



SUBDUED VOICES : A STUDY OF VOICES IN THE CITY

Dr. Parvir Kumar, Department of English,

Govt. College, Bahadurgarh

All the Indian women novelists have been depicting women in various manifestations. Women writers of post colonial strand have brought a great change in the trend of depicting women characters. All the women writers such as Kamala Markendaya, Nayantara Saghla, Anita

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Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Gita Hariharan and the others have presented women as an individual who fights against suppression and domination of the patriarchy. A number of recent Indian Women's writings have been presenting the inner life and complex interpersonal relationship. In ancient time women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question the already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions in the Indian society. They have to merely follow the patriarchal system. Women in the family have to be obedient, quiet, submissive, and passive : They can not claim any of their rights neither as women nor even as human beings.

Indian women novelists have been portraying woman as the silent suffers, the upholder of traditional values and ethics, a strict observer of social taboos, an epitome of tolerance and patience and a woman without an identity. They should be the worshipper of their counterparts, benighted and ignorant about their rights as human. But fortunately there is a change in this trend with the advent of feminism. Women are no longer characterized to surrender,



submit and suffer to martyrdom. Women novelists unveil the hidden secrets and enfold the deliberate denials that are refutable in today's context.

Anita Desai is a post colonial writer who intuitively perceives the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Her novel *Voices in the City* presents the desire of struggle of women to establish an identity. She has tried to create a space that women have to occupy in domestic relationships. In present society Desai feels the mother-daughter nexus is only one of the many manifestations of the Indian women's roles. She is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law; in fact there are many aspects of a women's life.

Anita Desai has presented a vivid portrayal of the women and the events which revolve around the backdrop of Indian Independence. Women's emancipation perhaps has its zenith now but in pre-independence era the fight for space and freedom was a combat in its early stages. In the novel, voices in the city, find that a woman's first encounter with her body becomes a significant point of departure for her. The female body is always at a disadvantage. The woman is either silent about her sexuality or defiant or rebel as in *Voices in the City*. For a woman, sexuality is a domain of restriction danger and repression.

Voices in the City (1965), Desai's second novel, deals with the human relations in its various forms. Each character in the novel personifies a particular kind of activity and each activity results in a typical failure which cause a sense of loneliness and boredom. All the characters try to reject the inauthentic life marked by disharmony and strive hard for the attainment of a wholeness of being. At the same time, however, his contact with the world of reality, of dampness and darkness of the environment, does not permit any success in this regard. The novel density as these failures are related to the activities of the two characters namely Nirode and his sister Monisha.



In Voices the City, Calcutta is made to serve not only as a befitting background against which meaninglessness and absurdity can be explored. At the sometime attempt has also been made to make it function as a force and an agent that renders life meaningless. Hence Calcutta transcending the role of a locale against which the theme is presented becomes a force, a theme in itself. Meena Belliappa's remark regarding this is:

In *Voices in the City* an attempt is made, perhaps for the first time in Indian fiction, to relate the subjective word of the individual to the spirit of a locale. (26-27)

The sordid, ghastly, monstrous force of Calcutta gets identified with the goddess Kali. It preys upon people renders their lives worthless and finally swallows them up totally. At the end of the novel *Voices in the City*, we see that Monisha gets swallowed up by Calcutta while Nirode is under the torture of an agonizing feeling that next, it is his turn. In the beginning Amla :

She loved driving also into Ballygunge and seeing its weather-beaten old mansions and palm trees. But the dark, devilish force of Calcutta does not take long to make Amla realize that this monster city lives no normal, healthy, red-blooded life, but one that was subterranean, under lit, stealthy and odorous of mortality (Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* 142).

