

GENDER NEPOTISM AND IDENTITY PREDICAMENT IN ANITA DESAI'S 'VOICES IN THE CITY': A STUDY IN CONTRAST

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Abstract:

From times immemorial, women in general tend to suppress their untold miseries within their inner psyche. There were many feminist writers who campaigned for the cause of men-women equality. In this context, Anita Desai succeeded to unveil the real face of Indian women in her novel 'Voices in the City' by uncovering the hypocritical mask of men in the contemporary society.

Keywords: *Rancorous, imperiled, infamy, inimitable, unfettering*

The immeasurable agonies of women in a male-dominated society perpetrated by the unscrupulous actions of men often go unheard. From times immemorial, women in general tend to suppress their rancorous combats, harrowing chagrins and unprotected yells within their inner psyche. The infamy and the torments that women have been imperiled to for centuries have made their plight even more unplumbed. For centuries women had been crushed by men so as to establish their sovereignty over them and their woes continue even today. Over the years we have witnessed lot many crusades to convince the male dominated society the urge to respect women at par with men in all spheres of life. Nevertheless, there is no breakthrough to the dismay of the women folk. Against this backdrop, the plight of Indian women is more pitiable even today. Perhaps, the diverse socio-cultural milieu deep ridden in the Indian ethos would have attributed immensely to the present agony of women. Probably, as time elapsed, there would have taken place some transitions in the amount of sufferings women have to bear with. But the male domination over women still looms large in the very fabric of our Indian ethos. The advent of British era in India heralded with multitudes of changes in the outlook of people, which in turn refined the very thought process of men and women alike. The reckless composure of men towards women has changed a lot. The Indian women, who were shackled for ages by the male fraternity, have broken off their handcuffs and slowly began to breathe a sigh of relief. Ironically, the bondage of India by the

British was in a way heralded with the emancipation of women from the bondage of men, their liberation from the age old oppression and humiliation that they were subjected to. Gradually, they began to adapt themselves with the transition that took place in the society. There began the identity crisis. Women began to grab every possible opportunity that came along. Men, for the first time, felt the brunt of her presence everywhere, a force difficult to reckon with. Alongside, the societal pattern got revolutionized. Despite that, the subjugation of women continued. Today, they are more vulnerable to a new form of oppression, societal intolerance, which is more dangerous than the previous one. However, they cannot make their reverse journey now.

There were many feminist writers who campaigned for the cause of men-women equality. The sufferings of the most marginalized sections in the society were advocated by many women writers in India and abroad. These women writers through their characters portray the interminable injustice meted out to the women folk by men who otherwise refuse to be subdued. In this context, the writings of Anita Desai, one of the most prolific women writers in India who made her niche in Indian English writings with her inimitable style and versatility, succeeded to unveil the real face of Indian women by uncovering the hypocritical mask of men in the contemporary society. Perhaps, her outspoken method of portraying and un-knitting the layers of man-woman conflicts would have invited the wrath of many hypocrites. Regardless of the outcries of these hypocrites, Anita Desai continued to paint the women characters, those who invariably represent their genre in all its totality. At a glance on the vast panorama of her novels, one could easily discern that most of the women characters in her writings cease to enjoy the ultimate concord with the exterior world. This is mostly because of their unwillingness to accept and resign the eventualities that come along. These characters are always in enthusiasm to find out something new, which can give them self-esteem. Most often, due to their perpetual sufferings, they are unwilling to

accept life as it is. They look at men in a desolate and rather indifferent way as if they are still haunted by the fear-psychosis of male domination. Anita Desai's novels depict excruciating feminine susceptibility, which is devoid of concord and empathy. These women characters are often confronted with hostile situations in their unyielding strife to outclass the male domination. Mostly, many of these characters perish in their crusade. Rather, these women characters are victimized in their unbending struggle to match with their male companions and sometimes even to attain dominance over men. These female characters of Anita Desai endure utter humiliation and acute agonies penetrated by men, who assume the posture of a loving father, a caring brother and mostly an adorable husband. These pretentious men pose as ceaseless danger to their legitimacy and perception.

