

BYE, BYE BLACKBIRD

Anita Desai

(1971)

Story

Bye, Bye Blackbird is one of Desai's less well-known novels and it has a setting different to most of her fiction. While most of her novels are set in India, this story takes place among ex-patriate Indians living in London in the 1960s. The action, subdued and unsensational as in all Desai's fiction, revolves around three characters. Dev, the protagonist, is an ambitious person who wishes to get a UK university degree and then go back home. When he arrives in London, he stays with a friend and fellow-Bengali Adit, who has tried to assimilate in the new country. His wife, Sarah, a quiet English woman, completes the triangle.

In the first section of the novel, these three people get on with lives, becoming close friends. In pubs, on the street and elsewhere, Dev and Adit suffer racist comments and attitudes, sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle. Adit takes Dev to visit the rooming house where he first stayed, before marrying Sarah, and where he has fond memories of his landlady, but his old landlady treats him like a stranger.

The drama picks up when the trio go off for a week in the English countryside, in Dorset, where Sarah's parents live in gentle retirement. At one point on their tour, they are joined by two Indian friends of Adit, one of them with his Indian wife. This week-long exposure to the traditional English way of life in the countryside, very different to the urban, metropolitan and multi-ethnic culture of London, changes both Adit and Dev. Adit, the one who has 'made his peace' with the English, finds himself alienated, especially by the taciturnity and cold manners of his in-laws (Sarah's parents). Dev, who up to this point has shown no interest in England, now is struck by the beauty and serenity of the southern English landscape and is impressed by the sincerity and basic kindness of its people.

Back in London, Adit begins to withdraw from England and embrace his somewhat distorted view of 'Indian-ness'. His nostalgia at times borders on depression and he is further unsettled by the news that India has gone to war with Pakistan, which prompts him to adopt a new role, through long-distance telephone calls, as a zealous patriot. The trajectory of his transformation ends when he decides to return to India, to live permanently. Sarah, though reluctant, and expecting their first child, agrees, which means that she has to give up a high-paying job. In the concluding scene, Adit and Sarah are standing on the platform at Waterloo station, about to board a train that will take them to Southampton where they will embark for Bombay by boat. Dev, who now lives in their flat, has come to see them off. As the author describes it, 'Dev stood silent, watching, for the most complex feelings of all tumbled and tossed inside him, clamouring for attention, for resolution. If plans and prophecies had any strength in them at all, it would have been he steaming out on the train to catch the boat back to India. This was what he had planned and, for some time, sincerely believed... Why was it Adit who was leaving and he who stayed on? What made them exchange the garments of visitor and exile? Dev asked himself.'

Themes

Alienation The central theme of this book, even hinted at in its title, is the immigrant experience and its attendant alienation. When Desai wrote the book, the 'diaspora' experience was not yet a common phrase, but she captures it beautifully. Adit, the settled immigrant, the Anglophile with an English wife, often dreams of Calcutta, where he will listen to Indian music on the sitar and his mother will dress his wife in saris with gold threads. His outlook has been called the 'root phenomenon,' meaning that a person in the diaspora will often invent a glorified vision of the culture they left behind. Dev, the newly-arrived Anglophobe, is disoriented by the silence and distance between people in England. At home, he would have heard his neighbours and known their names, but here everyone remains a stranger. So far, so usual, but then Desai complicates the alienation of these two men. Adit admits,

at the end, that although he thought of himself as 'half-English, it was only a pretence.' And Dev, who hates everything English, finds a strangely familiar atmosphere when he first enters an English pub, and later falls in love with the English landscape. Sarah, the third member of this confused trio, is the other side of the coin of alienation. Although born English, she is married to and loves an Indian man; she enjoys Indian food and music and realises that her parents are not as kind as she once thought. When she decides to accompany her husband back to India: she is pregnant and wonders what cultural identity her child will have. Once living in India with her child, Sarah will experience the same kind of cultural confusion as Adit and Dev have been through.

Confusion For all the three characters, confusion is the manifest symptom of their alienation. Neither Adit nor Dev are able to articulate their feelings, which shift through the course of the story. Sarah seems stable, as she watches the two Indian men battle with their bafflement. But then she, too, is divided, when she realises the prejudice shown by her own parents to her husband. In a subtle passage, Desai describes the nuances of Dev's confusion: 'In this growing uncertainty, he feels the divisions inside him divided further, and then re-divided once more. Simple reactions and feeling lose their simplicity and develop complex angles, facets, shades and tints... there are days in which the life of an alien appears 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 and, drawing himself together, he feels he can never bear to be unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land, however abject or dull, where he has, at least, a place in the sun, security, status and freedom.'

