

# IMMIGRANT CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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## Abstract

Anita Desai has written extensively on immigrant concerns. Her novels: *Bye – Bye Blackbird*, *Zigzag Way*, and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* are vivid examples of her themes on immigrant lives. One finds across these novels that the individual is alienated as a result of immigration the society in which they live in becomes too persistent in defeating them and crushing them in the end. The quest for identity by the individuals and their attempts to find their identity and settle down shows that being isolated from one’s own roots could be very vital in the stability and inclusiveness of an individual. By mixing the historical to the individual narration, Desai has been able to reveal the vices of immigrant life and the tribulations it brings upon individuals.

**Keywords:** Alienation, immigration, society, individual, acceptance, identity, inclusiveness, belongingness

Staying true to her own historical background Anita Desai has written extensively on matters related to immigrant life. Her novels *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, and *Zigzag Ways* in particular are novels that have deep interest in immigrant aspects. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the representation made to the anthropological aspect of people who were removed from their homeland to other countries and who had found life difficult is very genuine. Her own background of living in London among immigrant Indians is reflected authentically in the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. The central character of the novel is a young man named Dev, who went to London to pursue his education there. Due to the various cultural shock experiences he encounters in the foreign land he ends up being disillusioned and totally loses his compass and is in a state of anomy. As an Indian he felt that he was not welcomed by the English and among the Indians themselves he felt that he was not embraced as one of them. For him the Indian immigrant community was not exactly a home away from home, either. All the experience that he had growing up in India about neighbors being close to one another is challenged when he comes to London, where neighbors barely know each other and don’t have any bonding at all. This new experience of loneliness and alienation bothers him so much that he becomes very disillusioned and frustrated. There was a constant and unbearable life of isolation and he feels that he was totally cut-off from humanity. He feels that when Indians move out of their country in search of better life elsewhere they don’t realize it but they are paying a huge price. Things that they took for granted in their country and among their own community are not there anymore. The life of exile for him and the life of London as an immigrant was a complete isolation and it felt like a prison: according to Shree: The novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, is an authentic study of human relationship bedeviled by exile and cultural encounters. Desai held: “*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is the closest of all my books to actuality practically everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London.” (Atma Ram, Interviews, 31). The focus of *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is on Dev who comes to London to pursue his studies. As the plot develops, one can find him turning into a completely disillusioned man. He feels alienated in London from both Indians and English men. There is a lack of sympathy in English men, who do not, recognize their neighbours and 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” (Bye, 57). Shree, 2013 (249)

There is a great deal of the element of universality in the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* because it carries themes that concern humanity globally. The issue of marrying outside of one’s own community is one of such elements of universality that has been presented by Anita Desai in this novel. By showing how the character of Adit finds it very hard to get accepted after he married Sarah, who was an English girl. He is not supported in his decision to go ahead with the marriage and his union with her is not endorsed enthusiastically by his Indian community nor accepted by his in-laws warmly, either. Therefore the alienation was coming from both sides of the communities for him. It actually becomes a source of great anger in the white community who believed that their race was damaged by mixing in marriage with the other race. There is an element of white supremacy involved and being an immigrant didn’t help in Adit’s case that Sarah’s white community was not ready to embrace his Indianness. Even though it was Sarah who was getting all the abuse and suffering as a result of marrying him it affects him deeply and he feels the alienation because he is an immigrant. Where ever she goes, Sarah feels the abuse of friends, colleagues, and even complete strangers due to the fact that she married a brown man outside of her race. She is very calm and docile about it but the suffering she feels inside affects her deeply and it also affects Adit. The continuous jibes and abuses she got from her white community and the gossip that they seemed to spread relentlessly in order to make her feel that she had made the wrong decision and had disgraced her race by marrying

a brown man from South Asia go into her head and she finds it very disturbing. The English arrogance, condescension, contemptuousness, contempt, disdain and scorn with which they attack one of their own fellow human being for marrying an Indian is, unfortunately universal and a familiar story with inter-racial marriages. The narrator captures Sarah's predicament:

She was still breathing hard at having so narrowly escaped having to answer personal questions. It would have wrecked her for the whole day to have to discuss Adit with Julia, with Miss Pimm, in this sane, chalk dusted, workday office. She was willing to listen for hours to Miss Pimm's diagnosis of her aches and pains... But to display her letters from India, to discuss her Indian husband, would have forced her to parade like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own, although they would have been more than ready to believe her ... She had stammered out her replies, too unhappy even to accuse them of tactlessness or inquisitiveness and, for her pains, had heard Julia sniff, as she left the room, "if she's ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him ?". (Bye-Bye Blackbird, 4).