Anita Desai reacts very strongly against the prejudiced mindset of double faced hypocrites towards women. She always advocates for the cause of women empowerment. For her, men and women are equals. They too have their own inherent sentiments and cravings as men do have. It took hundreds of years for the women folk to come out of their forced slavery and subjugation. Now that they have already come out and it is for the male fraternity to accommodate them in the main stream of the society. May not necessarily be the same as most men do. In fact, women are more adaptable as compared to men in everything they begin with. They have their own unique ways of doing things and the best thing about them is that they want a sort of recognition for the work they do, which men seldom give. Anita Desai never pleads that women do not have infirmities. Undoubtedly, women are confronted with more problems than men in every enterprise they get on. However, women are more susceptible to all sorts of diverse situations in life and at the end they strive to achieve self-esteem. These days we witness lot many disagreements among the women folk. Majority of them are for safeguarding their rights and identities. Anita Desai's perceptions about women and their concerns reverberate in Diana Trilling's reflections: "It is not the quest for female selfhood but implicitly the need we all have for a new way of being, a new social and moral consciousness".¹

Anita Desai has cemented her aura as a novelist of par excellence. Desai's pursuit for individuality, realism and mysticism is profusely flaunted in her novels. The novelist's fascination with the character underlining the emotional impulses,

exasperation, human catastrophe and her profound perception of the ineffectiveness of human subsistence occupy the focal point in her novels. Another significant characteristic, which singles out Anita Desai from other women novelists of the period, is her acumen of portraying the inner terrains of the human psyche. Novel writing for Anita Desai "is an effort to discover and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things."² Invariably Desai's protagonists strive for ascertaining the value of existence.

Anita Desai prefers to portray pliable women protagonists in her novels. They are depicted as epitomes of love and empathy. As Shantha Krishnamurthy has rightly said; "moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their objects 'possession' to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurture in them through myths, customs and societal discourse".³

Anita Desai's master piece novel 'Voices in the City' depicts Monisha, wife of Jiban, who struggles to attune with the unending stipulations of marriage. Monisha's exceptional quality of understanding the human intricacies makes her vulnerable to abject humiliation and untold agonies. Monisha enters the threshold of the huge ancestral house of Jiban's family in Bow Bazar with lots of aspirations of leading a contented married life. Within no time Monisha realizes the emptiness of marriage. Her dream of building up an independent family ends up in solitary confinement. Monisha is pushed into the marriage trap of feigned love. Monisha is domesticated by her in-laws to adhere all the rituals including touching of their feet.

Everything around her seems to be very intricate. Life seems to be motionless. The panorama outside evokes in her a sort of aversion towards everything. For Monisha, the monotony around her penetrates into her heart and frustrates the concord of conjugal life. Monisha's inability to bear a child due to her infertility increases her discomfiture. Everybody looks at her with suspicion, abject negligence and indifference, which devastates Monisha's self-esteem. Monisha's dream of giving birth to a child, like every other woman, is shattered forever. All her urge to fertility is frustrated by the biological frostiness. The feigned sympathy shown to her is all the more disgusting. Being totally traumatized Monisha withdraws herself into a state of forced isolation rather a horrifying denial mood-of negation. Gradually Monisha loses her inherent urge to live - a

meaningful life. The proximity of Jiban fails to evoke any sort of emotions in her. Monisha is totally indifferent to Jiban's call for carnal impulses. The conjugal relationship between Monisha and Jiban is lost. She does not even like his closeness. Instead, Monisha prefers to remain alone. Everything around her seems to be empty. Finally, Monisha realizes the emptiness of her life. Monisha's perpetual escape from this world is the consequence of her harrowing experiences in real life. Monisha's frozen relationship with Jiban, her urge for adequate solitude in the congested house, distrust by her in-laws and her infertility work as driving forces to prompt her to commit suicide. Though the reasons leading to her suicide are many, the decision is hers. Thus, Monisha escapes from this barren life. Through death, Monisha silences everybody around her. According to Jasbir Jain Monisha's perpetual escape from the callousness of this world is an "attempt to rebel against this meaningless, death-like isolation."⁴ With this Monisha establishes her stance as a woman who chooses death after giving an advice to Amla, her sister to 'walk on opposite directions'. Monisha embraces death because death seems to be the only solution to escape from the perpetual agony and torments meted out to her by the society at large.

