

Images of Spiritual Escape and Flight in Anita Desai's *Voices In The City*

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Abstract

Anita Desai (born-1937) is the youngest among the entire school of women novelists which emerged in India after independence. She has firmly established herself as a leading light of Indian English fiction. She has a unique style and a voice of her own. The reality of the day finds a reflection in her works. And they are deeply rooted in the Indian ethos. Hence her characters can be easily identified with. Anita Desai focuses more on the spirituality of human life. Her works of fiction portrays the women protagonists mostly in a forlorn environment. Spirituality still remains an aspect of her works which has been highlighted the least. Images of escape and flight are found in abundance in her fictional works. In *Voices In The City* (1965), such images along with the spirituality is evident for all. Altogether these add a distinctive dimension to this novel.

Keywords: spiritual, voices, escape, flight, freedom, life.

Introduction

Voices in the City is the second novel of Anita Desai and was published in the year 1965. It is set in Calcutta – the city of Joy. In the early 1960s Desai spent a considerable time in Calcutta. Her experiences find expression in this book. It is the story of three siblings – Monisha, Nirode and Amla struggling to find meaning in their respective lives while residing in the city of Calcutta. It also includes their brother Arun. The author tries to explore the effects of a conflict between traditional spiritual Indian values and the new ideas of a modernising India on the psyche of young people. Pivotal social and spiritual changes are delineated.

Dominant images of escape and flight abound in *Voices in the City*. After Arun's departure, Nirode feels empowered “– to rise like a clumsy paper kite with a candle lit inside it that rises above... Arun in his crawling train, ... intoxicatingly light and free and powerful.” (*Voices*, 12) Amla describes Monisha as a “lifeless statue” (*Voices*, 148). This stillness

invades even Dharma's world which reflects the paradoxical quality of all their lives. Oscillating between these two extremes, the characters fail to realise and analyse their true selves.

Initially Dharma appears to be in control of himself as well as his own situation. However the escapist and egoist within him express himself later on just like any of the others. He is able to draw people like Nirode and Amla. Dharma's neutrality and concentration remains undisturbed. The move from Calcutta does not seem to have uprooted Dharma. Being self contained he is almost like an invisible God. Nobody misses him in reality and people seek him whenever they are in need of him. Dharma is neither passive nor has he withdrawn from active life. On the contrary, being very much alive he is aware of the nature of his own passion. But it appears that he needs no one.

Monisha has an inherent desire to be non-obtrusive. She decides to go the whole hog in order to annihilate herself and in the process withholds from herself every single way of sustenance. Ironically she is brimming with passion when she ends up destroying herself. Why is it that she retreats into a frozen state of being instead of marching towards fullness? All routes to creativity and passion for Monisha are blocked an emotional and physical frigidity. She is unable to conceive as something is wrong with her fallopian tubes. This barrenness affects her deeply. It is recoil from her mother's voluptuousness. Monisha's married life stands in sharp contrast to her own upbringing. The lascivious atmosphere of the house at Kalimpong has a very strong projection in the novel. Slowly one begins to wonder whether Monisha has ever lived there. The father's revenge on his own daughter seems to be motivated and directed more towards his wife than his daughter.

So, who is then able to successfully draw himself away from the narrow concerns of the self and relate to the outside world? It is neither Jit Nair nor Sonny Ghosh and not even Nirode's mother. Successful to some measure is Amla, only to a certain extent is Nirode and to the greatest measure is David Gunney. When Amla senses Dharma's rejection, she moves away from him. She is also able to visualise the worth of the commercial world of the Basu's. Amla is also able to fathom Jit's failures and self-concern. Ultimately Amla has arrived at a juncture from where she can proceed towards completeness and wholeness; born out of a critical sympathy and true love and compassion. She pays Monisha a visit. This is a gift from Amla, as it is an earnest effort on her part to draw her out. Monisha's mother-in-law's attitude froze this attempt in the initial stage. Being more spiritually alive than the rest, Amla also

tries to fathom Nirode and his troubles. She does not allow her heartbreak and disappointment in love to overpower and destroy her. On the other hand, Nirode draws personal failure towards him by travelling in the opposite direction. But the death of Monisha acting as a catalyst brings him back and relates him once again to this mortal world. Nirode's withdrawal is unlike Monisha's; and is not extinction.

