

“Lost in Translation”? - Identity, Migration and (Trans) Nationalism in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird*

**Dr Anna Clarke, FHEA
Associate Lecturer, The Open University
Visiting Fellow, Department of Literature, The University of Essex**

Abstract

The essay examines the contribution to debates on transformed identities in the context of (trans)national migration of Anita Desai's critically neglected 1961 novel *Bye Bye Blackbird*. In the era of trans-national movement and migration in the postcolonial world, Indian English fiction presents a paradigm of literary transnationalism: originated, developed, produced and consumed across national borders. Within the studies of this body of fiction *Bye Bye Blackbird* has not enjoyed the critical attention afforded to other works by Desai. However, far from its position of "irrelevance", the novel offers illuminating insights into patterns of migration, providing a useful framework of inquiry into formations of cultural identities. Drawing on the colonial discourse, postcolonial theory, as well as critical insight of postmodernism and new-historicism, this essay scrutinizes the stylistics of the novel in arguing that the text skilfully dissects the dynamics of the process of migration: from the initial desire to migrate, the encounter with the target culture of migration, to the eventual decision to return “home”. In doing so, the novel presents a useful framework of inquiry into the formations of cultural identities, transformed, or translated, in the process of recurrent movement across cultures and nations, as the text asks a question: having migrated away from the culture of "home" nation, is the return ever possible?

Keywords: Nation, migration, transnationalism, identity, “home”.

In Benedict Anderson’s famous dictum, a nation is an *imagined community*: although members of a nation do not know most of their fellow members, they carry an “image of their communion” in their minds. (1991, p.6) Since Anderson’s essay, several critical voices have articulated a conviction that a nation is an imaginary ideal, an artifact that hides the presence of often conflicting, heterogeneous, disparate group interests. The role of imaginary, and non-

existent, ideal in propelling the dynamics of migration is at the heart of Desai's thus far critically neglected novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* as the text explores formations of identity translated or transformed in the process of migration in a trans-national postcolonial context. Outside the world of the novel, the illusory nature of the national is further brought to the fore in the era of globalization and the transnational, the latter understood as extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers (OED 2017). Indeed, transnationalism as a phenomenon, etymologically clearly connected to the existence of a nation, reminds us of what it appears to transgress. Arguably, transnationalism "draws attention to what it negates – that is, the continued significance of the national" (Yeoh, 2003, p.2) as "transnationalist discourses insist on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices" (Smith, 2001, p.3).

The significance and ossification of borders, which the process of migration essentially transgresses, has recently made a disturbing resurgence in the reactionary and often deeply racist political movements across the globe. Suffice it to recall the example of the xenophobia and racism fueled rhetoric of stopping the influx of immigrants and, the much satirised proposal of, erecting a wall with Mexico in the latest US presidential election, or the continually contested and unexpected vote for Brexit in the UK, passed on the separatist rhetoric of fear in "keeping the immigrants" out. The picture painted in the electoral campaigns, of the tides of migrants needing to be stemmed, suggest fluctuations but also continued recurrence of the phenomenon of migration, the phenomenon which is essentially transnational in its nature in the context of a modern nation state. A "seasonality", or at least a rhythmicity of migration is evoked in the title of Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the title's metaphor of a seasonally migrating bird functioning as a slang shorthand for coloured migrants from India, and other countries in Great Britain. Desai is not isolated in evoking the seasonality of migration (see, for instance, the Tayeb Salih's acclaimed novel *Season of Migration to the North*), while Anita Desai's daughter, Kiran Desai's, *The Inheritance of Loss* similarly if more bleakly deals with the dynamics of fluctuation of migration which opposes the stasis of national borders. Working on the proposition that literature affords insights into, as well as creating cultural processes of, its time, this essay explores literary representations of migration, and the emergence of identity spaces as a cultural consequence of migration, depicted in Desai's overlooked work.

