



INTER WOMEN RELATIONS IN THE NOVEL OF ANITA DESAI IN VOICES IN THE CITY

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Abstract

Women in the Anita Desai fiction embody the author's far psychological insight awareness and harmony. They are focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the world from which they are alienated. There are some of the questions Desai needs to explore through her women characters. Her themes certainly touch the raw nerves of human experience. This is the case in voices in the city as well. In 1965, Anita Desai published her second novel voices in the city, which revealed the Calcutta seen by a group of aristocratic siblings and she left India for the first time to visit England. Voices in the city are based on the life of the middle class intellectuals of Calcutta. It is an unforgettable story of a bohemian brother and her two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values. In many ways the story reflect the vivid picture of India's social transition a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead and the emergent one's not fully evolved. The novel describes the bitter effect of the urban living upon an Indian family brought up in luxury and magnificence by an over indulgent mother nirode settles down in Calcutta and became engrossed in his bohemian life , while his elder sister Monisha lives out a servile existence within the rigid and stiff confines of a traditional Hindu family. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode not bear her stifling existences in the household of a wealthy old Calcutta family.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is one of the renowned cotemporary Indian women novelists in English. One of her recurring themes is the struggle of women to assert their independence in a restrictive Indian society. In her novels, she depicts the cultural and social changes that India has undergone to certain periods. She explores the power of family and society and the relationship between family members. She also depicts the aspirations and struggle of ordinary women in their homeland and focuses on the

obstacles encountered by these women who are suppressed by Indian society. Her novels revolve around themes of alienation, search for self-identity, and inter-cultural connections and survival.

She is rated as a great artist chiefly in her characterization, displaying psychological insight into the inner self, painting a realistic picture of Indian setting and background. But it is her deep interest in her women and their reaction to the various aspects of life

that add a new dimension to her novels. Not only does she excel in portraying these feminine characters but also makes a psychological study to lay bare the innermost feelings of these women.

Female characters are given prime importance in all Anita Desai's novels in which she focuses in displaying the innermost feelings and deep recess lurking in the hearts of these women. In all her major works like *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Bye-Bye Black Bird, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, In Custody and Baumgartner's Bombay*, she lays equal emphasis on the feminine characters and takes special interest in projecting the essential features that dominate their characters.

Desai brings about a new dimension to the Indian novel by drawing upon the troubled sensibility of a woman in an absurd world. Her characters like Monisha and Amla are lonely, anxious, estranged and suffer from a sense of alienation and identity crises. These female protagonists find themselves entrapped in oppressive environment of their family situations. She delves deep into the psyche of her protagonists and provides an insight into their state of alienation. For ages woman have been assessed by male standards and forced to play subordinate roles as the obedient wife, the self-sacrificing mother and dutiful woman. In the Indian Society, woman in real life as well as the fictional world has been presented as weak, modest and dependent.

Her novel *Voices in the City* is an examination of the plight of sensitive and

independent women caught in the web of the hostile society. It dramatizes the emotional turmoil of the two neglected female protagonist, Monisha and Amla. It projects their voices to struggle for life in the formidable city of Calcutta. Life in big cities is so complex. It is busy and time consuming that one hardly has got time for oneself and family.

WOMEN TO WOMEN RELATIONSHIP: VOICES IN THE CITY

Voices in the city were published in 1965. *Voices in the city* present a moving portrayal of Monisha, who like Maya suffers emptiness, but unlike Maya she taught herself docility. She has learned to suppress emotions.

Chakranarayan hails this work "a lyrical novel with a difference (89)"

Anita Desai cleverly presents theme of loneliness in a crowd by presenting the crowded city of Calcutta where the three brothers and sisters feel left alone. The whole novel depicts three protagonists who come to the city with all the energy and enthusiasm to work and establish them but all their creative energies do not coverage in a common point of integration. Each character in the novel performs a particular kind of activity and each activity encounters only failure. The novel focuses that these failures are related to the actions of the three central characters. Their lives are shaped by their mother in the unconscious and mother discovers the unconscious influence from foster mother, which is none other than

Calcutta city. The characters waver between their success and failure. At the end, they realize their futility of their struggle.

