

“Up and down the City Road”: London in the Other’s Eyes¹

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The IAFOR International Conference on the City 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper probes into two facets of the life of Indian immigrants in post-war London portrayed in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. On the one side, there is the expected and familiar outburst of nationalistic xenophobia on behalf of the domestic population of this urban landscape, triggered by the arrival of numerous immigrants from the Commonwealth countries during the fifties and the sixties, and fuelled by the fact that all of them seemed to have come to stay. However, on the other side, almost the same amount of detestation for the former colonisers is demonstrated by the Indians themselves: both the newcomers and those who have already spent some time in this hostile environment. This intense dislike is pervaded with their own nationalistic feelings and tinted by patriotic love for the far-away country of origin. In this exquisite study of the confrontation arising between two differently coloured races, of the clash between the East and the West, the conflict of the Self and the Other, Desai humorously translates nationalism into nostalgic intolerance in the hearts of the young prejudiced Indians. Consequently, one of the main protagonists, despite being imbued with British culture since an early age, concludes that the time has come for Indian immigrants to take over London, spread over England, feed the Brits on Indian dishes, clothe them into Indian costumes – in one word, ‘strike back’ by doing everything that the colonisers had done in their country and to their people.

Keywords: London, the Other, Indians, coloniser, immigrants

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The International Academic Forum
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¹ This paper is part of the research project “National, Regional, European and Global Framework of Social Crises, and Contemporary Serbian Literature and Culture”, financed by the Serbian Ministry of Education and Science (Project no. 178018).

Introduction

Literature and history have always been inseparably and dialogically related to each other, since the socio-historical background both shapes a literary work and is reflected in it. Anita Desai's 1971 novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is no exception in that sense, as it represents a testimonial to life in London in the sixties, viewed by immigrants of Indian origin, according to the statement by the author herself: "*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." (as cited in Jee Jha, 2007, p. 157).

The protagonist of the novel, Dev, a young man from Calcutta, joins his friend Adit Sen in London, where the latter has lived and worked for several years, having married an Englishwoman named Sarah. Though Dev's initial idea was to study economics and then go back home, especially as he is often confronted with xenophobia there, he eventually starts liking London so much that he stays to live and work in England. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* thus confirms the statement made by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, in their study of Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*², about the "recourse to the city by the colonials in order to find an identity" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2004, p. 89), since being has to be positioned in the city as the centre, while the margins represent nothingness.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to reveal why Dev liked London so much as to decide to spend the rest of his life there, by following his steps through The City as not only the centre of a former empire, but also an urban landscape at times both strangely familiar and surprisingly enticing to a newcomer from its largest colony, India.

London in the Other's Eyes

The novel starts with an extremely picturesque description of Clapham, a south-west London district, and within the first sentence the author mentions: birds, new-leafed hedges and "milk bottles on the steps" (Desai, 1985, p. 5). But not only does the reader enter the physical world of this community, since the passage also includes other audio-visual elements, such as colours and sounds emanating from the following words: bright; liquid light; "the milky fingers of morning"; "silver caps of the milk bottles"; brass door knockers; rang; clinking and clanking; good-morning voices; "ticking of the watch"; bird-and-bottle sounds; and, last but not least, "red roofs and blackened brick walls of Clapham" (Desai, 1985, p. 5). This last phrase at once creates in the reader's mind the image of the favourite British dwelling, the so-called terraced houses or terraces. Their most important connotation is that they are usually inhabited by people of limited means, which immediately though subtly posits the protagonist in the right milieu.

The second stereotype about British culture, which has already become its symbol, is mentioned right after that: the protagonist craves to drink a cup of tea. However, in this context it is no longer a symbol of Britain itself, but of its former colony – India,

² Which was published in 1967, just four years before Desai's novel.

and therefore has implications linked with the culture of that country, from which Dev has emigrated, and where he used to be served by his mother or their servants, which is evident when he recalls “the cup of tea that would have been brought to him if he were at home in India now, by a mother fresh from her morning prayers, or a servant boy scorched and sooty from a newly made fire” (Desai, 1985, p. 6). Having just arrived in London, moving from a collectivist East Asian to an individualist European culture³, he concluded that “It was the first lesson his first day in London taught him: he who wants tea must get up and make it.” (Desai, 1985, p. 6).