The novel depicts how Sarah goes through a rough path of identity crisis as a result of being shun away from her own community and the constant abuse she was receiving at work and everywhere. The novel is a strong demonstration that staying in the realms of one's own culture is always easier than trying to challenge it or go against it as an individual because the society is stronger than the individual and that universally results in the individual being crushed by the society. However, Sarah's choice to cross the line and intermarry with someone from another culture was a source of great uneasiness and havoc in her life as an English woman. What made the problem with Sarah deciding to marry Adit is not only that he is a brown man from South Asia but also that his country India was colonized by the imperial power of England. So Sarah's people felt that she was marrying down and not up because they looked down upon the people who their country used to colonized not a long time ago. Their superiority complex didn't stop in vilifying Sarah for marrying an Indian but also showed their disdain and contempt upon the Indian people in general based on racism and white supremacy. If one thought that with the development of modern education and spread of knowledge human beings would move out of the old traditional stereotypes that didn't permit for mixed-race marriages they are in for a big surprise. As the novel has captured the people of England who have a huge amount of progress to boast to the world and preach of their civilized cultures on the basis of which they justified their invasion and colonizing of so many foreign lands in the past, lays bare as Sarah's and Adit's marriage becomes such an irritating issue for them. As a result Sarah starts being haunted by the question of her own identity.

She constantly asks herself who she was:

Who was she – Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari One burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen the Head's secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency ? Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters ... she felt an impostor, but equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit's records ... she had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles and when she was playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Where was Sarah? ... She wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth. Bye-Bye Blackbird (34-35).

Desai's novel, *Zigzag Way* is set in Mexico. This is a further indication that her themes are universal and her characters come from different corners of the world; and yet the problems they face is tied up to the fact that they were just immigrants. She treats the predicaments that an individual faces by just being an immigrant and how it affects them individually. On the one hand the immigrants are moving toward what they think is a modern and developed part of the world in terms of economic progress and leave their own traditional societies due to economic hardships. But in their quest in search of green pastures they have a great deal to lose from the essence of their own cultural ties and their own people. As a result this becomes a great source of anxiety and predicament. In *Zigzag Way*, Desai narrates the situation of immigrants who had travelled across difficult seas and risked their lives to try and move out of poverty from Cornwall to work in the new gold and silver mines that were opened in Mexico. *Zigzag Way* is in a sense a historical novel as it deals in great detail about how the history of Mexico and tribal cultures there is influenced by the contact that these peoples had a long time ago with Europe. It covers countries and cultures across Mexico Cornwall, New England, and Vienna. By showing the background history and tying it to the new trend of immigration in search of a new beginning Desai presents characters and societies involved in cultural shocks and alienation apart from showing the endemic poverty and suffering that was caused by the racist past of imperial rules on the traditional lands. So it has a strong historical appeal as well as individual and social tales of cultural conflicts. *Zigzag Way* also has a strong anthropological appeal as it shows how the ancient tradition of the pagans came into contact with the Christian communities and how the process took shape across the years. It shows how the day of remembrance for the dead – *Dia de los Muertos* which it is presumed by the culture of the society a date in which the dead were reunited with the living and how the history is intertwined to the contemporary times and situations and how they found meaning in it. According to Suhasini Vincent:

The novel's hybrid fictional space is replete with efforts to unravel the past as the protagonists re-embark on a passage to New Spain, re-trace ancestry, and re-locate the lost fabled ghost town of the Sierra.<sup>2</sup> Memories of turbulent history re-surge and re-envelop the fictional space as the rich seams of the Mexican ghost mining town reveal the life of the Cornish