Racism Despite her subtle depiction of alienation and cultural confusion, Desai does not flinch from underlining its primary cause: racism towards immigrants from India (and Pakistan). England in the 1950s and 1960s was experiencing an unprecedented wave of immigration (from its crumbling empire), which was welcomed by the government in order to compensate for the loss of men during the war. This sudden surge of outsiders was something new for the ordinary people of the island, who had seen off Napoleon and Hitler. Anti-immigrant feelings emerged in the pubs and in parliament. This is the background to the experiences of Dev and Adit in the novel. On one occasion, Adit is called a 'wog' ('white oriental gentlemen', which sounds innocuous but was deeply insulting, with its 'dog' rhyme) by a school-boy. On another occasion, when they are walking down a street, they overhear a woman say, 'This place is littered with Asians now. Must get someone to clear them out.' In yet another scene, Adit is called 'a bloody Paki' when he didn't close his umbrella quickly enough inside a bus. In a third instance, Sarah and Adit are enjoying Indian music on the jukebox in a pub, when someone yells, 'Shut it off, will ya? Where d' you think you are, eh?'

Characters

Dev Dev is the newly-arrived immigrant, who comes to England with the sole purpose of earning a degree and going back home. He stays with Adit and Sarah, but is highly critical of Adit's life, which he views as a cowardly submission to his inferior status in post-Imperial Britain. Dev himself shows little initiative in pursuing his degree and feels disoriented in a culture so different to his native Bengal. He also experiences several instances of racist behaviour and attitudes, which harden his feeling of alienation. A week in the serene English countryside, however, changes his feelings and by the end, he has decided that he can make England his home.

Adit Adit is an educated Bengali man, with a UK degree, who found no favourable job prospects in India and returns to England to further his career. He takes a minor position with a travel company and marries Sarah, an English woman. The arrival of Dev, with his sensitivity to racism, and their visit to the countryside, where he encounters the silent prejudice of his in-laws, have a profound effect on him. At the end, we watch as he and his wife leave England for an uncertain future in India.

Sarah Sarah, the English woman who marries Adit, is a young woman with a good job. Although she has an interest in Indian culture, and although she loves Adit, they have difficulties negotiating the cultural divide. She is usually quiet and accepts her husband's decisions, but she has an inner strength that sometimes surprises.

Bella Bella is the wife of Samar, who is a Punjabi friend of Adit. She is fun-loving, less troubled and more extroverted than Sarah, but also more 'English' in that she harbours a streak of latent racial prejudice.

Miss Moffatt A minor character, Emma Moffatt owns the flat that Adit rents, and where Sarah comes to live with him. She is described as 'living at the top of the house like an aged mouse,' although she has a well-developed interest in Indian culture, especially literature.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

DEV (Confused)

Character At first, Dev appears to be a sarcastic and pretentious intellectual who hates imperialist England and its racist people. He goes to England only in order to get a good degree and return home, and he has chosen the prestigious London School of Economics. The author gently reveals his superficiality by noting that he thinks he knows all about England from his study of nineteenth century authors and that he will 'impress his professors with the subtle complexities and the deep wisdom of the oriental mind.' Dev also scoffs at his host Adit's lazy acceptance of England and its intolerance of immigrants. The racism he encounters during his first months in London only deepens his contempt for England and Adit. Then, having spent only a week in the countryside, he realises that his understanding of England was as blinkered as the racism he detests.

Activities Although planning to enrol as a student, Dev is side tracked by taking bus journeys around London to see the sights. Staying in Adit's and Sarah's flat, he lounges about, reading novels and listening to the radio. In the evening, he often goes with them or by himself to a pub. He travels with on a tour of the countryside and stays in a village with Sarah's parents. In one chapter, when he finally musters enough initiative to apply for a job, we follow him on a round of unsuccessful interviews.