Another stereotype, this time in reverse direction, regards the famous Indian meal, but eaten in London and not in its country of origin: “the chicken curry with which the Sens had celebrated his arrival in England” (Desai, 1985, p. 6). It is well-known that Indian cuisine has become an integral part⁴ of British gastronomy, and in 2001 the then foreign secretary of the UK, Robin Cook, acknowledged that – as one of the most popular dishes in the country, and having replaced the notorious fish-and-chips – “Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.” (Cook 2001). When we read these words we cannot but realise that what Desai wrote in 1971 became British reality in the 21st century: “No one shall cook stews any more, or bangers and mash. Let us feed them all on chilli pickles, *tandoori* chicken and *rassum*.” (Desai, 1985, p. 62).

Talking about food and drinks, it is well-known that the most important symbol of London is the pub, which is meticulously depicted in the novel. The famous 17th century MP Samuel Pepys in his diary “described the pub as the heart of England” (Fletcher 2013). The pub is the first place in London in which Dev’s knowledge of Britain, gathered through the literary works of the English authors⁵ he had to study at school, puts him in a strange position of feeling that he had already been there and at the same time that he sees the original place for the first time. In order to conjure up the atmosphere of the London pub, Desai presents to the reader the following pieces of the jigsaw puzzle: “the rich, plummy, semi-darkness of the local pub, lit by the gleams of glass, brass pale ale and Sunday leisure”; “a wooden bench by the wall”; “the “mullioned windows,” the “horse brasses” shining against the stained woodwork, the “casks” and mugs and portly British faces”; the scarred tabletop; “the rich foam of ale frothing over the tumbler tops”; “New moons and half moons of tumbler stains on the worn tabletops”; “The strange and hieroglyphic variety of horse brasses dangling from the wainscot”; “The tumblers hanging upside down on their hooks”; and again she adds sounds above the picture: “The pop and gurgle and swizzle and gush. The growl and hum and chuckle and swish.” (Desai, 1985, pp. 10-11).

³ See more about the dimension of individualism/collectivism in Hofstede 2001.

⁴ There are about ten thousand Indian restaurants in the UK, and this number also shows the popularity of Indian food in the country of the former coloniser. Many of these restaurants are in London, so for example, Brick Lane is nowadays famous because it accommodates numerous curry houses as part of the large British Bangladeshi community, the so-called Banglatown.

⁵ Desai’s explanation of this phenomenon – that “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” (Desai, 1985, p. 10) – immediately recalls the legendary words of Stuart Hall: “When I first got to England in 1951, I looked out and there were Wordsworth’s daffodils. Of course, what else would you expect to find? That’s what I knew about. That is what trees and flowers meant.” (as cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2003, p. 457).

The second instance when Dev sees the original for the first time, but already has some presupposed knowledge about the place, is in the High Street, where he recognises parts of his mother country. Namely, in the colonial era, many Indian towns were constructed as imitations of London and other British towns, so consequently:

strolling lopsidedly down the High Street, it seemed to him he was strolling down the Mall of a Himalayan hill station, the Mall of Simla or Mussoorie or Darjeeling or any one of the little towns that heat-maddened, homesick British colonists had created in the incongruous Himalayas, created in the shape and memory of little English country towns and little English suburbias, left oceans behind. ... Now, recognising in the High Street those echoes of the Indian hill station Malls, he realised that the holiday retreats of his childhood had not been the originals he had taken them to be, but copies. The original existed over here, in the High Streets of London's suburbs and England's villages. Here were the bow windows and the red roof tops, the coffee shops and the dipping side lanes, the strolling crowds and dogs on leashes, the cakes and flowers and magazines on display. (Desai, 1985, p. 13).

For Dev, the High Street is an 'echo' of India, as he has believed that India is the original, and in his eyes the coloniser's city is the space marked by otherness in the same way as India is otherness for the Brits. In this interplay of hybridity and imitation we can recognise Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, of being "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86).

