

Women Characters in the Novel of Anita Desai: A Study of Monisha in *Voices in the City*

¹Anamika Majhi

¹Assistant professor

Department of English, Silda Chandra Sekhar College, Jhargram, West Bengal

ABSTRACT: Anita Desai is one of the best-known contemporary women writers of Indian fiction in English. Born to a Bengali father and a German mother, she is an excellent example of the bicultural heritage of postcolonial India. Her novel, *Voices in the City*, encompasses the author's experiences in the city of Calcutta, represented in the novel as a locus of wealth and poverty, light and darkness. The central characters, again displaced figures, find their own complexities reflected in the chaotic waters of urban Calcutta. As a woman she is capable of understanding woman's psyche better than the male writers. This paper focuses on the portrayal of women characters in Anita Desai's novels with a reference to *Monisha in Voices in the City*. Anita Desai is one of the leading Indian women novelist writing in English most of the theme found in her novels are the problems of alienation, immigration, marital disharmony and so on. In the *voices in the city* Anita Desai portrays how people, especially poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead the life. Thus the society makes a lot of sudden changes.

Keyword: Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*, portrayal of women characters, Monisha

INTRODUCTION:

Anita Desai's novel *Voices in the City* as well as many of her other works present the difficulties of contemporary Indian culture from a woman's perspective as the author saw it, simultaneously accentuating on the Indian predicament of keeping up one's identity in the world where the old traditions are still present and exert a strong influence on the society; but the new ideas, technologies, and values that come into existence are still too weak to substitute the old one. This mix makes people confused as they do not know what to believe anymore, especially the youth who cannot find its place in life being bound to the familial, traditional customs, but realizing that those values are gradually losing their power and the new ones come, but the youth does not really understand them. This transition is the main theme of the *Voices in the City*.

Anita Desai has carved women's character in her art with her social awareness and insight in her novels. She studied woman in the background of her environment. With special reference to her sensibility through psychological aspects grounded in real incidents of human life. She records the emotional turmoil, chaos and agonies of her oppressed protagonist in a very touching manner. She takes her readers on a journey into the mind of her characters that are sensitive, speculative and complex. Desai's novels lay stress on interior rather than on exterior characterization on motives and circumstances. Her novels are not only concerned with inner experience of characters, but also their inarticulate subconscious life and can be termed as 'stream of consciousness'. They reveal anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptability by threats to individual's identity and relation to reality. Her women characters find the real world, too harsh, unpleased and intricate to survive (Sharma 1983).

Anita Desai has sought to examine the whole range of relationships in her characters and this essentially shapes the thematic value of all her novels. She has explored these relationships with a remarkable intensity and consistency. Anita Desai deals with 'individual' rather than 'society'. She has left the known world of social documentation and skipped the stage of domesticated novels. While the earlier women novelist has confined themselves to the domestic life of their characters, she goes much further and ventures to explore the inner thoughts and feelings of her characters (Vasanji 2008).

Anita Desai, being a woman herself, is naturally inclined to delve on the plight of women in the male dominated Indian society. She tries to depict the intensity of human sufferings seen in the limited context of family and lays emphasis on the values of the individuals. Anita Desai is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Desai's novels explore tensions between the family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her later novels Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-Semitism, the devise of traditions and western stereotypical views of India. Brief introduction of some of the novels of Anita Desai in hereunder (Ram 1977).

It was followed by '*Voices in the City*' (1965), a story about three siblings, Amla, Nirode, and Monisha and their different ways of life in Calcutta. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode sacrifices everything for his career and, Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy Calcutta family. '*Voices in the City*' is a powerful attempt at the exploration and analysis of the dark recesses of the consciousness of its three main characters in the novel. Each main character is oppressed by the hollow and meaningless existence in Calcutta. Each of them is greatly affected by it and finds themselves imprisoned in towards the cell of isolation, psychologically. Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. Her ambitious pursuit drags her through various psychic situations till finally she establishes a contact with her real self and achieves equanimity. B. Ramachandra Rao recognizes Amla's move from revolt to conformity which he terms "surrender" (Rao 1977).

Voices in the City reminds a spiritual, existentialistic odyssey of a journalist, who is quite lean, melancholic, and hungry in the "city of death", Calcutta. The name of this doomed individual, who seems to be bound to the city he dislikes, is Nirode. Such a dull description defines aptly the very essence of the novel, which presents a tragic exploration of the individual suffering that is caused by the intense vulnerability of the young man with very high intellectual potential. Nirode lost his pathway in modern India. Anita Desai digs deeply into the childlike despair, which is constantly irritated by the existential fear.