Voices in the City are a story of three siblings, Amla, Nirode and Monisha and their different ways of life in Calcutta. The novel is divided into four sections. The first three are named after a trio of young adult siblings from a Himalayan village. They are separated for different reasons and they have moved to Calcutta. They struggle a lot. They search for their identity and struggle for survival and freedom in the crucial city. The narrative follows each sibling individually. Desai illuminates the myriad ways that their respective social class defines their self-identities.

Voices in the City offers a moving picture of the life of another Maya named Monisha. Like Maya, Monisha also suffers emptiness within as well as without but unlike Maya, Monisha has stilled her emotions and has trained them to submit. Maya pushes Gautama off the roof so as to protect her world of sensuous abundance but Monisha sets herself afire to reach the case of intense feelings. Anita Desai depicts her awareness and understanding of the social and cultural pattern and values of India. This novel reveals her personality as an uncrowned queen of the emotional world of woman. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar very aptly observes:

In Anita Desai's novel (Voices in the City), the inner climate of sensibility that lours or clears of rumbles like thunder suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than the outer weather,

the physical geography or the visible action. Her fate, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility – the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is all at ease among the barbarians and the Philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists.

Here Anita Desai offers a moving picture of monisha's married life that is married against her wishes in a middle class stole family, grossly unsuited to her inclinations. Her husband jivan ranked even lower on the scale he is an uncontrolled vacuum and a solid well. To monisha her marriage was the most excruciating of all social institutions that traps and tortures her isolated, sensitive psyche:

"She questions herself: is what my life is then?"

Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion

And pain, never to arrive at a solution, only a conundrum

Is that, then life (78)?"

Suffering is the reality of life. This fact is the backbone of the story of voices in the city. Human being must offer suffering highlights the fact that we are frail of human beings; that is to say, we are not god. Some, however, have no greater ambition than to be their own god. They are "antitheists" – self god. Suffering aids us in seeing the real worth of things. A fresh spring day make the soul ecstatic family and friends take on a new preciousness.

In the voices in the city nirode, mother has suffered immensely is polished, educated woman with fine sensibilities. She is graceful and aristocratic woman, but she abhors her decrepit husband. Her husband is coarse and not a suitable companion. He carries a penchant of malice. Her illicit relationship with the major is a means of escape from her unfulfilled relationship with her husband.

IMPACT OF INDIAN SOCIETY ON THE WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP

The adverse effect of society on Monisha and Amla is strong and it is even stronger on her brother Nirode. As the present thesis is concerned with the predicament of the female protagonists, the whole characteristic features of Nirode is not taken for analysis. However, the character of Nirode cannot be completely ignored. His depression, dejection, longing for affection and love play a very significant role in their contribution to the predicament of Monisha and Amla.

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By placing her women protagonists Monisha and Amla in the context of a traditional joint-family system in the soulless city of

Calcutta, Desai examines their predicament from the psychological angle. Deftly introducing several incidents involving the confrontation between these characters and society, Desai analyses the agony experienced by such victims. An examination of various significant events, that contribute to the plot development, demonstrate how sensitive women are forced to sink into a world of despair and disillusion by unsympathetic people around them. 93 Generally Anita Desai describes the sad and frustrating aspects of married life, but modern marriage reform is indeed grounded on these two principles – first that the individual's emotional life and subjective choice are of supreme importance for the personality process and secondly his or her social economic and political interests must be considered as imperative as the adjustment of the body to the physical world.