Strange as it may seem at first glance, Desai makes many comparisons between London and Indian cities, other than the layout of the Malls, which becomes only logical when we think about the mutual influences of both the centre on the margin, and vice versa. Thus, for instance, the Victorian era also left an important mark on architecture in the colony:

Whenever chance takes him past Hyde Park, he stops to walk up to and stare at the Albert Memorial. Its ballooning grotesquerie, its fantastic black-magic brew of marble, bronze, mosaic, brass, black and white colours, all drawn out, beaten, and billowed out into the most fearful shapes – like a piece of architecture having a nightmare following an ample Victorian repast – recall to him similar nightmares of stone and marble in India: the Victoria railway station and the University, the Clock Tower and Flora Fountain in Bombay; the Victoria Memorial and the Marble Palace in Calcutta; the big-thighed, deep-lapped, pigeon-nestling statue of Victoria outside the Old Delhi railway station – all these pockets and stretches of Victorian India which continue to have a life of their own, a dream life out of touch with the present. (Desai, 1985, pp. 83-84).

Another similarity that Desai points to are bazaars, which represent Indian atmosphere in the very heart of London:

"This could be one of our bazaars," says Dev, standing stockstill in the middle of Petticoat Lane. "It is a bazaar, Sarah, really it is." Out in the open, between grimed walls, there is an Oriental turmoil of shove and bustle, push, pinch and pickpocket. There are jugglers of china cups and glasses, there are hangers displaying coats with secret rents and dresses with crooked hems, hot dog vans streaked with mustard, toffee apples and ices, prams and pearly kings, guitars

and mouth-organs. To make it all the more authentic, there are even Indian traders with little trays of Moradabad brassware and Kashmir papier-mâche. (Desai, 1985, pp. 60-61).

The same atmosphere is found in another London market: “With its open-air booths, its leisurely crowds and loud brass bands, Portobello Road has the air of an Indian bazaar though not its appearance” (Desai, 1985, p. 70), but here again Desai underlines the contrast between such binary oppositions⁶ as the centre and the periphery, the self and the other: “Dev, accustomed as he is to the Indian trader’s obsession with the newest, the “novelties” – in plastic and tin and nylon, wanders glaze-eyed at the profuse manifestation of the young English people’s obsession with the past” (Desai, 1985, p. 70).

On the other hand, “the rowdy, libertine Indian atmosphere” in London bazaars is a sign that the situation has changed and the colonies are ready to strike back⁷, so when Sarah tells Dev and Adit: “It seems to me the East India Company has come to take over England now” Dev elatedly and joyfully shouts: “Let history turn the tables now. Let the Indian traders come to England – the Sikhs and Sindhis with their brass elephants and boxes of spice and tea. Let them take over the City, ... Then let them spread over the country” (Desai, 1985, p. 61).

However, in depicting London, Desai finds many contrasts with Indian cities, as well, for instance regarding the difference in their urban layout. This not only reflects the problem of overpopulation in the former colony, on the one side, and the fact that in the United Kingdom town and country planning is regulated by law, on the other, but also hints to the (post)colonial binary dichotomy between the coloniser as civilised versus the native as savage and primitive⁸, thus considered to be unable to regulate the urban environmental issues:

Cities in India are tight, insular clusters, built like fortresses on plains and sea-coasts – houses, streets, windows, lives, all turned inwards, with rarely a slit left from which to gaze outwards. But, in London, built on hills and with its roads curving and dipping, Dev is caught up, again and again, by the swift wonder of a vista suddenly opening out where he has expected nothing but city. (Desai, 1985, p. 69).

Nevertheless, crowd is an element of Indian life that can again be found in London, too, especially regarding the transportation, and there are many passages in the novel about the infamous London traffic jams, either above or under the ground. In one of these, Desai describes the horrible conditions on London motorways, which were obviously traffic-packed already in the sixties, so what should have been a relaxing weekend escape from the city for the protagonists turns into a true hell:

⁶ See more about this in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2007, especially in the following chapters: Binarism, pp. 18-21, Centre/margin (periphery), pp. 32-33, and Other, pp. 154-156.

⁷ In his exquisite study *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (2005), Andrew Thompson argues that for Britain the main impact of having been such a huge empire remains the question of the vast immigration of people from the Commonwealth, especially India, since the post-war period, which has led to the diversification of the British society.

⁸ Which Edward Said (2003, p. 207) names “the advanced/backward binarism” in his seminal work *Orientalism*, explaining that in this dichotomy the Oriental is “designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded”.

the highways leading out of London on this weekend afternoon soon became more and more of a sticky nightmare in which one had packed and prepared and set off on a journey only to find oneself unable to move, to travel, ones' feet stuck like those of ants to rivers of glue. Every road and lane an unbroken chain of cars, linked together by their obedience to the rule of weekends to be spent in the countryside, inching along, then halting for hours, unable to break up and speed away. (Desai, 1985, pp. 126-127).