Anita Desai, who needs little introduction as one of India's most distinguished and prolific authors, is a recipient of several international literary accolades counting novels, short stories and children's fiction amongst her literary output. Born in India of a German mother and a Bengali father, Desai is now an Emerita Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, dividing her time between the USA, India and Britain. Although as early as in 1977 Darshan Singh Maini would eulogize the "Achievement of Anita Desai" (215- 231) in the context of her oeuvre some 40 years later her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* continues to receive relatively negligible critical exposure. Even the novelist herself, admittedly often harsh about her own work, dismisses her third novel as "irrelevant". The claim is as surprising as it is unsupported.

Far from justifying such claims, and in an attempt to partly redress the balance of critical inattention, I would argue that the novel offers illuminating insights into patterns of migration, provides a useful framework of inquiry into formations of cultural identities, and dissects the dynamics of the process of migration: from the initial desire to migrate, the encounter with the target culture of migration, to the eventual decision to return "home". Secondly, I want to suggest that the novel focuses on processes of identification and boundaries of belonging, exploring the role of memory and the function of objects and cultural practices.

As the novel belongs firmly to the body of Indian English fiction, it is worth noting that, although its emergence predates the term "transnationalism", Indian English prose fiction can indeed be productively viewed as a transnational phenomenon, or a transnational product par excellence which extends beyond the national bounds. The novel as a form and cultural artefact arrived in India in the trunks of the British colonisers in the nineteenth century, began to be consumed and produced locally, and in the context of the postcolonial is now often produced outside India (Desai herself, now working and living in the US, wrote her novel in the UK), and is consumed globally. "Transnationalism" as a term has lately gained considerable currency, even if the growing body of academic work on the subject notes a lack of its clear definitions. That the transgression of national borders does not coincide with any simplistic leaving behind of national affiliations and identifications which may be demanded by some models of nationalisms, is amply demonstrated in Desai's novel which dramatizes the experiences of immigrants and identity formations in the context of migration.

As the novel explores migrant experiences, potential levels of assimilation and the consequent transformation of their loyalties in the land of their settlement in the 1960s Britain, Desai's sympathetic interrogation of identity formations in the process of migration, makes this novel particularly poignant in the current climate of borders solidified, (would be) walls erected, and the waves of xenophobia seeking to stem the tides of migration. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, although seemingly uncharacteristic of the oeuvre of the author, affords valuable insights into the literary representation of paradigms of migration and identity formations in the context of seemingly transnational state, i.e. post-war Britain.

Since no migration happens in a vacuum, contextualizing the novel briefly in historical, literary and critical terms will throw light on its stance of intervention. Published in 1971, the novel deals with Indian migrant experiences in 1960s' Britain. As such the text clearly addresses a historically and culturally specific moment of migration, dramatizing the experiences of many migrants arriving in Britain in the post-war, post-Indian independence period. Alongside Kamala Markandaya's 1972 *The Nowhere Man* and Hanif Kureishi's *Borderline* (1981), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* belongs to the body of Indian fiction in English which addresses experiences of Indian migrants to Britain when the initial, official welcome, extended under the umbrella of the Commonwealth through the 1950s, turns into resentment and hostility in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, in England the first International Commonwealth Literature Conference, held in Leeds in 1964, and the formation of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, signalled the developing scholarly attention to literatures in English originating from former colonies or dominions of the British Empire. I would suggest that the text actively participates in the critical debates surrounding movements of people and ideas in the context of formerly colonial relationships, exposing the gap between critical interests and lived experiences.

Early on the narrative establishes irony as the key stylistic device deployed in representing this gap, and scrutinizing the lived experiences of South Asian members of the Commonwealth. As a group of immigrants with their spouses, some of them English, gather for an evening of communal camaraderie and entertainment over a Pakistani film, the "mock BBC voice [speaks] up from the darkness. 'Two civilizations at loggerheads. Period of transition. Awful responsibility.

The future. The point is - does the Commonwealth really exist? If so, why doesn't everyone use the same law?" (Desai, 1971, pp 23-24; all subsequent references to this edition). The direct mockery of the elevated tone and vocabulary of the discourses of the British mass media, in the sharp contrast with the scatological humour, effectively serve to undermine and expose the lingering imperialist attitudes of the ideology of Commonwealth. Mockery and irony, however, are not just the staple repertoire of the character discourse of Indian protagonists living in England. They are also crucial narrative strategies in debating the questions of cultural identity in the context of migration examined in the novel.