However, Anita Desai depicts the changing reality of woman's need. She is not the self effacing kind of traditional woman. One cannot justify her social responsibility for Nirode's predicament. It is her helplessness which is not being able to pretend devotion to an unfit husband. The wanton wife points out the defiled, mother who indulge in love outside marriage. This is the changing reality of idea of the woman and her individual self but nirode cannot compromise with her circumstances. Therefore he must live in penury. However her selfish desire for fulfillment is the cause for her son's predicament, but she is conscious of her emotional needs. Ofima's personal need as a woman clash with her role as a mother; the severity of this conflict

and nirode's hatred at the name of the major is portrayed realistically. This aspect of social reality is presented clearly, where both the mother and son are at loss. Ofima cannot play the role of mother confidently as seen in the last part of the novel, where she is brought in person at monisha's death. Suffering produces a vivid of purgation of feeling and emotions. Nirode who was detached from the members of his family, regains his capacity to feel and sympathize with them in the face of monisha's death. He experiences tenderness towards them, which can be witnessed in these lines from the novel:

“He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as he rejoiced

In his sensation of touching other flesh, other's pain,

Longed to make them, mingle with his own (249)”

He realized that he is not beyond feelings, distress and grief.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF CALCUTTA

Monisha wishes to have peace and silence which she does not get. In her in-laws house, she does not mind the great amount of work she is made to do. But the fact that she is always under the scrutinizing eyes of others, causes her discomfort. It seems to threaten her individuality. The fact that she is childless and is incapable of bearing a baby snatches from her the privacy, even of her own room. In such circumstances when she realizes that her husband Jiban is unable to

understand and fulfill her emotional needs, she begins to grow world-weary. Monisha's unnatural silence and unobtrusiveness only emphasize the distance she has covered from „reality into realm of colourlessness“ .

Philosophy is a great fascination for the heroines of Mrs. Desai. It is this philosophical interpretation of sentiments that regulate the pattern they follow. In moments of difficulty, she recites passages from the Bhagavat Gita. She obligates herself with higher objects like the fruits of action, attachment, involvement, wisdom. These contrive to explain substantially her detachment through which the spiritual quest is made towards a greater attainment. Peace is the ultimate wisdom to end all misery – this principle captivates her for the attainment of meditative mind that will enable to land in a visionary secluded world of her own, devoid of all misery.

The city is the significant motif in the novel. Anita Desai traces the relationship between the city and those that it harbors in a metaphorical manner. It is symbolic of all human activity with its “shadow, stillness and silence” on the one hand and its coagulated blaze of “light and sound odor” on the other. The young intellectuals are caught in this fray and struggle to surface in this “monster” city that has-

“No normal healthy, red blooded life but

One that is subterranean underlit, stealthy

And odors of morality (6)”

Anita Desai has shown

“Different meandering ways and tortours laves the

Artist of various shades and temperaments take and what

Relationship they have with society”

The mother is transformed from a sweet, sensitive, accomplished beauty into a coldly, practical and possessive woman having no human warmth and tenderness even for her own children.

She tells Dharma

“I saw such terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes

When he came to kalimpong, he never followed her.

He used to lie back against his cousins Idle and contented

Contented I think, in his malice (V.C. 207)”

Desai reveals that a true picture of the feminine world, against which Monisha reacts as:

Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (VTC 120)

CONCLUSION

In one form or another, the theme of marital discord dominates the contemporary fiction, may it be of British, American or Indian origin. It is one of the central themes in the works of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai and others. Marital discord, the conflict in married life, is as old as the institution of marriage itself, although it has varied in degrees from time to time and from person to person. In the pre-industrial era, men and women who came together in marriage shared cultural values, mutual commitment, trust and faith which subordinated the interests of the individuals resulting in the smooth relationship of the family. There were tensions and maladjustments in their marital relationship too, but the moral and religious convictions, economic dependence and the fear of social disapproval kept them together. “Marital discord represents a breakdown in the consensus and co-operation of the married couples. Usually, marital discord originates when rivalry develops between the partners by internal and external manifestations like separation, physical violence and vituperation. They drift apart when they are unable to sort-out their problems which result in the strain and tension in their relationship.” According to C.B.Mamoria, “Desertion and divorce are the final tragic denouements of family disorganization” (Mamoria.1960:384).

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