Illustrative moments

Cynical At first, Dev is dismissive of everything English and especially of his friend Adit, and those like him who wish to assimilate to England. A good illustration of his (often cruel) cynicism occurs in the opening chapter, when Adit complains that the people in the flat above are too noisy. When Adit tells Dev that they are Sikhs, from India, Dev unloads his sarcasm on Adit. 'You poor thing,' Dev says. 'You've tried so hard to convince Sarah [his wife] what a babu [anglicised Indian] you are, only to be let down by this rabble of brown people upstairs.' When Adit tells him to be quiet, Dev continues his sarcastic attack. 'Really, Adit,' he says, 'you must write a letter to *The Times* complaining about all these black fellas who have invaded your emerald isle.'

Confused While Dev's sarcasm may be explained as self-defence against the racism that he encounters in England, his experiences also leave him confused about his place in the world. This confusion is illustrated in a scene, in the middle of this short book, when he wanders into a pub. He looks around and, although 'nothing in... his past twenty two years had resembled remotely this world he had entered by stepping through the door of the King's Arms, this world of beer-soft, plum-thick semi-darkness was familiar.' Dev finds that he can name the type of window casing, the kind of chairs and hats, and he can identify the places shown in the old Victorian prints framed on the wall behind the counter. All of these things he has read about in novels, which he has hungrily consumed while in Calcutta. Then, Sarah, who is sitting next to him, begins to sing a traditional English rhyme—'Every night when I go out, the monkey's on the table'—and, to the astonishment of the men drinking with them, Dev completes the ditty by saying, 'take a stick and knock it off, pop goes the weasel.' The words flow out of him with ease and he wonders who he is.

Transformed Dev's confusion about his cultural identity deepens and then reaches a conclusion toward the end of the book. Having spent a week in the serenity and beauty of the English countryside, he is struck by the authenticity of rural English life and the underlying kindness of people he once thought arrogant. He decides that he can no longer depend on his father's money and that he will try to make a life for himself in England. 'When he lay down in the soft grass of Hampshire and felt the warm sun and listened to the cows munching, England ceased to be the imperialist. It had become something small and soft that he could hold in his hand and love, like a bird.' He returns to London transformed, and begins to see the world around him with the eyes of a lover.

ADIT

(Nostalgic)

Character Adit is the 'good immigrant' and seemingly kind husband. Sometime before the novel begins, he came to England, got a degree and returned to India, where he was stuck in a low-paying government job with no future. He returns to England and accepts a similarly low-paying position in a travel company. Happily married to Sarah, he seems reconciled. While he is generally kind to friends and colleagues, he is a typical Indian husband in that he doesn't consider Sarah to be his equal. He 'loves' her but he doesn't consult her when he takes the momentous decision to return to India. As he explains to Dev, 'These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week.' His deeply troubled sense of self, never quite as settled as he thought, is disturbed when he makes friends with Dev and when he is treated badly by both his former landlady and his in-laws. Those churning undercurrents of unrest finally come to the surface when he suddenly becomes an ardent champion of India and its culture and then uproots himself and moves 'back home.'

Activities Adit works in a travel agency, but we see little of him there. Instead, the novel details his time spent with Sarah, his wife, and Dev, his recently arrived friend from Calcutta. They have breakfast together, they travel about London by bus and they visit pubs. Most important, he takes them on a week-long tour of the English countryside, with life-changing consequences. In all these situations, Adit is more passive than active, although we are let into the secrets of his dreams and nostalgic hopes.

Illustrative moments

Nostalgic The most significant moment in Adit's life is the attack of nostalgia he has after visiting his wife's parents in their secluded house in the English countryside. On the train ride back to London, he begins to reflect. Nothing about that visit was different from the others—his mother-in-law had scolded him before, and his father-in-law had ignored him before—but now, as he watched the rainy, grey landscape slip by, he felt drained of his very blood. He struggled to understand the change he is feeling, and knows it is 'nothing precise or definable.' He realises it is the gradual build-up, or the silting down, of many minor feelings, but especially 'the dismal dinner and the night, when Sarah had shut him out from her childhood of one-eared pandas and jigsaw puzzles.' As he continues to watch, sadly, the English countryside go by, it becomes an Indian landscape, with his long-forgotten memories of rivers and trees.

Aware Following on from his vision on the train, Adit begins to look at London and life with new eyes. Desai describes his habitual walk to work in the morning. He passes all the landmarks, Big Ben, the bridge over the Thames, this street and that junction, but nothing looks the same. The people scurrying along on the pavement seemed, to him, to be escaping something. The laughter that came from the pubs had 'a sinister, conspiratorial ring' to it. And then he sees a poster, which he stared at. 'Not at one of the posters he so delighted in but at a piece of that "Nigger, go home" graffiti on the walls that had previously nearly skidded off the surface of his eyeballs without actually penetrating. Now he screwed up his eyes and studied it as though it were a very pertinent sign board ... Now Adit felt he was one of the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong.'