However, the withdrawal of both Nirode and Monisha can be viewed from a different angle as Nirode is a man and Monisha a woman. Hence even while withdrawing from life Nirode can afford to give it a particular shape, whereas Monisha is unable to do so. They are two versions and two aspects of the same personality. The difference in the nature of their withdrawal and its consequences can be attributed to a contrast of sex. It seems quite clear that their father has exacted revenge on the two older children. Monisha, being like her mother and Nirode being her mother's favourite; were the underlying factors.

There exist strange overtones and undertones in Nirode's relationship with his mother. He was once extremely close to her but now completely alienated from her. During the period of his illness, Monisha takes care of him like a mother. Speaking about Nirode's relation with his mother, Monisha says:

Not of mother in the years when he so inexplicably turned against her, just after father's death, when we thought he would grow close and dearer to her than ever before but of mother when we were all very small... (*Voices*, 127)

In spite of trying hard enough Nirode is unable to get away from this relationship with his mother. Infiltrating his sleep, it enters the world of his dreams turning them into a nightmare. The world inhabited by his mother turned horrifying and macabre. And added to it, turned his dream-world into a nightmare.

...he soon saw why he himself was not an inhabitant of it. He stood some distance away from it and between him and his mother's brilliant territory was erected a barbed wire fence, all glittering and vicious. (*Voices*, 28)

The inexplicable change in the behaviour of Nirode is realised by Monisha and well noticed by his mother. He himself senses this. Being uncertain of him and his responses his mother feels a deep urge to understand him thoroughly. She turns to the language of his childhood – Bengali, while writing to him. "She wrote in a quick, minute, frightened hand, betraying reserves and uncertainties of which a son could never know." (*Voices*, 36) Reading

the letters, Nirode is disturbed from within. As his withdrawal from the material world is actually the withdrawal from the self which loves his mother. And so it is actually a disease of his desire when he folds his arms closely about himself willing to announce to the world that he is a leper. "I am a leper, he wanted to ring and call, leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all." (*Voices*, 61)

Nirode wants seclusion. He does not want contact with fellow human beings. He turns away from love and wants nothing to do with marriage. He resents his mother's claims on him and disapproves of her friendship with Major Chaddha. After the death of Monisha, he goes to the airport in order to receive his mother. Being unable to take her eyes off her, he deliberates:

She is still beautiful he thought, he thought with fear, a fear that contracted and expanded inside him like a membranous shield that covered and constricted his heart. She is still beautiful, he repeated and her beauty compelled him to embrace her. (*Voices*, 248)

So, it is almost an electrifying shock for him to realise that she does not want him anymore. This rejection heightens his neurotic anxiety and speeds up his self-alienation.

There are certain questions which linger. Why it is that Nirode is alienated? What is the reason for this inverted desire for failure? Why is there a sudden switch of loyalties from one parent to another? The past from which he is running scared of but unable to do so completely and the dreams that haunt him – all these are indications of repressed desires and of incestuous relationships. Anita Desai obvious concern is the Freudian complexes in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City*. And comparisons can be drawn between the Nirode-mother relationship and Hamlet's relationship with his mother; as Ernest Jones reveals the interpretation of 'Oedipus complex' in his book *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949).

References to the Victorian houses "screened by royal palms" (*Voices*, 124) are references which indicate the nature of the human mind rather than the depicting the landscape. Nirode is afraid of his own self. His action of running away from his childhood and from his own past is simply an admission of this fear.

The only person who seems to be at peace with Nirode is David Gunney, the waif from Ireland. David seems to have achieved some sort of balance between ego and non-ego and hence he is not upset and unaffected by what is going on around Nirode. But the

spirituality of David is in keeping with the rest of his overall character. He appears to be an emotional albino who is unable to withstand the flashy lights of passion and life.

Conclusion

The above mentioned images of escape and flight are in originality an escape from the constricting circumstances which holds a person down. In an attempt to seek the true meaning of life Monisha, Nirode and Amla make earnest efforts towards freedom. According to Swami Vivekananda:

Now, freedom is only possible when no external power can exert any influence, produce any change. Freedom is only possible to the being who is beyond all conditions, all laws, all bondages of cause and effect. In other words, the unchangeable alone can be free, and therefore immortal.
(Vivekananda, *Life after Death* 9)

Freedom in real sense is only feasible when it is not forced from outside. It has to originate from within. The person who has cast away all attachments can only enjoy the sweet nectar of freedom. Hence, the All-Pervading Spirit and the One who is beyond change alone can enjoy the bliss of true freedom. Anita Desai poignantly delineates this struggle for spiritual freedom in life of the characters in *Voices in the City*.

References

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