Jacks in the midst of revolutions triggered by Emiliano Zapata. I shall thus consider how Desai reconfigures various descents down figurative ladders such as the “ladder of time,” the “ladder of matter and life” in Mexican mythology, the “ladder of memory,” the “ladder of mining history,” the “ladder of a pilgrim’s progress” and the “ladder of each closing day,” to show how collective memory can re-surge, re-emerge and be re-written by the migrant writer. Vincent, 2009(2) The characters of Dona Vera and Eric are used by Desai in her novel *Zigzag Way* to show interracial relations and immigrant concerns. By showing Vera’s European background and heritage the novel shows how the influence of Mexican history had created a hybrid personality in her character and how Vera tries to manage the hybridity. Eric on his side is trying to find his compass as he was in an uncertain state of anomy for being unable to find his family background in the America. Desai narrates how the old myths of treasure and wonder are related with the new economic foraging of miners toward the New World the gold and silver mines. Their economic situation was so dire that there little space for the miners in regards to culture, politics, identity, and religion and the overriding concern seems to be their zeal to find a new beginning for their individual selves and families. Their impoverished status did not allow them to stop and think about which country and geography they were headed to provided that their journey promised economic benefit. After the wars of independence from Spain the gold and silver mines were forgotten for many years and these new immigrant Cornish miners were so determined to even put their lives at risk by not only crossing the high seas under dire circumstances but also by working in the dangerous Mexican mine tunnels and ladders which were made of tree trunks. The novel also explores old myths about Cornish miners who had been in quest for gold flakes in the land for a time immemorial. By annexing the past to the present the novel is able to discuss the anthropological side of the populace to the economic drives and human suffering in the gold mines of Mexico. The immigrant concerns that Desai writes in this novel is not by any stretch an Indian story but an international and universal one at that. The tales are applicable to all humanity and it shows how the writer has drawn from her own experience as an immigrant in a European country and how it can affect the individual as well as society when two cultures come into contact and people are moved from their base and core values:

Eric was later to describe the experience, to Em, as like stumbling into a rabbit hole—falling, falling, he said, till all was a welter of strange words, strange names, churning around him. Then with a bump, landing upon the startling awareness that many of them were actually familiar to him. It was like being in a crowd of swiftly moving strangers and finding that there were faces among them that you recognised. Or like walking, with difficulty, through a gravel and coming across veins of liquid brightness running through them. Golden dramatic words unfurling through the rubble, words like Sierra Madre Oriental, Sierra de los Catorce, Real del Monte, La Purisima, La Ascuncion, Los Lorenzos, La Luz, Valenciana [...], and he had heard them before; each had an image, a memory linked to it that he struggled to resurrect. His mind scrambled, as if on its knees, to recover the images they had once conjured. *Zigzag Way* (31-2)

Desai narrates how every step down the tunnel ladders into the mines is very painful for the miners through the character of Eric. The severity of the tunnel movement and their risky discomfort is carried to the smallest detail representing the historical connotation of the Mexican mines in relation to the European times. The experience of Eric as he stumbles his way through the difficult stairs is purposefully employed by the writer to denote the postcolonial distorted world childhood make-believe. The sentence construction and the way of the narration is so purposefully distorted as are all postcolonial writings to rebel against the colonizer’s language use of syntactic correctness. The descent down into the ladder by Eric represent the turbulent Mexican history as Cornish gold miners had suffered and were not able to express in words. But the level of brutality of the harsh conditions that the miners had to endure is captured in this symbolic representation of Eric’s descent down the ladder of the old mines. The severity of it all is not just in the real life of the characters but in their subconscious mind as well; as Eric is depicted as carrying it in his dreams and suffering even in his sleep that he makes a very conscious effort to fight off the swinging of his mind and the turbulence of his heart. That way Desai recreates the history of the Mexican mines in her historical narrative, *Zigzag Way*. The way that the images of descent down the ladder of mines is constructed is in such a way that it is very chaotic and difficult to fathom but it nonetheless bursts into his imagination, symbolizing the harsh historical reality of Mexico in relation to its past was suppressed but had suddenly burst out turbulently and that it was not going to be buried forever. The constant juggling and twisting of ways to find his way down tunnel ladders represent the fact that people in the present had to adjust themselves depending on the atrocities of the past as life had to go on and they had to ensure their survival the way they had been presented the choices. Eric’s struggle to reconstruct the images of the way down the difficult descent of the mining ladders is reminiscent of the way people were trying to reconstruct and remember the historical path and to find ways through which they could make sense of it all for them to heal and continue their present situations. The images of shards and shreds and difficult paths down the tunnel represent the historical struggle that was full of challenges and hardships for the people of Mexico. The language used by the author is also disrupted and syntactically scrambled, further demonstrating that the chaos created by colonial times was being addressed in this postcolonial narration as one that had created real confusion and chaos for the immigrant miners and a cry for their tribulation. Desai describes these cruel clusters of memories:

