

ANGST IN ANITA DESAI'S *VOICES IN THE CITY*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Literature of any particular era should present the existing socio-cultural perspective. The Indo-English writers have their own innovative literary style to observe and interpret the inherent predicaments and anxiety. This paper is an attempt to focus the life of every human being suffering from their past and being deliberately ensnared to surrender himself/herself to the world of alienation. Anita Desai's "Voices in the City" is the milestone in delineating the pathos, agonies and the element of keeping oneself aloof from the outside world. Desai is much interested in depicting the real view of each character- be it the protagonist of antagonist. With all these complexities among the characters, she has remarkably mingled the concept of existentialism, the hollowness of modern man prevalent everywhere. Nirode- the protagonist is the epitome of how a human being is compelled to become an escapist and then confines and surrenders himself to the peculiar norms of society. Reading the text would lead the reader to interpret Nirode as anti-hero as well. The factors which entitled him as anti-hero are here the flaw in himself as we have in the tragedy of Shakespeare but the nightmarish memories of past imposed on his equilibrium. It seems that at certain extent, Desai's characters reflect the unconventional sense of despair preponderant every time apart from the traditional characters who always believes to be triumphant after grappling with the situation. We find few concepts like aimlessness, chaos and hopelessness which are very much influenced by "The Theatre of Absurd" Desai has also highlighted how the Cultural imbalances make a drastic impact on the individual's perception of life.

The reputation of Anita Desai as the sublime Indo-English literary writer rests not only as she is interested in describing Indianness but she feels the acute pain of the victim and then poured the element of sensitivity to it.

Anita Desai (b.1937) is one of the major second generation Indian-English novelists. For Anita Desai, a novel is:

“I mean the human condition itself which is only superficially affected by the day-to-day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies. The only way to create a sense of meaning in the face of such hopelessness is to relive the past.”¹

During the 18th to 19th century man has discovered new worlds of science. Industrialization, urbanization and modernization changed the individual, family and social set up on economic and emotional grounds as well. It pushed man towards psychological traumas and tensions. This led man, since late 19th century, to discover a new world inside himself – ‘The Unconscious’ world of psychology. The privilege of gaining an insight into human nature influenced the literary writers, critics and the readers deeply. And its credit goes to Freud’s theory of Sex and human psyche – by which to interpret man’s bondage to his sexual compulsions, or to the repressions that society forced on him. Later on, this influence was strengthened by Adler’s concept of inferiority complex and Jung’s theory of collective unconscious i.e. unconscious of the society or people. Modern man’s predicament is well explained by Heinemann when he says:

“The problems of existentialism...are, in a narrower sense, expressive of the present crisis of man and, in a broader sense, of the enduring human condition.”²

In this sense, Anita Desai is “an existentialist in Indian-English Fiction.”³ As she repeatedly deals with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation for the individual’s identity and relation to reality.

Virginia Wolf is a remarkable figure in the field of psychological novel. To her, the business of the novelist is the exploration of the human personality so as to attain a vision of life’s meaning. Her characters live, think and unfold in time and hence her preoccupation with the problems continues.

Mrinalini Solanki observes:

‘the novels of Anita Desai depict the workings of unseen forces on the human mind and psyche...she portrays with amazing accuracy the inward odyssey and psychic upheavals of hyper-sensitive people struggling to survive in difficult human situations. Desai’s characters are exceptional beings who are victims of anguish, anxiety and a terrible self-consciousness, and are unable to accept life as it comes. Consequently, they suffer from terrible inner conflicts.’⁴

The very title *Voices in the City* itself indicates the central theme of alienation and isolation of the modern man. As Matthew Arnold says:

“In the sea of life enisled
We mortal millions live alone”⁵

Science has squeezed the world into a foot-ball, but we have failed to communicate and this dilemma has created individual shells. Everybody wants to escape and screaming for help. But in this fast urban life nobody is ready to hear other's voices, emotions, dreams and the screams turn into mere noises – meaningless cries. The frustrated being revolts against this deaf society but fails to influence or change it, because under the pretext of revolt actually everyone tries to escape from this inner failures, and real 'I' and so he neglects the routine life, withdraws himself and hides in the dark corners of life: But this blind detachment leads doom not only upon his head but to all those related to him. Thus the theme of the novel is the clash between the city and its voices. As T. S. Eliot says:

“We are the hollow men...
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless.” 6.

