

Souls in Wilderness: A study in Voices in the City

Anita Desai has added a new dimension by writing a novel like *Voices in the city* to the Indian fiction in English. Anita Desai can be regarded as a pioneer in heralding modernism in theme and technique of this novel which one is likely to find in European and American novels written in 1950' and thereabout.

Renowned critic , Meenakshi Mukherjee places Anita Desai in the third phase of evolution and growth of novel in English in India. In the novel 'Voices in the City' 'Voices' is an adjective used by Anita Desai. It connotes the life of alienation, meaninglessness,, senseless, and anonymity being led by the residents of Calcutta. Voices indicate incoherent, senseless sounds which failed to give any specific meaning of action or an individual. Calcutta is inhabited by a large number of people who seem to be swarming and choking and the place as well each other. The city is not only an object but also a symbol having an obsessive emotional and spiritual significance like Hardy's Egdon Heath in *The Return of the*

Native. 'Voices' emerge everywhere but none knows what he or she wants to convey.

In the novel 'Voices in the City' Anita Desai is probing deep into the bottomless pit of human psyche of her characters ---Monisha, Nirode and Amla. She brings the hidden contours into a much sharper focus. The world of her novels is the inner world of her characters who suffer from longings, fears, apprehensions and frustrations. It is only the individual and his Kaleidoscopic mind that is of chief interest to her as she does not depict any predilection for the prevailing social or political matters of the lives and times of her characters.

Anita Desai's novels deals with the working of 'inscapes' theory which is adopted by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Henry James. That is why critics have dubbed her novels as nihilistic or pessimistic. Her characters seek their goals in life but they confront with the essential absurdity of life.

The novel explores the inner climate of youthful despair and acute self-consciousness of the three major characters –

Nirode, Monisha and Amla who finds no meaning in his own life and life at all. The three phases one after the other, are entitled after these characters. The final phase is entitled 'Mother' but it, unlike the three preceding phases , presents an external , outside view of mother rather than inscape , as in the case in other sections. As one goes through the novel one comes across adherence to the stream of thought rather than to chronology and logic.

Brought up in a luxury by an over by an over-indulgent mother Nirode settles down in Calcutta . He wants to live in silence and stillness. He gives up his job and thinks about another job. At the end he starts editing a literary magazine 'Voice'. Soon he chucks it up and starts living a life of semi-starvation. Infact he is a rootless drifter or rolling stone that gathers no moss. He is obsessed with failure. At one place he says— " I want to move from failure to failure step by step, to rock bottom . I want to explore the truth. " (Anita Desai *Voices in the City*, Delhi Pocket Books, 1968 pg 40)

Monisha was married against her will into a joint family of rich middle class philistines by her father. She is confined

to the big ancestral house with her husband's extended family in Bow Bazar. The raised balconies and darkened courtyard are like "stagnant well water and " the bars at the windows" make her feel a prisoner .According to her Calcutta is a 'devil city' with a 'dull' vacant,' hopeless face'. She is an intellectual cast among the philistines . Her wardrobe is stocked with Kafka, Dostoyevsky and French and Sanskrit works. Her intellectual aspirations amuse the lady of the household.

Added to this is the indignity of being unable to bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked. The women members of the family discusses her bodily organs physically and insensitivity for medical test that has revealed her inability to conceive. She becomes an object of pity and neglect, ultimately of difference. She is even accused of stealing money from her own room. Her own husband, Jiban fails to stand by her. He said , 'Why didn't you tell me before you took it ? (pg 138) She increasingly gets disoriented and remote from her immediate surroundings. She yearns for the free air of kalimpong. One day she empties a kerosene can on her body and sets herself on fire. Since she had bolted the door , nobody can come to save her.

Monisha's youngest sister , Amla also comes to Calcutta after completing her education in Bombay. She is frolicsome and liberalised. But very soon she is disgusted with her career and social life as a commercial artist. When she meets Monisha at her house she feels that her sister has turned into a ghost some unknown and dread entity. Amla too realizes that Calcutta , as a city saps up the energy and vitality of life from within a human being . She finds dissatisfied spirits all around in Calcutta. Like Monisha , like Nirode and 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 on weary-gaze at me from every direction". (V.C pg 56)

Thus existential concern of Anita Desai's fiction has its roots in a blue blooded experience. The sensibility which is perceptible in her novels is fundamentally Indian but the angst and despair of her hero are of intellectual and spiritual origin.; he suffers because he refuses to conform. His marital needs

are met but his emotional and intellectual needs remain unfulfilled. He like the legendary, Trishanku stays midway between the world that he rejects and the world that rejects him. Nirode, Monisha and Amla are all presented as rebels—successful or unsuccessful. They are seen as constituting aristocracy of suffering and non-conformity. Their problems are existential. As rebels they seek ways and means by which they can protect their individuality against the pressures of conformity.

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