When he finally went down to bed—down, down the stone stairwell, one pounding step after another, in semi-darkness, the last journey of the day—he felt his head, his brain, his mind come crashing down together. Bits and pieces, shreds and shards, all cluttered and confused and rattling as he threw himself on the bed. He lay against the red cushions, under the white wool rug, and tried to steady the swinging of his mind. (ZW 11)

Anita Desai’s novels reveal elements of great turbulence and depression in the psyche of the characters as a result of the atmosphere and the society that impose upon them great pressure and restrictions. Her characters are deeply disturbed

and in many cases on the border line of nervous breakdown. They are normally good and ordinary people who were sane and healthy that the tribulations they face in their psychological situation could not be attributed directly to their own background as mentally unstable. These are stable and well balanced people to start with but as the world around them begins to pile upon them pressure upon pressure they succumb to the weight of the conflict against the society. Anita Desai reveals deep psychological pain and anxiety that the characters cover very well in their attempts to adjust themselves and try to tolerate that it becomes at times a subconscious nervous condition not only for those around them but even for the characters themselves. In this case the pressure is the result of immigration and its alienating effect on the individuals who are uprooted from their homelands. No matter how much fight and struggle they put up to change their situation the societal pressure becomes too great the individuals are crushed and reduced to psychological wrecks. This is one of the skills of that Anita Desai has and her experience of immigrant life becomes an icing in the cake to make the completion of the narration regarding immigrant concerns in her novels. By showing how unmerciful the immigrant's situation is and how much degrading it is for the characters the author accomplishes her mission of highlighting the dangers facing immigrant communities and individuals.

In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Desai delves deep into the character of the protagonist, Hugo. He is a typical of her immigrant characters who is searching his soul for his own identity amid the confusion of mind that he was in. She uses the lines in T. S Eliot's poem East Coker, "In the beginning was my end" to signify that Hugo's childhood was the very determinant element of his whole life and destiny. She narrates how he moved on his journey that starts in Berlin as a child, then ends up in India's Calcutta and Bombay. Even though he was settling down well in India and getting adapted to the culture and new normal life presented for him there, his efforts turn up to be futile and meaningless as he ends up being alienated. There was no indication that he was unwilling to adapt to the Indian life or attitude at first but the situation gets out of his hand when it becomes evident that settlement and equanimity was not possible. India was his homeland and there was nothing he could do to change that but feeling included was the problem at the heart of his alienation. As an immigrant he finds it very hard to compose himself and feel safe that he had bleak vision about his future. The feeling of predicament and hindrance and uncertainty creates in him a loss of identity out of which he could not come out. Despite his attempts and good will to adapt to the situation in his immigrant life, it looked that the culture was not adapting to him in a sense that it did not accept him. The only option left for him was to go to England and he had hoped that that change of venue to Europe would alleviate his problems. In the hope of finding solace in England he feels momentary respite of the mind and thinks that all his problems were coming to an end:

he realized it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen." (p 63)

**Conclusion:**

In the *ZigZag Way*, immigrants tension is clearly reflected in the lines – "Give up, Father, she told him, give up, and let the old gods back. It is their land, you know" (77).

Anita Desai focuses on the immigrants and brings out the contrast between their own country and their settled country.

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