All the characters of Anita Desai's are lonely and haunted by various obsessions. Their story-line is, often, limited and helps in vindication of the characters, though analysis of their psychic disorders. Anita Desai's novels are now categorized along with existential ones N.R. Gopal's comments are very much of quoting when he writes:



Its emphasis on the alienation of man from an absurd world, his consequent estrangement from ‘normal’ society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless, “presents the sensitive individual, fragmented and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex. (5)

Both Nirode and Monisha had spent their childhood at Kalimpong. This childhood was happy and peaceful. It included pleasant surrounding and happy domestic affairs closely knit with the intentions and actions of their mother. The mother cared for them during this period. This fond care of the mother resulted in nothing short of mother fixation in their sub-conscious. But this fixation remained the spring hold of their psyche when they come to be confronted with the dark state of city life.

As the story tells Monisha is a middle aged woman. She is married to Jiban. Her early life is revealed when she is confronted with multiple chaoses in her married life. She faces the grim situation ever after marriage and confronts the irreconcilable environment. Her life appears as a contrast to the conflicting situations faced by her in the middle stage when she has to face and rationalize the conflict. In the early stage of life Monisha is complacent naïve and trustful, and all put together she takes most of the things for granted. Whether it is her own person or it is the character of her parents or the scenic aspect of Kalimpong, she only derives satisfaction on and pleasure. That is way only her emotions come into play. She does not have to apply her mind, may be because there are no problems that necessitate such an exercise. In brief, Monisha at Kalimpong is governed by emotions and leads a life of freedom and undisturbed calmness. This stage he happens to be a self-willed girl.

Monisha, Nirode’s sister is married against her wishes in a middle-class family. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness



and lack of communication. She is always haunted by a sense of her life dedicated to nothing. She is also childless like Maya. She wishes to have peace and silence which she does not get. This awareness of absurdity which gradually becomes more and more intense, has been realized in the novel by the consideration of various vocations, avocations and different aspects of life, all of which fail in providing any basis for their being regarded right. The background, against which meaninglessness and absurdity have been explored, has been provided by the great metropolitan city Calcutta associated with Kali – the goddess of death.

Anita Desai's preoccupation with women of disturbed mental status often takes us to the level of subnormal and women nearing the border of lunacy. N.R. Gopal has said :

Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of common woman but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal women. These are the women who because of various factors are under so much of mental stress that they cannot be called insane but then certainly they are not normal. (22)

After her marriage Monisha shrinks day by day. Her relatives talk about her blocked fallopian tubes and malfunctioning ovaries which leave her barren. Monisha shrinks. 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. She finds her life – monotonous and devoid of love, and so she withdraws from all material concerns. But her withdrawal and stillness are also deathlike, like those of Nanda. They are not the results of



experience, but of fear and attachment. That is why when Monisha is waving good-bye to Amla from a window of her bow Bazaar house, Amla notices :

Her had, protruding from the dark window, was like that of a stuffed rag doll with a very white face nodding insecurely on its neck its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark (*VITC* 160).

Monisha withdraws because of the monotony and boredom of life, the lack of privacy and absence of pure love into herself, a vulnerable exposed being, trying hard to find a protective shell. It is from Monisha's searching and self-confronting entries in the diary that we construct the graph of her psychic life. Monisha's diary begins with her reception her husband's house after her marriage. It is funny, ironical account of the reception arranged by the heads the reception arranged by the heads of this many headed family.

Monisha feels existential angst, placed as she is in a conservative atmosphere which stifles her hypersensitive soul. Married against her will into a joint family, she finds herself throttled by the triviality, the cocoon-like trap of her husband's family. She feels most hurt and rejected when it is discovered that she can not bear children. She has the moment of reckoning when she feels body and spirit falling apart. Anita Desai has dissected with painful ferocious intensity the loneliness of the sensitive and gentle Monisha. Her longing for real emotions, for passions gets crushed by the brut weight of her marriage to a well-meaning but insensitive man. Thus, the sensitive nature of Monisha and the cruel setup of urban life are the factors responsible for Monisha's Marriage with Jiban. So, these conditions push Monisha into a vacuum and her life gets crushed and subdued by male dominated world.



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