

Raising the Feministic Voice in Anita Desai's *Voice in the City*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian novelists. She has almost a worldwide audience making her a literary celebrity of lasting significance. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that in her novels we witness a long interrogation of the self through introspection, psychological analysis and stream-of-consciousness technique. *Voices in the City* tells the story of three siblings as they struggle to find meaning while living in the Indian capital of Calcutta. This paper tackles is the imaginary transition of Indian women from a deeply enrooted tradition to fast-changing modernity. Desai displays the rest of the novel through feminist lenses. This paper explores the bitter effects of urban life on families and reflects the social changes in India through the eyes of the characters. Anita Desai portrays how people, especially the poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead a life.

Keywords: struggle, society, humanity, compassion, feminism, quest, and suffering

INTRODUCTION

Women are the main protagonist in most of Anita Desai's novels such as *Cry, the Peacock, Voice in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Bye –Bye black bird; Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day*. They are painted in the various colour and portrayed in many roles from housewives, to enlightened professionals and in their roles from housewives, to enlightened professional an in their restricted atmosphere they have been treated as helpless birds in a cage. For instances, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is half-neurotic due to over attention and much breeding in childhood. Toto's death results in unexpected havoc in her, whereas to the practical Gautama it is no more than a natural phenomenon; he sits as calmly as the mediator beneath the Sal tree. The stubborn daily life of Gautama holds very little liking for the young heroine who is dissatisfied by the ugly scurrying of livelihood. Maya's struggle is of her own creation – this is the trait that governs most of Anita Desai's heroine. Anita Desai is one of the leading Indian women novelists writing in English most of the themes found in her novels are the problems of alienation, immigration, marital disharmony, and so on.

In *Voice in the City*, Anita Desai presents a set of young educated people- Nirode Ray and his sisters Monisha and Amla. As signified by the title, the city which is here Calcutta with its dark pandemonium takes the role of living spirit. It is the city of death. It turns to the tragedy of man in a society where both art and life are in lack of love. Nirode is a person without family who meets failure after failure. And he refuses to make even the most necessary compromises that life demanded. He is neglected even from his mother. His elder sister, Monisha, finds him reduced to shrunken waste thing. Married against her will to a blind moralist she finds her life a real prison and develops an incurable claustrophobia. The other members of the family are not very favorably put. The mother's action is quiet disturbing. The elder son, Arun, has married a clean, efficient, blue eyed nurse never to return home. The younger daughter, Amla is like her brother and sister, real extrovert. She decides to lead a gay life with the painter dharma. But in vain. Thus they all are the product of the same social ethos and are the subject of the same kind of pleasure.

Anita Desai's second novel *Voice in the City* depicts the miserable plight of Nirode, Monisha and Amla in the city of Calcutta. In this novel portrays the failure of a Bengali youth Nirode, the troubled life of Monisha and the commercial art of Amla and the indifferent attitude of their mother. In *Voice in the City* the scene shifts from Delhi to Calcutta which is a strange city of ambivalence city of crowds, now passive and depressed, now sullen and angry. It is of Goddess Kali of death, yet pulsations of life are strong.

Voice in the City the tree voices Monisha, Nirode and Amla- by a process of self denial, trial to explore secrets of permanent peace and delight in an absolutely world dominated by passion. Gilbert Ryle rightly comments: " She pinpoints the exact quality of characters in which she is interested, and the exact degrees against stimulations of that quality, against deficiencies of it, and against qualities which, though different, are brothers or cousins of that selected quality" (Roy, 111) Anita Desai is, thus, like Jane Austen, a master delineator of wonderful characterization. In this, like regards, Nirode and Amla are supplements to Monisha whose struggle as of her creation. Her extraordinary energy of visualization, as is usual with Anita Desai's heroines, provides her with sharp reactions against the degrading social outlooks and ethical degradation. Married for three years to Jiban in a planned, loveless marriage, she is bound to the big ancestral house with Jiban's extended family in Bow Bazar, Monisha is propelled into the unnatural love behind the threshold. Her experience consists of touching the feel to her different in laws, rimmed with alta. "Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another. How they all honour their own feet.....feet before faces here" (55)

In *Voice in the City*, here allusion to the Victorian houses screened by royal palms, which indicate gloomy and dejected minds, languishing in self-isolation and solitary confinement. The houses here have aged with grace, and faintly lit by low gas lamps glowing a pale blue in the foliage" (Swain, 191)

