

Self-exploration of the Voiceless: A Study of Women characters in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

Abstract:

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Anita Desai is one of the renowned cotemporary Indian women novelists in English. One of her recurring themes is the struggle of women to assert their independence in a restrictive Indian society. In her novels, she depicts the cultural and social changes that India has undergone to certain periods. She explores the power of family and society and the relationship between family members. She also depicts the aspirations and struggle of ordinary women in their homeland and focuses on the obstacles encountered by these women who are suppressed by Indian society. Her novels revolve around themes of alienation, search for self-identity, and inter-cultural connections and survival.

She is rated as a great artist chiefly in her characterization, displaying psychological insight into the inner self, painting a realistic picture of Indian setting and background. But it is her deep interest in her women and their reaction to the various aspects of life that add a new dimension to her novels. Not only does she excel in portraying these feminine characters but also makes a psychological study to lay bare the innermost feelings of these women.

Desai, a writer with a purpose, aims at raising her voice against injustice and orthodox patriarchal code to liberate the women from male domination. Female characters are given prime importance in all her novels in which she focuses in displaying the innermost feelings and deep recess lurking in the hearts of these women. The present paper *Self-exploration of the Voiceless: A study of Women Characters in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City** proposes to direct attention towards the predicament of identity crisis and voicelessness of Desai's female characters in the novel.

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Anita Desai is one of the renowned cotemporary Indian women novelists in English. One of her recurring themes is the struggle of women to assert their independence in a restrictive Indian society. In her novels, she depicts the cultural and social changes that India has undergone to certain periods. She explores the power of family and society and the relationship between family members. She also depicts the aspirations and struggle of ordinary women in their homeland and focuses on the obstacles encountered by these women who are suppressed by Indian society. Her novels revolve around themes of alienation, search for self-identity, and inter-cultural connections and survival.

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“Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitive, a penetrating analysis and a skill to paint with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female though dominated by the letter.” (XXVIII)

Desai, a writer with a purpose, aims at raising her voice against injustice and orthodox patriarchal code to liberate the women from male domination. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the author of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is of the view that in the case of female Subaltern in patriarchal social setup every sort of exploitation is a complicated agenda. In her book, *A Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World*, she explores the silence and isolation of Subaltern woman. She raises a question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In the context of such remarks, we can assess Desai's Voiceless characters whether it is Maya, Monisha, Amla, Bim or Tara all are entrapped in a state of alienation. These characters are unable to raise their voice and rebel against the accepted norms of society.

Female characters are given prime importance in all Anita Desai's novels in which she focuses in displaying the innermost feelings and deep recess lurking in the hearts of these women. In all her major works like *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Bye-Bye Black Bird, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, In Custody and Baumgartner's Bombay*, she lays equal emphasis on the

feminine characters and takes special interest in projecting the essential features that dominate their characters.

Her novel *Voices in the City* is an examination of the plight of sensitive and independent women caught in the web of the hostile society. It dramatizes the emotional turmoil of the two neglected female protagonist, Monisha and Amla. It projects their voices to struggle for life in the formidable city of Calcutta. Life in big cities is so complex. It is busy and time consuming that one hardly has got time for oneself and family.

Desai brings about a new dimension to the Indian novel by drawing upon the troubled sensibility of a woman in an absurd world. Her characters like Monisha and Amla are lonely, anxious, estranged and suffer from a sense of alienation and identity crises. These female protagonists find themselves entrapped in oppressive environment of their family situations. She delves deep into the psyche of her protagonists and provides an insight into their state of alienation. For ages woman have been assessed by male standards and forced to play subordinate roles as the obedient wife, the self-sacrificing mother and dutiful woman. In the Indian Society, woman in real life as well as the fictional world has been presented as weak, modest and dependent. According to Meena Shirwadkar, the main reason is:

“Traditionally, the Indian woman accepted the framework of the family with a blind faith and rarely showed a rebellious trend. She continued to be docile, self-sacrificing, patient, loving and capable of suffering..... they suffer, submit and adjust themselves to circumstances. This aspect of woman’s life has been portrayed by the woman writers with sensitivity and instinctive understanding.” (Shirwadkar 11)

That traditional role is, of course no longer acceptable to woman in India and other advanced countries of the world. In our time, writers are depicting the ‘New Woman’ with her individuality and self assertion in the changing reality. Writers like Shashi Despande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kamala Das and Shobha De, have carved a forte for themselves not only on the national but also on the international literary scene.