Anita Desai called the emotional disturbance of the young journalist "the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence". This description is aptly outlining the main challenges Nirode has to go through. The young man seems to be going through the personal crusade against his own self, knowing that he would never be able to win in this fight, and the defeat is close, though he is still attempting to change the

outcome feverishly. The situation is especially well-depicted through the portrayal of the protagonists - Monisha and Nirode. Monisha discovers hamartia (the fatal flaw, which causes the hero's downfall (which is usually tragic) or heroine) too late. In case of Nirode, he reaches hamartia through a strong suffering which annihilates everything inside him, leaving an exhausted body that does not feel the taste of life anymore. The third main protagonist, Amla, is the younger sister of Monisha and Nirode. Their mother is another significant character of the novel. It is interesting to note how Anita Desai depicts Calcutta, which seems to become alive, together with the four people who left their homeland, moved to another city, and plunged into quite a different culture and lifestyle marked by the industrialisation. Calcutta becomes an extremely disastrous, dominating character that strongly influences and affects the manners and moods of the newcomers.

MONISHA:

Anitha Desai's portrayal of Monisha in her second novel, *Voices in the city* makes her the most sensitive and the most poetic of all the characters in the novel. She is an extraordinary woman who reads Kafka and Camus. She is a sensitive woman and cannot understand the taboos of tradition. She reveals herself in minute details.

Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* written after two years (1965) 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. 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 crowded city of Calcutta makes her feel tired in mind and she finds the atmosphere uncomfortable. She leans over and shivers at this ugly sight of the city. Even at night, there is no relief. Images of decay and disintegration endow a suffocating sensation to the entire novel. To Monisha, the stars seem pale with tuberculosis. Monstrous vulgarity of everyday life and the sniveling women and obscene men of the marriage party display spiritual disintegration. Monisha fails to pull herself on amidst this sordidness, the wasteland of civilized humanity. Monisha has incapacity to bear a child, incommunication with her husband and the suspicion of her in-laws, who condemn her as a thief, cause to oblige her to choose between death and mean existence. It is Monisha's diary which serves as her only reliable means of existence, of communication in atmosphere of distrust, envy, ignorance and lack of privacy. In addition to the diary, Monisha finds that Nirode is the only other medium for communicating her feelings and ideas. Neither her husband nor her in laws try to sympathize with Monisha. She fails to adjust herself in her husband's joint family. Her heart is always thirsty of love. That is why she longs for her mother's love and seeks her brother's sympathetic company. In this world, the relation between husband and wife is very delicate and it is based on the better understanding between the two. Having tragically failed to win either the affection of her mother-in-law or the love and companionship of her husband, Monisha is very sensitive to the oppressive domestic environment that she is repelled by the mechanical recitation of the Sanskrit lessons by Nikhil. His sermon gives her some relief like the rain water. Jiban is the prisoner of a conventional culture in which a woman's most important roles – child bearing, cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children - are under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. The elders of Monisha's family are addicted to the feet before faces syndrome. Monisha has to touch their feet all the time and she hates it. She also cannot stand the noise, the sights and the smells of the large household where she is consigned to an iron-barred rooms upstairs. She reveals, "Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows-other bars."

Apart from doing her household chores, Monisha is treated indifferently by everyone since she cannot bear a child; her fallopian tubes are blocked. She is filled with distaste when other talks of her organs and the reasons of not having a child. On hearing the talk of the childless Monisha, She herself consoles, "I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to scrutiny."

Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility, and the stress of living in a joint-family with an insensitive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. Monisha is the victim of the crippling life within a joint-family. Monisha's diary clearly pictures the trauma experienced by her when she finds herself in the midst of unsympathetic relatives. An educated girl with a refined sensibility, Monisha's expectations of happy life are shattered to pieces when her father marries her to Jiban against her will.

CONCLUSION:

To sum up, we can say that in the *voices in the city* Anita Desai shows the picture of lower-class society through different characters like Monisha, Nirode and Monisha. If the people, particularly his mother and the society had not affected Nirode, he would not have left the city. If the family of Monisha had not behaved rudely, she could have led a peaceful life. If the mother had been good, both of them, when suffering in life, would have gone to the mother. From the mother, who is poor and seeks money through ill-manner, Anita Desai portrays how people, especially poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead the life. Thus the society makes a lot of sudden changes. By this novel, Anita Desai render to picture womanly sensitivity .generally women alike male foresees firing in all its methods & acknowledgement. They battle for Equality of women rights historically & politically. They stress on the esteem of females in the fellowship.

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