The narrative focalises on the life of a young Indian Adit, working and living in 1960s' London with his British wife Sarah, and Adit's friend Dev, newly arrived from India, brimming with enthusiasm at the prospects of opportunities afforded by the new country. The paradigm represented here is that of voluntary migration, from a former colony to the imperial centre. The process of migration is also seen in the novel as cyclical, that is to say the new arrivals in Britain coincide with departures of those returning "home" to India. Although the narrative structure of the text is complexly suffused with prolepses and analepses, and the trajectory of the lives of different characters is not synchronised, one can, nevertheless, discern three stages in the dynamics of the process of migration.

Stage one is marked by the decision to migrate. One of the main aspects of cultural migration acknowledged in the novel is the construction and operation of desire to migrate (much of the language of the novel, and its multiple focalizations, deploys the vocabulary of dreams, nightmares, subliminal, subconscious urges and desires which haunt the imagination). Migration then, emerges as an imaginative act, before it necessitates a physical relocation. In a self-referential gesture, the novel explores the role of art, and literature in particular, in powering and directing the vectors of migration, creating a desire to discover and possess what is already imaginatively appropriated. In addition, the novel stresses the role of education in exposure to literary representations of the culture which will be the recipient of migration, inescapably participating in the process and fuelling the desire to migrate. This role of education and literature is particularly visible in the representation of Dev.

Exposed to that imperial legacy - English education in India - Dev is a product of what Bhabha would later term a "forked tongue of the colonial discourse" and its civilizing mission. (1994, p.85) Dev is, effectively, a fictional representation of a mimic man. The character, who

self-consciously refers to himself as one of “Macaulay’s bastard[s]”, (p.122) bears out the effectiveness of Macaulay’s educational directive in the famous 1835 Minute, to “form a class ... of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”. Dev also very nearly testifies to the legacy of Macaulay’s dream vision of “the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws” which will outlast the political, military impact of “schemes of policy ... victory, ... triumph”. (Macaulay, 1889, p. 572) Illustrating this, the text is saturated with episodes of Dev’s joyous wonder at the eventual confrontation with the landscapes of pubs, idyllic countryside and villages, buildings and monuments. Part II of the novel is entitled “Discovery and Recognition”. “Recognition”, the word more frequent than any other in the discourse of the text, implies prior knowledge, familiarity, and in the context of the novel acquires a shade of a sense of reunion, a reclaiming of common heritage. The narrative rendering of Dev’s first visit to the pub illustrates the point amply:

Dev ... recognized and named the “mullioned windows”, the “horse brasses” shining against the stained woodwork, the “casks” and mugs and portly British faces. He had known them all, he had met them before, in the pages of Dickens and Lamb, Addison, and Boswell, Dryden and Jerome K. Jerome – and yet how exact the reproductions had been, how accurate, he realised as he recognised the originals ... [The pub - and by extension various aspects of British life] was known, familiar, easy to touch, enjoy and accept because he was so well prepared to enter it - so well prepared by fifteen years of reading of the books that had been his meat and drink, the English books that had formed at least one half of his conscious existence. (pp.10-11)

Immediately, however, two points of fracture open themselves up to the reader and character alike. In the quick rhythm of the prose, amidst the free indirect discourse of the childishly excited character, it is easy to miss that the English culture forms only “at least half” of his conscious existence.