Such chaotic situation is not limited only to the rush hour on London motorways at weekends, but is also an everyday feature of downtown traffic, and that can be seen from the following paragraph, which at the same time demonstrates the difference between crowded but well-regulated London streets and the unruly movement of vehicles in Indian cities, including those pulled by animals:

He stood in the middle of Oxford Street, watching the traffic that kept him trapped on an island. Bus, taxi, car swept by – bus, taxi, car, with a monotony, a predictability that made him burn with longing to see one bullock-cart wander into the fray, only to make an alteration in the single, swift tempo of the London traffic. (Desai, 1985, p. 192).

The infernal atmosphere of the former coloniser's capital is likewise aptly illustrated by one of the symbols of London – its tube⁹. This passage follows Dev going down into that hell, almost certainly for the first time in his entire life, with some nice intertextual touches:

Dev ventures into the city. He descends, deeper and deeper, into the white-tiled bowels of Clapham tube station. Down into the stark caverns artificially lit, by way of long, ringing staircases where draughts sweep icily up and down and yet leave the underground airless, suffocating. The menacing slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down – like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison. On the platform, with blank lights glaring at the cold white tiles all around he stands fearfully with his fellow travellers and darts horrified glances at the strange look these people, who had seemed natural enough in the sunlight of High Street, have acquired in these subterranean depths. (Desai, 1985, p. 57).

The ending to his tube experience reveals the protagonist's fascination by London parks, which reflect the city's immenseness and strength: "He does emerge, to his amazement into the most natural freshness and light of Leicester Square – its little park ringed with tulips and green benches on which old men sit, under early summer foliage, reading their papers and scattering crumbs to fat, overfed pigeons." (Desai, 1985, p. 58). There are also many nice descriptions of the Clapham Common, Greenwich Park, Kew Gardens, and other beautiful green spots in the city, but of course the most striking is Dev's experience of the most famous London park: "He has never seen a green like the green of Hyde Park in that Sunday sunshine – never

⁹ London Underground, not only the oldest in the world, since it was opened in 1863, but also among the largest ones, with eleven lines, 270 stations and over 400km of railway tracks, is best described by the following headline of a review at a touristic site: "London Underground: Can feel like hell on earth" (see https://www.tripadvisor.rs/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d187536-r344840060-London_Underground-London_England.html).

seen such a sheen, such a gleam, such a freshness of green in grass and leaf-inlaid sunshine.” (Desai, 1985, p. 63), together with its lake: “the Serpentine, ruffled by the breeze, stirring and waking to the summer sun. The wind bellies out the red and white striped sails of the boats, and swans compete with them, graceful and languid.” (Desai, 1985, p. 64).

On the contrary, opposed to the greenery of London parks, everything else is grey, as Desai highlights in this paragraph, among many others:

Out in grey-blue Trafalgar Square, they stand at the foot of Nelson’s column amongst the fountains. Everything about them is in the colours of a gay-necked pigeon’s feathers. The buildings are slate grey, the sky blue-grey, the shadows deep and violet. The fountains spout and sparkle about the grey column and the grey lions (Desai, 1985, p. 60).

This greyness is above all due to climate in London, mentioned every now and then in the novel, either explicitly or implicitly: “Rain on Sunday. Damp raincoats ... wet umbrellas ... Smell of rain, fish, mildew and mud.” (Desai, 1985, p. 54); “the cold and the rain” (Desai, 1985, p. 63); “a rain-shrouded window in a bus” (Desai, 1985, p. 85); “the drip-drop of rain”; “Long rows of trees weeping down his neck.” (Desai, 1985, p. 105); “dense damp greenery” (Desai, 1985, p. 106); “the grey-and-dun setting of Oxford Street in a drizzle” (Desai, 1985, p. 111); “the drops of rain that were now breaking upon the pane and the clouds that were hanging low over the fields like sodden smoke.” (Desai, 1985, p. 175); “He gazed at Big Ben’s face looming through the first autumnal mists” (Desai, 1985, p. 181); “chill drizzle” (Desai, 1985, p. 208); “The London fog lapped the windows” (Desai, 1985, p. 230), etc.