Monisha's brother Nirode is the prototype of his sister. He is totally directionless ever since the suicide of his sister. He lives in utter disappointments. The more he thinks about the untold agonies and societal rejections that his sister went through, Nirode falls far deep into the perils of isolation. In a way Monisha's death enables him "to protect his conscience, to give up the struggle, thoughts of success or sorrow, and live in silence and solitude as they are the true gifts of life. He could not escape from his dilemma but has learnt to live with it."⁵

Nirode stands as a sharp contrast to Monisha. Their approaches towards the harsh realities of life are just paradoxical to each other. When Monisha shows her rebelliousness against the injustices meted out to her by choosing death, Nirode resigns to an acceptance mood-accepts everything that comes along. Their varying approaches towards life can be viewed from an altogether different perspective. They belong to opposite genders. Their perceptions towards life and the intricacies involved in it are entirely paradoxical. Nirode, though totally broken, strives to find solace even in his disillusionments, which Monisha could not. Monisha and Nirode are typically opposite in their perceptions towards life, though their problems are

the same. It is merely because of their gender differences. When Nirode attracted the anger of his father owing to his closeness with his mother, Monisha's resemblances with her mother perturbed her father. In a way, both of them were preys to the anger of their father.

Anita Desai is typical in portraying the prototype of Monisha and Nirode in Amla, another significant protagonist in the novel. Amla, like Monisha and Nirode, is frustrated in her life and she wants to run away from the harsh realities of life. Sickening sense of societal rejection attributed to her dismay. She is entrapped in the web of lucrative temptations of the world. Amla fails to discern what is right or wrong. She is confused now. Amla's intense urge to flourish as an acknowledged designer is at conflict with her own escapist propensity. The city of Calcutta glares at her helplessness. Amla's thirst for leading a dignified life is under threat now. Like Monisha and Nirode, Amla reclines to her fate, "They share one face, one expression of tiredness, that even bitterness is merely passive and hopelessness makes the hard extend only feeble, then drop back without disappointment. Two faces-one rapacious, one weary-gaze at me from every direction."⁶ (179)

In no time Amla is swallowed by the under currents of the city of Calcutta. The merriment of the city, which Amla once relished, now becomes an empty commotion, "despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupation, new acquaintances, and the mild sweet winter air, this sense of hollowness and fertility persisted." Even at her place of work, she feels like "an outsider in the group of colleagues that gathered about a tray full of coffee cups." (161)

Amla is fully engrossed in the lustrous extravaganza of the city of Calcutta now. Her fascination with the material world prompts her to enter into the world of modeling with the artist Dharma. This association has gradually turned into love. However, Amla never realizes the barrenness of her fondness with Dharma.

Anita Desai's brilliant skill of portraying the hollowness of modern life in all its vividness is portrayed in the novel 'Voices in the City'. She has incredibly demonstrated her superb narrative acumen of depicting the various attributes of modern life in the form of psychological syndrome, awkward man-woman relationships, loss of individuality and unceasing search for empathy and affection. Mostly all the women protagonists in the novel revolt against the opposite sex, against the outside world or even

against their own conflicting inner psyche. Rather, Anita Desai is a champion of depicting the diverse dispositions of human beings, of cravings and fantasies, of opposing human intricacies. Anita Desai has magnificently portrayed the diverse human intricacies in her master piece novel 'Voices in the City'. The novelist has never hesitated to give a kaleidoscopic touch to all the human aptitudes while narrating the story. Desai's skill in relating the intimate and the distant aspects of human reality is widely acclaimed. To sum up, it is worth quoting Ramesh K. Srivastava's hypotheses about Anita Desai; "Her forte is the explanation of the interior world plunging into the limitless depths of the mind. This man thrust on the inner life of the individual, on the myriads of inner impressions, passing fancies and fleeting thoughts together with her razor like sharp awareness of the futility of existenceturning inward, her fiction grapples with intangible realities of life and plunges into the innermost depths of human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind."⁷

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