In so far as only half of Dev's and Adit's taste, few opinions and by all means not all the morals are "English" the text gives a slippage to, and corrects, Macaulay's imperialist fantasy. Furthermore, if Dev indeed can be read as a mimic man, then he will soon have to learn that, borrowing Bhabha's terminology, "[h]e is the effect of a flawed colonial [or more precisely here postcolonial] mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English". (Bhabha, 1994, p. 87) The text amply illustrates the lesson, which the Anglicized character has to learn, in the use of local and structural irony, as by the end of the chapter the sense of exuberance and wonder is somewhat deflated by one of many incidents of racism when, unexpectedly, a boy abusively calls him a "Wog" on his way home. "'Paji' - the narrator coolly informs us in characteristically ironic terms - "Dev [swore] and did not invoke the names of Johnson and Boswell again, or of Dryden or Pope but chewed an unlit cigarette and sucked its black, bitter shreds". (p.14)

Positing the phenomenon of "recognition" in the encounter with the appropriated culture, the text exposes a gap between the mental possession of an image, or claiming of cultural heritage, and the lived experiences of migrants. Ultimately, the novel questions the adequacies of the model of identity construction based on assimilation and integration, when the migrated subjects, having arrived in their claimed "home", are not, in their turn, "recognized". The experience of misrecognition, resonating of the dynamics of the Lacanian mirror stage, haunts the subject until it eventually propels him or her to withdraw from the migrated context and return "home". The withdrawal following on from the loss of recognition coincides with the arrival of the next intake of migrants. That, however, is hinting already at stage three: the decision to return home, whereas I would first like to explore stage two: an encounter with the culture into which you migrate, in greater detail.

The second stage then is the encounter with the already appropriated culture. Here Britain is represented through the technique of kaleidoscopic images and richly sensuous language: for example, as the narrative opens we find the personified morning light as it "slides" down the telephone wires, "perches" on television aerials, ringing the brass door knockers and setting the birds and bottles clinking and clanking in informal good morning voices that "politely" wake Dev up. (p.5) The Kings' Arms is the "world of beer-soft, plum-thick, semi darkness" (p.10). However, the encounter with the host culture also brings back the memories of "home", of the past, including colonial past, as Dev's focalization reminds us.

The Albert Memorial contains the spirit of the era – bulges with it, balloons with it, groans and sighs with it. ... Dev is not sure whether he comes to it, again and again, in order to look upon the face of England as it had existed in his imagination when he was a child – years before he had begun to plan to come to England – or because it reminds him of that Victorian India that formed a part – unreal and, therefore, all the more haunting, omnipresent and subliminal – of the India he had known. (p.84)

The extract highlights the text's debate of the processes of cultural identifications, as the role of visual, sensory memory is exposed. The images, as well as imaginings – of social, economic freedom, of visions communicated in literary and artistic representations - can propel you into a physical move of migration, but they can also hold you back; haunting, they never do let go. Having grown up on a diet of “language and literature completely alien” but fed to him “like a sweet in infancy”, in a moment of searching self-awareness Dev struggles to rationally comprehend why he

had travelled so far in search of the origin, the fountain head of the vision induced by this drug, that enthralling, bewitching vision that had lived in him so long so that now both drug and vision, copy and original, held him in the double net. (p.122)

The novel singles out two processes which problematise cultural identifications in the country of target migration. Primarily, as far as identification in this context is concerned, there are two possible scenarios: the first one is one of integration and assimilation into the culture of target migration, so that it in time becomes “home”; the second is that of the rigid ossification of cultural practices of “home” while “away”. The first of those scenarios is denied a narrative possibility of fulfilment. In the face of unemployment and racial abuseⁱ, or at best, indifference, the metropolis which was once “a land of opportunity” becomes a land of “silence and emptiness”, “a cold wasteland of brick and tile”. (p.63) Disjunction of expectations and reality of migration, coupled with awareness that recognition and willed appropriation does not equal being recognized, propel the characters into solidifying the manifestations of culture or origin.

The Indian community represented in the novel becomes gradually more inward looking, and the role of objects and cultural practices in the formations of cultural identification resurfaces as paramount.

This process sets up the dynamic which propels the characters into stage three: the decision to return “home”. Here, two factors which emerge as significant straddle the two stages: they are present during the migrant experiences living in the nation of target migration, but they also propel them into the decision to return “home”. The first of those is the role of memory and the second is the circulation of cultural objects and practices.