In *Voices in the City* Calcutta is the city of darkness, death and destruction. The city epitomizes the existential agony of Nirode, Amla and Monisha. Amla realizes that the city had changed Monisha her sister. She feels that it seized the girl, turned inside out, giving her an every unreality. Something Amla saw had laid its hands upon her scarred and altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet and subtly uncaring elder sister Amla had remembered." Monisha warns her sister that she should not allow it to oppress her. Nirode and Monisha rebel against the oppressive atmosphere of the city. Monisha tries to reach for her identity but feels that she has "no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing. I can give myself to, and so I must stay. . . . Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice" (Anita Desai 142). And her choice is the tragic end. Amla, a young, career-minded girl, an extrovert unlike her brother and sister, also feels dejected in Calcutta. The city oppresses her and she exclaims to Nirode that "this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?. " (Anita Desai, 121-122) The three of them ask the fundamental questions about human existence and are confused about human nature. Monisha and Nirode speak about the inevitability of death and nothingness, and are victims of self-destructive urges. Amla on the contrary focuses on the positive features of anxiety, anxiety as the road to self affirmation. Desai's Calcutta becomes a part of existential design of the characters in the novel. The disintegration of values in society force individuals to be inauthentic none actualizes.

The increased balconies and darkened courtyard are like "stagnant well water and the bars at the window' make her realize a prisoner. Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows- others bars" (34) . They produce cold response and hatred. And the city, witnessed through the details of daily life, Monisha looks as a menace, a threat; it arouses her indignation. Above all, to Monisha "the mindless, meaningless monotony of empty sound"(78) hour is a blow to subject to peace as well as her integrity, symbolizing the dreadful image of the city against the greenery of the hills in Kalimpong. Contributed to all this is the dignity of being unable to bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked. She becomes an object of pity and suffering ultimately of indifference. It is a household where she is merely tolerated. her suicide relieves everyone of this outsider who could never managed to the well-established middle -class set up in central Calcutta with "an idol in the shape of an umbrella stand" (78) where the folded, black umbrellas are hung "like the offerings of pilgrims and worshiper"(87) The peace of the household is broken by Nikhil's preparation for the examination by the "haunting, warbling, mourning, contrived solely to drive" her mad; it ruins her peace and plan to rest. The household neither respects nor offers privacy, everything is laid bare to their scrutiny "(99) Amla is testified by the usual wetness and rain in Calcutta. Humanity and individual qualities seems to be drowned under the surging wave of struggle for living. Like Monisha, like Nirode, like Amla

" they share one face, one expression of tiredness that even bitterness is merely passive and hopelessness makes the hand extend only feeble, then drop back without disappointment. Two faces one rapacious, one weary gaze at me from every direction" (87) this evokes a feeling of degradation. Humanity and compassion are under attack. *Voice in the City* is a struggle for freedom that Aunt Lila claims to have carried all young women and that she keeps drilling into Amla all the period. Her own daughter Rita has escaped the city after a brief, luckless marriage to do research in physics in Paris. But all the others- Monisha, Amla and even Aunt Lila herself are put in the vicious circle. Only Monisha's and Amla's mother are unaffected as she lives in hills, playing mahajong and card games with her admirer Major Chandha. Her reaction to Monisha's suicides is one of calm recognition. She is Kali and controlled her lips and hands are demon are one.....See how still and controlled her lips hands are because she has at last seized and mastered death, she has become Kali..... Kali is the mother of Bengal; she is the mother of us all. Don't you see, Amla, how once she has given birth to us, she must also deal with our deaths?" (53)

Through subjective suffering- though renunciation of the putrid world, to unite the self and the spirit- the women characters in *Voice in the City* chase their own solutions- Monisha through her attachment for our “our feet in the grass” (105) and Amla through her praise of art and the artist(Dharma). Nirode’s experience with failure reinforces this. Ironically, elderly characters like Aunt Lila interpret it as the diseased young generation and realize dejected. Images of emancipation, the horse in the race course wanting to escape beyond the city, the kite flying high strengthen this Monisha

Nirode fears his isolation from his own past, his childhood home. The image of the house is projected through the symbol of the shell. Nirode is engaged in his small shrunken shell. But he steps out of it for self expression. The house to Monisha is prison. In the first few pages of the novel, the concept of her husband’s house as a prison, cage comes across very strongly. She does not belong to it, does not relate to it. Her husband, on the other hand continues securely in his own age. To him, the house is a symbol of safety and shelter. The house to Monisha is also an object of intimidation. The four tiered balconies with metal railing were so intricately criss-crossed that one could not so much thrust one’s head through them. Enclosing shadows like stagnant well water.