Anita Desai, in *Voices in the City* represents Nirode, his two sisters Monisha and Amla as an 'individual' and their 'terror of facing, single handed the ferocious assaults of existence' 7 with the help of memory. As Bergson says:

“The past is not past but continues into present through the vehicle of memory. But memory does not recover the past as it was. For each person reconstructs his past in a unique way dependent upon his experiences, prejudices and opinions. Thus the way a character experiences time, helps the reader to grasp the very essence of that character.” 8

Thus, Anita Desai shifts the focus from present-future conflict to past-present one. 'The Clock Time' stops and explores time created within the mind of the individual which is called 'The Psychological Time', which has no chronology. And to make this complexity aesthetic Anita Desai dramatizes her style. Her language becomes more poetic when she says:

“The suitcase is never packed, the tickets never purchased, and the ship sails, leaving one ensnared in the net of sleep. He was not one of those born with a destination balanced like a boiled egg upon a silver spoon in his mouth. He was merely a traveler.” 9

Nirode is the chief protagonist – the 'self' that is ever alone despite its continuous search for connection. To understand his present we have to search his past. Once he fell down during horse riding in his childhood and left the entire outer adventurous world and ceased himself in the lap of his mother. On the other hand, Arun - his younger brother's bright career and father's affection for Arun creates inferiority complex in him. Amla, the youngest sister, also confesses to Dharma that father “**was imperiously unfair**” to Nirode. Consequently, Nirode lost his “basic confidence” and thus his inability to succeed forced him to be a 'congenital failure'. He says:

“I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder of success, all you find at the top is space; all you can do is leap off – fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly.” 10

Fears of personal inferiority lead Nirode to search for glory and meaning of life. As a boy, he achieves this by running away several times. Being searched for and brought back established his position in his own eyes. And in manhood by rejecting all personal ties of family and society both emotionally and economically, he tries to differ from the common man.

“The intricacies of relationship aroused in him violent distaste.”¹¹

Nirode creates the image of an anti-hero; as his sense of inferiority leads him to seclusion:

“He knew by instinct that he was a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring.”¹²

Nirode thinks of the heroes of Kafka and Camus as his ideals; Elena J. Kalinnikova says:

“Nirode suffers from claustrophobia.”¹³

He does not retain any correspondence with his sisters Monisha and Amla, and does not even reply his mother’s letters. Monisha precisely describes him in her diary:

“I look about and wonder where that Nirode is gone. There is nothing left of him but this is the shell that is gone, the protective covering that one could touch, stroke or knock, without fear, it is gone, and what is left is this snail inside, transparent, fragile, something so bare and irreducible that I start back, I cannot possibly touch anything so exposed, it might bruise.”¹⁴

By detachment Nirode seeks solace in his self-conceived world of imagination which Erik H. Erickson calls – ‘Negative Identity’. Withdrawal is an important solution as it leads to self-analysis by self-communication. But J. Krishnamurti says:

“If you have not laid the foundation, which is love, virtue, beauty and real compassion in the depth of your whole being, then your silence is only the ending of noise.”¹⁵

Nirode’s life is a negation of all beauty, goodness and compassion. He is sick and he is aware of it:

“I am a leper...leave me do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all.”¹⁶

As Bernard J. Paris says about his character Underworld Man:

“His disease is that of being too conscious, too intellectual and it places him far above the stupid normal man of action whom he envies.”¹⁷

Thus his self adoration and inability to reach those ‘Box Wallahs’ is the reason for Nirode’s jealousy not only to Arun but to all those who follow a routine.