Memory, as a factor in developing the dynamics of the return “home”, is represented as a force whose power equals that of the imagination which set the characters on the road to migration in the first place. Its role affirms the text’s emphasis on the imaginative leaps taken before the physical action. Powerful as it might be, the function of memory, including sensory memory is, however, gently mocked as misleading in the processes of cultural identifications. That much is evident in the tone of narrative distance from the character’s focalization every time they reminisce of or visualize their “home”: for example, in Adit’s repeated exaggerated lusciousness of halva, or Dev’s idealized thoughts about India as a somewhat alliterative “place of sun, security and status”. (p.86) Hearing the sound of a sitar, during one of the music evenings, a recital of a great artiste Ustad Sultan Ahmad of Benares, many of the listeners, especially ladies “are glazed-eyed as the music poured over them like showers of mango blossom, of the jasmine-scented night that they recalled with a deep, unburied passion, extravagantly glorified and thrice romanticised by long memory”. (p.96) The escalating irony of the narrative voice in the hyperbolic exultations that rapidly spiral out of control would be impossible to miss.

The second key factor is outlined as communal, cultural practices – such as music evenings, art exhibitions, social gatherings. Those, alongside use of language and culturally significant objects, are playing a key role in the formation of cultural identification. However, they soon emerge as either fetishised territories on which minute struggles of cultural supremacy are enacted, or ghettoising practices which deny the possibility of settling into the culture of the “host” nation. The affirmation of cultural identity through such objects in the context of migration is only part of the problem.

The issue is also one of authenticity. The communal practices gradually acquire the charge of “inauthenticity”, emerging as simulacra, the term which the text invites, through Adit’s focalization, for the Indian way of living in Britain as a whole. Adit’s address to his wife vocalizes the issues:

Our lives here – they’ve been so unreal, don’t you feel it?
Little India in London. All our records and lamb curries and sing-
songs, it’s all so unreal. ... I’ve got to go home and start living a
real life. I don’t know what real life there will mean. I can’t tell
you if it won’t be war, Islam, Communism, famine, anarchy or
what. Whatever it is it will be Indian, it will be my natural
condition, my true circumstance. (p.204)

This is one of the focal points of the character’s crisis which precipitates his final decision. His growing dissatisfaction with the strained copies of the “authentic” ways of Indian life is coupled with his realization that communal Indian practices reinforce the exclusion in the society of migration. The model which bleakly emerges is not one of national, cultural assimilation but ghettoisation, and the search for originary cultural practices. It might be worth bearing in mind, however, that since the character is here speaking in a highly charged, emotional state, his focalization may be unreliable and in any case it cannot be unproblematically taken as the stance of the narrative as a whole. Adit’s perspective is not legitimised by the value judgments of the narrative voice in the novel.

The circulation of social energies in the exchange and use of culturally significant objects resonates here of the insights from Greenblatt’s new historicist essay “The Circulation of Social Energy”. If Greenblatt, however, in trying to find the answer to the extraordinary longevity of Renaissance drama, pointed the finger to the circulation of cultural objects and exchanges which encoded the texts with the *energia*, the scenario of the novel is more akin to Baudrillard’s, than Greenblatt’s, conclusions in *Simulacra and Simulation*. The practices, rituals and objects resorted to in an attempt to foster the spirit of “home” while in existing in the host nation do not primarily circulate between diverse social groups but within them and, moreover, transpire as a source of disappointment for the characters, attracting – as I have already said - the criticism of

inauthenticity, a kind of second order simulation where the cultural product masks and perverts the recollected reality of originary culture of “home”. Conversely, if this is not a solution to retaining a sense of one’s “original” cultural identity in a context of migration, it seems equally counterproductive in the existence in the newly adopted sphere of the country of migration. Here, the “original” cultural practices, transpire as having a largely ghettoizing function, and thus unsettle categories of both cultures and cultural identities, problematically undermining the possibility of belonging to either culture.