Decisive A few weeks after his vision on the train, Adit takes the difficult decision to return to India. This is the most significant moment in his life, when he overturns everything that he, and Sarah, have built up. He has based his future on living in England, but now he decides to leave it behind. He is so overcome that his attempts to tell Sarah produce an inarticulacy that frightens her. 'I must tell you something, Sarah,' he stammers in a voice she didn't recognise. 'What is it?' she asks. 'It's over. It's all over,' he said with a pained expression. She immediately thinks he is referring to their marriage and is hugely relieved to discover that it is England that is finished. 'You know, Sarah,' he explains, 'I've loved England more than you. I've felt myself to be half-English. But it's only a pretence.' That insight now prompts him to take this life-changing decision.

SARAH (Timid)

Character On first reading, Sarah comes across as a quiet and unassertive woman, perhaps the least important of the three central characters. But further readings reveal a complexity that neither Adit nor Dev possess, a quality that might be explained by the fact that she is closest to the author's own personal history (Desai was born to an Indian father and a German mother, and then married an Indian.) Like many English people, Sarah has an interest in Indian culture, cooks Indian food and listens to Indian music. However, even before she meets Adit, Sarah, who works as a secretary to a school head, is somewhat anonymous and lost. After her marriage, she is not only between cultures but is the object of racial prejudice because of whom she has married. She doesn't often challenge her husband, but when she does it reveals hidden layers of strength and self-belief. As a timid and quiet wife, she appears to be not very different to the typical passive Indian wife, and indeed this is one reason that Adit says attracted him to her. However, like the 'typical' Indian wife, she does stand up for herself at crucial moments and express her opinions.

Activities Sarah spends her working week in an office as secretary to a school head. She deals efficiently with all sorts of problems, on paper and in person, such as misbehaving students and rude parents. At home, she cooks, usually Indian food, and listen to Indian music with her husband. They often go to the local pub. She sometimes, but not often, visits friends in their flats. She also makes frequent journeys to Hampshire to visit her retired parents.

Illustrative moments

Timid Our first real look at Sarah reveals her deep timidity. As she crosses a small park and enters the school, the children call after her, yelling, 'Hurry, hurry, Miss Scurry.' No wonder that she tries to slip into her office at the school 'unnoticed.' Once inside, she sits down and places her hands together 'as if in prayer.' Then she sets up her 'fortress of paper', behind which she battles with time-tables, telephone calls and emergency orders from her boss. She operates all day with 'a misleading self-confidence'.

Lonely One reason, we later learn, for her timidity is the criticism she faces from colleagues, schoolchildren and acquaintances. In their eyes, she has broken an unwritten rule by marrying an Indian, which renders her the target of the growing racism in English society. As a result, she is a lonely person. As the author explains, 'She has become nameless, she has shed her name as she has shed her ancestry and identity.' Again, we are told that 'it would have wrecked her for the whole day to have to discuss Adit with Julia or Miss Pimm [colleagues], in this sane, chalk-dusted, workaday office.... To display her letters from India, to discuss her Indian husband, would have forced her to parade like an imposter, to make claims to life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own.'

Confused Sarah, the middle-class Englishwoman, born to solidly native parents who live in a rural village, is as confused about her cultural identity as are her husband and Dev. At the end of working day, she stands at the window and asks herself, 'Who is Sarah? Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Would she ever be allowed to step off the stage and enter the real world—whether English or Indian, she didn't care. She only wanted its truth, its sincerity.' Here, we see that Sarah is the other side of the diaspora coin: Adit and Dev are immigrants in England, while she is an English woman married to an India immigrant. She has visited India before, with her husband, she enjoys cooking and eating Indian food, but she is deeply English. Her identity crisis comes to a head when she, carrying her first baby, follows her husbands' decision to move back to India. As she is about to leave for India, a friend asks about the baby and Sarah says, 'You mean boy or girl? I don't mind either. Or do you mean who it will look like, Adit or me? I hope it will look like Adit, brown as brown, with black hair and black, black eyes.' But she is worried about what cultural identity her child will adopt.