As a detached person Nirode can’t work under others and so leaves his job as a journalist. Like Desai’s other characters, Nirode refuses to see himself as a part of an impersonal mass of mankind at large. And to achieve an authentic existence on individual potentialities, Nirode exercises his choice to say “No”. As Anita Desai asserts in an interview:

“I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into despair and so turned against the general current. It is very easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them.”¹⁸

Nirode starts his magazine ‘Voice’ and at the moment of success he abandons that also and ventures to write a play which also fails. Thus by failures he tries to hurt those well established friends who helped him during his unemployment which is called – Vindictive Triumph. The

essence of his problem is aimlessness, fear and a blocking off of consciousness that is why after all these failures he gets nothing - only chaos.

But Monisha's suicide breaks his silence and he regains his human capacity to sympathize with Amla and Aunt Lila's sufferings:

“He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other flash, other's pain, longed to make them mingle with his own which till now had been agonizingly neglected.”¹⁹

But the tragedy of man is that sometimes he knows the right truth and yet due to some instinctive flaw fails to accept the light and continues with the dark unknown. As Eric Fromm says:

“Man's existential contradiction results in a state of constant disequilibrium.”²⁰

Nirode's search for a meaningful existence remains unfulfilled, as he does not follow any path persistently:

“He drifted, a shadowy cipher, and his life consisted of one rejection following another; he loathed himself for not having the true unwavering spirit of either within him. There was only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for.”²¹

Nirode also fails when he compares his mother with Kali – Goddess of Death and says that now I am waiting for death. Earnest Jones calls this attitude Oedipus complex. He was deeply attached with his mother in childhood. But after his father's death, like Hamlet he hates his mother, for her supposed relations with Mr. Chadha. Eric Fromm transfers it from the sphere of sex to that of impersonal relations. Nirode's reaction is intense not only because he loses his share of love but his mother's behavior shakes his cultural identity also. As a young boy he identifies himself with his father. Culturally his mother's behavior violates Nirode's moral and social standards. He cannot digest it and that arouses in him a complex love-hate relationship which strengthens his alienation more and more. Nirode is trapped by an unhappy situation. It makes him an “ill-tempered hermit”. A complex personality, confused and unsure:

“I don't know why I ever got involved in anything...I want to lash out on my own now... whether I sink or swim.”²²

Nirode's rebel against all forms of authority and establishments put him, as D.S.Maini suggests “in a kind of intellectual vice”²³ without any moral or spiritual values, he hates “being responsible for anything at all.”²⁴

Monisha is also a victim of the past. In childhood her lack of parental love and quarrels creates a kind of insecurity and the father's misbehavior forces her to hate the opposite sex. Monisha and Jiban's marriage is lonesome and incommunicative; as Jiban shows negligible respect for his ‘better-half’ and her childlessness throws her into a meaninglessness of life. Discontentment with the environment and the shock she gets out of the incident when she is treated like a thief leaves her lifeless:

“These pettiest of people, they regard me as meaner than they.”²⁵

A loveless relationship with Jiban and others in the family and absence of any creative activity creates a pathetic emotional vacuum. Woman in Anita Desai's world in most human relations are seen to suffer from acute breakdown of communication. Parental, marital and social relations are in a meaningless absurd state. It makes her aware of a void in which she is fixed. She is pursued by “this sense of hollowness and futility.”²⁶

Monisha wants to live alone but the city Calcutta never offered that too. And this frustration cast her aside from her husband, brothers and whole family. She failed to communicate and thus understand life:

“Why are lives such as these lived? At their conclusion, what solution, what truth falls into the waiting palm of one’s hand, the still pit of one’s heart?”²⁷

Dissatisfied with the present, Monisha escapes into the past. It is an escape from conflict – inner as well as outer. At times she thinks of Nirode or her stay with Jiban, at the last posting, out in a district, away from the city and the family: She weaves a web of her own and remains imprisoned in its privacy. She feels:

“There is no escape from it. It surrounds this entire house, imbues it and drowns it.”²⁸

Monisha’s involvement with this self-deception and preference for passive solitude leave incurable wounds in her mind. This “encounter with nothingness” ultimately engulfs her by a depressive reaction of suicide.