The novel, then, scrutinizes the lived experiences of South Asian members of the Commonwealth in England, exploring the formations of cultural identifications. Here, the text singles out the role of memory, including sensory memory, further pointing towards the circulation of objects and cultural practices. In tackling the former, the novel employs ironical distancing from the question of memory, revealing it to be misleading in the (re)construction of visions of the shifting categories of what is “home” in the context of transnational existence. Idealization of another culture, through the exposure to the images of it in art and literature, received in the country of one’s birth, is singled out in the text as one of the key elements in the processes of formation of cultural identification. At the same time, however, the text questions this process through the crucial narrative strategy of the use of an ironic counterpoint to the projection of idealized images of originary culture, or the culture of target migration.

In this critically examined paradigm of migration, is the return “home” ever possible? As the novel ends with Adit’s eventual rejection of his life in England and his decision to return to India, taking his reluctant wife with him, the narrative deliberately occludes the possibility of the exploration of the multi-cultural existence in India. It might seem that placing the narrative ending at the point of departure for a new life would serve to propagate the fantasy of a happy, multi-racial, multi-cultural coexistence, devoid of the hindrances encountered in Britain (in the same way that the nineteenth century romantic/realist novels cut off the plot at the point of a heroine’s marriage, fostering the myth of conjugal happiness secured at the point of tying the knot). However, I would argue that the ending serves deliberately to provide more questions than answers as it destabilizes the myth and the possibility of return “home”. This effect, I would suggest, is achieved through the sense of repetition, reminiscent of the titular images of rhythmicity of migration, in the sense of frustration and growing discontentment in Adit.

His experiences in England mirror almost directly his initial experiences that lead to the decision to migrate to London. Both stages of his life are marked by the sense of frustration with the lack of opportunities of employment and economic advancement, coupled with his desire for “freedom”. On his arrival in England it is the comparative social and economic freedom which excites Adit, while directly precipitating his decision to return to India; it is likewise the freedom, this time in its absence, of his ghettoized existence - restricted to a circle of Indian friends and petty jobs - which acts as a catalyst for departure.

Even though the vectors of the migration movement are circular, the place you finish your journey (in physical) terms on your return to your nation of origin is clearly not the same place you began in terms of emotive, conceptual terrains of identity locus. When Salman Rushdie famously said that “[h]aving being borne across the world, we are translated men”, (Rushdie, 1992, p.17), he might also have said that we are migrated subjects. The connotation of movement across cultural and linguistic terrains evoked in his dictum resonates in the physical and imaginary leap of migration. The verb “translate” signified a change or transformation in form, appearance or substance as early as the fourteenth century, and in the late sixteenth century Shakespeare famously used the term “translated” to mean changed with reference to Bottom who, upon his ontological transformation, is addressed as being translated, i.e. transformed (3.1.105). The subjects of Desai’s novel are translated, transformed in the process of transnational migration. What the novel depicts is the continuity of the process of transformative migration, that is to say, the momentum of the narrative defies the possibility of narrative closure because the process of migration is set to continue. The illusory possibility of ever returning “home” and rediscovering the state of originary cultural purity is denied, in so far as the action-replay of the character motivation sets up the unrealistic expectations of arriving in a culture which will provide an escape from the frustrations of whatever “home” context one finds oneself in. Migration eludes the fulfilment of the imaginary vision of the new “home”, just as the experience of having been “borne across” or migrated shuts out the possibility of ever *returning* to the “home” you left behind. Desai’s characters, like postcolonial men, become migrated subjects, caught up in the ideological tides which, presenting the vision of a foreign or domestic shore, simultaneously take you further away from either of them.

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ⁱ See, for instance, Rosen, "Nation and Anti-Nation", p.399.

ⁱⁱ Maya Jaggi "A Passage from India" The Guardian Profile: Anita Desai", *The Guardian*, June 19, 1999; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/jun/19/books.guardianreview11>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for instance, Yeoh, B. et al *Approaching Transnationalisms: Studies on Transnational Societies, Multicultural Contacts, and Imaginings of Home*, Kulwer Academic Publishers, Boston, Dordrecht, London, 2003.

^{iv} Bhabha quotes the famous speech in support of his argument about the operations of colonial mimicry in *The Location Of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.87