

MONISHA'S PLIGHT IN ANITA DESAI'S VOICES IN THE CITY

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Abstract: Anita Desai is one of the most prominent names in the arena of the writers of feminine sensibility. She writes about a domestic world with a focus of delving deep into the interior of mind. Each of her novels is an endeavour to tackle the central problem of modern man – the problem of identity-crisis. In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai creates a fictional world delineating four characters of the Ray family – Nirode, Monisha, Amla and their mother. All these characters are intense, self-absorbed and possessed by a conscience that never allows them peace of mind. The present paper focuses on life of Monisha. It is an attempt to explore the predicament of Monisha in a dehumanized society – how she gets a release from a life of gloom and despair.

Keywords: self-realisation, truth, sensibility, essential wisdom, alienation

Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* (1965) has been hailed as an epic on Calcutta. The novel is divided into four sections after the four characters of the Ray family: Nirode, Monisha, Amla and their mother. The sections deal with a "congenital failure" (*Voices* 9) of a bohemian Bengali young man Nirode, the troubled married life of self-absorbed Monisha, the life of existentialist Amla, and finally the indifferent attitude of their mother. *Voices in the City* depicts the corrosive effects of city on all these characters. Only the mother is portrayed as a balanced character because she lives in the hilly region, Kalimpong, away from the hustle and bustle of Calcutta. Anita Desai delineates the predicament of all these characters in the terms of "the enduring human situation" (Heinemann 178).

The second section of the novel entitled "Monisha: Her Diary" is devoted to one of the four characters. The section starts with Monisha coming to a large house in Bow Bazar in central Calcutta. The house belongs to Jiban and his extended family. Monisha has been married to Jiban for the last three years. And in present, she comes to Calcutta as her husband has been given a transfer to his ancestral city. Monisha has been brought up in the hilly region of Kalimpong. She is a new woman with a heightened level of awareness and a strong sense of individuality. She is blessed with extraordinary power of visualisation. When she comes to live with her in-laws, she goes through the experience of having a "surreptitious push from Jiban" to touch "feet after feet" of various people. She has to spend time in "the tiered balconies", in the room with "the bars of windows", "black" bed and "black" wardrobe. The entire description makes it clear that the environment creates cold response and threat in her and makes her feel like a prisoner.

Monisha finds herself misfit in this new house as she is a well-educated, peace-loving, self-absorbed woman with a philosophic bent of mind. She fervently wishes her solitude and privacy and says that:

Only I wish I were given some tasks I Could do alone in privacy, ... Alone I could do work better, and I shall feel more whole. But less and less there is privacy. (115)

The situation gets more intensified when Monisha can't find privacy even in her bed-room because of presence of her sisters-in-law in her own room. She needs a room of her own. Therefore, one can observe her altogether different mind-set.

The situation becomes alarmingly perplexed for Monisha, when one of her sisters-in-law comes to her room and asks her to show saris in her wardrobe. When she throws open the wardrobe, the lady gets amused and shocked to find "Kafka, Hopkins and Dostoyevsky" etc. instead of saris there. Monisha does not relate to the shocking behaviour of her sister-in-law. In a way, Monisha finds a cramped atmosphere at her husband's place. Added to this is the indignity of being unable to bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked. She feels really embarrassed when her sisters-in-law discuss her "ovaries and theirs" (116). This is the encroachment in someone's private life and

Monisha disapproves of this very attitude. Here Monisha feels like being objectified in the atmosphere of indifference.

Through her acts and thoughts, Monisha seems challenging the popular belief of confinement of a woman in four walls of a house enjoying motherhood. She espouses the quest for freedom as asserted by famous critic Betty Friedan:

For woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfilment, autonomy, self-realisation – is as important as the sexual needs. (282)

Anita Desai explores the emotional world of Monisha who is “under the acute alienation stemming from marital discord” (Prasad 3). Jiban is utterly insensitive to her. Monisha admits, “Jiban remains sitting with us but Jiban is never with us at all” (*Voices* 111). Monisha feels like a bird in a cage, like a “Bleeding Heart Dove” (*Voices* 121). She is a lonesome, lost person “tired of ... passive, but distressed” (118) crowd of Calcutta. She finds a solace in the Zoo where there is “rest, a relief from claustrophobia” (119).

Monisha is possessed by a conscience that never allows her peace of mind. Anita Desai highlights the plight of a sensitive character who is totally different from other women sacrificing their lives for others. Her anguish and different attitude comes to the fore when Manisha remarks:

I see many women, ..., who follow five places behind their men ... They make me little ashamed of myself ... and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in ... waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical ... waiting for death and dying misunderstood ... in the old houses in the old city. (120)

So, Monisha finds herself isolated, and goes through the pangs of alienation. But she knows very well that for living a life, there is the need to communicate, to connect. She tells her younger sister Amla that there must be someone in someone's life “who reciprocates, who responds”. And this response, this reciprocation should be “silent, discreet, pure, untouched, untouchable - ” (194). But she makes it clear that this reciprocation makes some “demands, ..., obligations, extortions, untruths, bullying” (195). Anita Desai explores that Monisha is facing a dilemma, an impasse regarding her existence in this world. She is throbbing between two choices: “death and mean existence”, and death being “not a difficult choice” (121). O. P. Budholia rightly points out that “Monisha truly represents the tragic vision of Anita Desai, she burns inside as a woman defeated on all fronts of life” (93).

Already agonised and persecuted, Monisha is heart-broken when she is accused of the theft in her house. She is more shocked with Jiban's insensitive, unemotional attitude towards her. Actually, Monisha has taken her husband's money from the cupboard without his permission (to pay the hospital bill for Nirode). After the accusation, she was expecting supportive attitude from her husband. But Jiban's words to her, “Why didn't you tell me before you took?” shatter her completely. She finds herself a sort of exiled from the rest of family:

I think what separates me from this family is the fact that not one of them ever sleeps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and dark. Mine is all dark now. (137)

After this incident Monisha withdraws totally. This “changed” Monisha is sensed by Amla. Through Amla, Anita Desai raises the pertinent question – why Monisha has been married in family completely unsuitable for Monisha's tastes and inclinations? Thus, the novelist suggests that the compatibility is the essential ingredient for a successful marital relationship.

One day Monisha happens to hear the musical notes from the street below. The other women also hear the same notes and they start enjoying the music. Monisha wants to relate herself, but in vain. And she finds that everybody is relating with the music, except her. She feels as if all the others are blessed with “essential wisdom” (236). She sees herself merely an imperfect observer “watching and listening, unable to understand a single word or gesture” and therefore, thinks to “remain alone, apart and enclosed within” (238) herself.

Monisha's categorical deprivation of “essential wisdom” and suffering make her disillusioned with life, hurt her extraordinary sensibility. She cannot come to terms with the harsh realities of life and she chooses “not so difficult” option of killing herself. Sharma observes that this act of Monisha “communicates most powerfully the tragedy of human existence in a dehumanized society” (67).

Anita Desai is preoccupied with a quest for meaning and value that can sustain a human being in the meaningless world:

One's pre-occupation can only be a perpetual search – for value, for ... truth. I think of the world as an iceberg – the one tenth visible above the surface of the water is what we call reality, but the nine-tenths that are submerged make up the truth, and that is what one is trying to explore. (Int. by Dalmia)

Thus, Anita Desai graphically depicts that lack of communication and Monisha's unmitigated privation become instrumental in Monisha's plight – her "dying misunderstood" (*Voices* 120). She annihilates herself by pouring kerosene on her and setting herself afire. Only in death, Monisha explores her truth – gets final release from the meaningless existence.

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