It was enough to depress her. She longs to thrust her head out of the window but the bars are too closely set. After all what was there to see. Other houses, other walls and others bar. In the privacy of her room, she is oppressed by a tarrying sound that repeats like the motif of a nightmare, from which there seemed no escape. The atmosphere in and around the houses seemed to stifle herself expression. She is engaged in the house. Like Nirode, she cannot step out of it. It is impossible to avoid any corner of this house, the damp pressure of critical attention. Everything in this house is impressive in size and duration

Finally, the boil erupts and dejected Monisha dies “misunderstood.....behind those terrifying black bars” (76) this is deadly bondage. Bird imaginations are, now and then, used as mechanism for identification with women. The dove’s stigmas, finely transformed into women, enforce the scorching impact of the harsh treatment as unlike the doves, women, bleeding through a life of suffering, live eat and at periods are forced to Singh. Monisha’s going away from the world of tradition, of affluence, to a place under the sun with the hot gram and ice-cream sellers at the distance, marks the importance of relaxation as a simple source of happiness. The zoo, with its animals and flowers, gives her relief from claustrophobia.

Optimistic Amla, her sister, tingling with life and vivacity at the start of her career as a commercial artist in Calcutta fears that her sister has changed into a ghost, “some unknown and dread entity”. She mistakes her as “a lifeless statue” confronting dry, hard ‘flagstones’ of reality dejected spirits around, sighing and complaining warn Amla of the slow mortality of all fine things. Gradually growing exhausting and dejection with his paralyzing all the seeds of hope and thrill of entering the big city. Under the great pressure and presentation of changing current of established outlooks and all the fine discretion between high and low, right or wrong, start freezing.

Lassitude has overcome her and her generation like a fever. Later, it takes out her all of the vitality and zest of wonderful talent. The city robs her of her art, of her ambition of the career of a designer, She develops more and more stifled: “She felt herself being torn with excruciating slowness and without anesthesia, from the Amla of a day, an afternoon ago. Miraculously, there was no blood, only the broken nerves hanging there exposed to the clammy air, like cut telegraph wires, glinting in moonlight”(143)

Drifting through the darkness, sordidness of the city, Amla occasionally realizes the glorious streaks of freedom in the goose feathers ‘shone like white China’ and the horses glowing with free instincts ready to fly. The conglomeration of ideas is the clash of wants and growing pessimism cluster around the character. Through the dying horse in the race course, the writer steals another opportunity of vivifying the helpless voice of the voices. The ruined city descends, grinning in triumph like fine-women net over the wounded, nervously moving souls to gulp into the inordinate darkness. Amla comes when she has been accused of mistrust and suspicion by Nirode. She makes complete against the city which conspires against who all who really desire to enjoy it. She marks Monisha’s transformation peacefully: “Her head, protruding from the dark window, was like that of a stuffed rag doll with a very white face nodding insecurely on its neck, its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark” (88)

A partly with its atmosphere of underlet reality, of incomplete life, arouses a sentiment of ‘stifling fear’ in her. The pressure of the yellow glint and slight of the dancers make her think of delight as the most ‘rotten sensation’ of all in Calcutta. Through her once again the novelist has attempted emphasize the artificiality, imitation, the perversity and antagonism of city life. The singing women and the harmonium player, disclose another ugly scene of the devil city. The lustful eyes of the man tell more of the debasing standards of moral values. The raw passion of the strolling musician, the immediate reply of the audience let Monisha realize of the endless devastation to which thoughtless emotion leads.



CONCLUSION

Monisha in Desai's *Voices in the City* is also a victim of a loveless marriage. Monisha is also deprived of her husband's understanding and emotional support. Her terror arises out of her self-awareness, which makes her conscious of her deplorable existence, chained and framed by the patriarchy of her milieu. Amla on the other hand fights against these hostile situations boldly. She has the courage to go in the opposite direction. At times she also responds in the Child ego state, when the city oppresses her. The artistic circle of the city gets exposed in the portrayal of the characters of Amla, Dharma etc. Calcutta with Goddess Kali as its presiding deity is both a creator and a destroyer of her own character.

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