She finds her answer in the bleeding doves who carry their suffering with them, but her own options are limited – “Choice between death and mean existence.”²⁹

“I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me... what a waste, what a waste it has been. This life enclosed in a lock container, merely as an observer, so handicapped... I have not give birth not attended death. All the intervening drama was gone by, unwounded itself like a silent blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified me.”³⁰

Many of Anita Desai’s women, have tendency towards violent and destructive behaviour, less on physical level but is more asserted on emotional and mental plane. Monisha puts herself ultimately on fire. Erich Fromm explains such hostile attitudes;

“Life has inner dynamism of its own: it tends to grow, to be expressed, to be lived. When this tendency is thwarted, the energy directed towards life undergoes a process of decomposition and changes into energies directed towards destruction. In other words, the drive for life and the drive for destruction are not mutually independent factors but are in a reversed interdependence. The more the drive towards life is thwarted, the stronger is the drive towards destruction; the more life is realized, the less the strength of destructiveness.”³¹

Amla, the youngest and enthusiastic girl, though born and brought up in the same socio-cultural environment, tries to remain alive through parties, commercial art business and through life with an artist – Dharma whom she considers as an ideal and responsive companion. The image shatters, when Dharma talks about the estrangement between him and his daughter and how cruelly he practices his authority over the young. His apathy towards his wife makes Amla recognize that Dharma, though an artist, is heartless and insensitive to a woman’s value as a human being. Thus she is also not proof against the infection of Calcutta, the city of death, which to her is the monstrous city that lived no normal, healthy, red blooded life but one that is dark, secretive:

“This city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?”³²

Though Amla does not become a pessimistic or destructive, Jit observes the ravages:

“I think you all involve yourself in the tragedies of your own making. I think you all drive yourself deliberately into that dead end where you imagine you will find some divine solution.”³³

R. S. Sharma rightly observes:

“The novel repeatedly turns to the tragedy of man in a society where both art and life are devoid of love.”³⁴

The way absence of love and belongingness increase the chances of hostile reactions in the behaviour of Nirode, Amla also, looks for the ways and means to survive in an environment so suffocating. Nirode and Amla’s illusions about their intelligence and talents, devoid them of their limitations. R. D. Laing believes that

“when the ‘self’ becomes more and more participant in phantasy relationships, less and less a direct participant in real relationships, in doing so it loses its reality.”³⁵

Nirode, in reality, pretends to be what he is not. So is Monisha’s fantasies whereby she is desperately in need of an image for herself. Ironically, this results in her losing awareness of her real identity. Amla, too, unable to unite permanently with Dharma, finds repose in her dreams. But the reality breaks her world of dreams and leaves her behind in pain.

The central anxiety of Nirode, Monisha and Amla is a search for meaning in this disordered life, for identity and ideal love relationships. And the most responsible factor for this chaos in *Voices in the City* or any city of the world is a lack of faith. As Mrs. Dalloway in Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Voyage Out* says:

“What Solitary icebergs we are, Miss Vinrace! How little we can communicate.”³⁶

This is true of the three, Nirode, Monisha and Amla, terribly lonely, as Virginia Woolf says again:

“Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart and his friends could only read the title.”³⁷

Of course, the anxieties and anguishes of Amla get resolved at the end of the novel by regaining the old order of her life in the form of Mother:

“Oh, I see so clearly now, I feel my skin is stripped away and my interior has melted into the exterior, I know it so well. I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I, and she is also everything we have fought for. She is in our consciousness and out unconsciousness. She is all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest.”³⁸

Thus the novel shows the moral conflict between the outer and inner world of a modern intellectual and over-sensitive beings, trapped in their own web.

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