The novel, *Voices in the city* is a story of three siblings. Amla, Nirode and Monisha and the different ways of life in Calcutta. The novel is divided into four sections. The first three are named after a trio of young adult siblings from a Himalayan village. They are separated for different reasons and they have moved to Calcutta. They struggle a lot. They search for their identity and struggle for survival and freedom in the crucial city. The narrative follows each sibling individually. Desai illuminates the myriad ways that their respective social class defines their self-identities. She

describes a filthy picture of a Bengali family and illustrates the miserable condition of the three characters in the city of Calcutta and the city of Kali.

Voice in the City is devoted to the analysis of dark domains of the psyche of its voiceless characters – Monisha and Amla. Monisha, an intellectual and highly sensitive woman, finds herself entrapped in a huge oppressive joint family household of Jiban and she reacts against it with hysterical intensity. She wants to be free, but find it difficult to free herself of her appurtenance and duties. For her

“Life follows a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning”
(Voices in the city 252)

Monisha relationship with Jiban is marked by loneliness and in communication. Married into a placid, middle class family, and to a prosaically dull husband, she is unable to adjust to her environment. She stoically refuses to identify herself with her in-law’s family. Later on she realized that

“Life is reduced to cooking and washing which hurts her pride. To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep when this is not what one believes in.” (VITC 240)

In the novel, closely barred windows are symbolic of her phobic fear. She is always tormented by a sense of boredom, monotony and lack of privacy. Quite often she says, “I long to thrust my head out of the window and cannot, the bars are closely shut.” (VITC 250) For her the choice is between a meaningless life and non-existence, and she chooses the latter. She would prefer and end with the dignity of the tiger.

Monisha fights a relentless battle against her lost self and is in the process doomed to degeneration and destruction. In many respects she resembles Maya in that she also is childless, sensitive and victim of an ill-matched matrimony. She is a very sensitive intellectual laced in a very hostile, adverse and uncongenial environment. She feels desperate and completely alienated from her husband, in-laws and the outside world. She is a posture of endless mental and spiritual agony. She has no peace or happiness at all because her husband is indifferent, unresponsive and insensitive. He does not understand her feelings or agony. He doesn’t care for them at all. The result is that she becomes a neurotic and commits suicide. The fate of Monisha has a universal significance because she typifies the lot and destiny of many such Indian women.

Monisha’s mental agony keeps mounting from page after page in the novel and she feels more tormented. There is no escape from it and makes her feel the futility of her hollow existence and

ultimately drives her to suicide. She says, "What a waste, what a waste it has been. This life enclosed in a locked container merely as an observer and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that." (VITC 242) At one time she feels that- "I am different from them. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate of warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me." On introspection Monisha is terrified by her emotional vacuum. Monisha's Suicide is an attempt to rebel against this meaningless, death-like-isolation. She feels that she is unable to raise her voice in a male-dominated society.

Amla stands in direct contrast to Monisha. While Monisha commits suicide, Amla indicate a steady progress in her march from self alienation to self-discovery, from sickness to health; from neurosis to full humanness. 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 herself and achieved equanimity. Prior to this she passes through a period of bewilderment, grappling with self idealization and self realization.

Amla's quest is directed towards this aspiration. She strives to master all fear and anxieties of life, so as to give meaning to it. Monisha's suicide makes Amla see her future very clear. She opts for progression. This is a significant move towards self-actualization. Finally it is Amla's affirmative will power that gives direction in her life.

In the novel, the role of sensitive Amla assumes significance as an observer and she is a witness to the sensitive events. Her reaction to the events is quite opposite to Monisha's silence and passivity. Monisha's death teaches and gives strength to face her problems in life.

To conclude, one can say that Anita Desai has been fully successful in raising woman's voice through her woman characters. She has an innate ability to peep into the inner recesses of the psyche of her characters. Desai's is obsessively occupied with the individual's quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world.

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