Of course, British climate is opposed to the Indian sun, and the importance of weather conditions for the inhabitants of a country or region had already been put forth long before it became part of the Oriental/Occidental dichotomy, as early as in Montesquieu’s ‘theory of climates’, which stressed ‘strong passion’ of Orientals as a result of their living in hot climates. Therefore, it is not at all strange when Dev so passionately but also desperately concludes: “You must be masochists to live in this climate ... Masochists. What a climate, what a stinking climate.” (Desai, 1985, p. 55).

This binary opposition has been used by other postcolonial authors as well, among others the late Indian English writer, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who was also a great friend¹⁰ of Anita Desai. In her collection of stories appropriately for this discussion named *A Stronger Climate*, Jhabvala mocks the presupposed impact of climate on passion and sensuality in the East:

It was, they said, the climate; and of course the food they ate, all those curries and spices that heated the blood. Miss Tuhy [an Englishwoman] wondered: if she had been born in India, had grown up under this sun and had eaten the food, would she have been different? Instead of her thin, inadequate, English body, would she have grown up ... like Sharmila with flashing black eyes and a big bust? (Jhabvala, 1986, p. 172)

¹⁰ In fact, it was due to this friendship that Desai became a writer, according to her own words (see <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/how-odysseus-hit-the-hippie-trail-1584502.html>).

Conclusion

As we have seen so far, in this novel Desai repeatedly highlights the contrary feelings of immigrants towards their new country, which Dev emotionally calls ‘teapot’ (Desai, 1985, 17), or ‘emerald isle’ (Desai, 1985, p. 28), or ‘the land of opportunity’ (Desai, 1985, p. 19), but on the other hand he also exclaims that London is ‘a jungly¹¹ city’ (Desai, 1985, p. 10). Endearing as the description of London may sound, it is always spoilt by images of immigrants and the xenophobia they face there, which Desai evokes, for instance, by phrases like the following: ‘hordes of black invaders’ (Desai, 1985, p. 28), ‘Littered with Asians’ (Desai, 1985, p. 16), ‘Bloody Pakistani’ (Desai, 1985, p. 26), ‘*Nigger, go home* graffiti’ (Desai, 1985, p. 181), etc. Therefore, no wonder Dev at first does not want to stay in London, where even small children insult him and his friend by calling them ‘wogs’ in the street (Desai, 1985, p. 14), where there are “three kinds of lavatories - Ladies, Gents and Asiatics” (Desai, 1985, p. 17), so he concludes thus: “I wouldn’t live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted” (Desai, 1985, p. 17).

However, once he arrived in London, England which he had previously met in “all of picture-book nursery-rhyme” (Desai, 1985, p. 85) suddenly came alive, and this renders sense to the title of the novel:

“Up and down the City Road,
In and out the Eagle,
That’s the way the money goes.....” (Desai, 1985, p. 12).

Part of London’s charm for Dev, besides its being a place from his childhood dreams, is certainly contained in what Buruma and Margalit explain when they describe the Occidental city, the City of Man, namely London, as opposed to the Oriental City of God, stating that the modern Western metropolis is “given to commerce and pleasure instead of religious worship” (Buruma and Margalit, 2004, p. 16). As such, The City has also become “a wicked symbol of greed, godlessness, and rootless cosmopolitanism” (Buruma and Margalit, 2004, p. 21), and this is something that constantly bothers the protagonist:

Another thing to which Dev cannot grow accustomed, in all his walks and bus rides through the city, is silence and emptiness of it – the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents – all, to his eyes and ears, dead, unalive, revealing so little of the lives that go on, surely must go on, inside them. The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut ..., of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking and their throats from catching cold, cannot quite be explained to him by the facts of the cold and the rain. ... the emptiness of the city ... utterly silent, deserted – a cold wasteland of brick and tile. (Desai, 1985, p. 63).

This last sentence immediately recalls the following verses of T.S. Eliot’s long poem “The Waste Land”: “Unreal City, Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (Eliot, 1988, lines 60-61), and by that intertextual reference to Eliot’s words, Anita Desai decidedly leaves the final stamp on the protagonist’s reactions to his life in a

¹¹ Thus strangely recalling in the reader’s mind India and its jungles, as well as *The Jungle Book*.

new but already known country, and reveals his feeling of alienation in that Unreal City which we know by the name of London, and which used to be the centre of the greatest world Empire, whose biggest colony used to be Dev's country of origin, India.

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