miraculously, to be unravelled (Rehana Ghadially 1988 : 65). Here one may equate Sarah's condition with that of Abraham's wife, Sarah, who was childless. 'She prayed to God for a child. God promised her that in her old age she would bear a child to Abraham. The child's name was Isaac' (The Wordsworth Dictionary of Classical and Literary Allusion, 1994 : 196). Anita Desai perhaps has recast the biblical character in the post-colonial context. Anyway, Sarah's anticipations that her pregnancy will deliver her from the insecurity, doubt and shame of infertility and provide her with adult identity, that her unborn child will be her saviour and instrumental in winning for her the love and acceptance of those around her, make her bid adieu to her English self.

In addition to that, Sarah's pregnancy may be interpreted by a psychoanalytic feminist theory which, in a Foucauldian feminist perspective, might be included as one among a plurality of tactics of resistance to male dominance (J. Sawicki, 1991 : 65). As Kristeva

observes in her *Women's Time* (Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader*, 1986 : 206), in pregnancy woman can recover a repressed relation to the semiotic maternal through the profound psychic experience of giving birth to her new born child. She also observes that pregnancy involves a kind of pleasurable, creative thinking with an other. Not only that, pregnancy reproduces the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject : redoubling of the body, separation and co-existance of the self and an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech. This mode of relating, according to Kristeva, involves a potential reconstruction of human social relationships, one in which a new relation to the semiotic body, its pleasures, and its dismantling of fixed oppositions (self/other, man/woman) can overturn existing masculine culture. Adapting Kristeva's theory we may say that Sarah's pregnancy in postcolonial context subverts the death-dealing fixed binary oppositions of semiotic/symbolic, self/other, man/woman, East/West and thereafter reconstructs a prospect of new human relationships of recognition and acceptance. The child to be born in India will, no doubt, be a hybrid child of Indian father and English mother. The child, like Anita Desai, will be brought up on Indian soil and inherit western culture from his/her mother. Does it not invoke multiculturalism in the post-national period? Thus resurrecting the subjugated knowledge of a married English woman through the construction of the discourse of heterosexual femininity and that of the expectant mother, Anita Deasi creates a form of resistance to the purity of the authentic essential national culture in the post-independence period.