

Anita Desai's contribution to Indian novel writing in English with reference to *Voices in the City*

Ms. Suman Singh

Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Ganga Institute of Technology & Management Kablana, Haryana

Abstract: Anita Desai is one of the most celebrated Indian writers writing in English. Anita Desai has treated psychological realities very minutely in her novels. She is not eager about observing profane, extraneous surface realities. Her novels talk about themes with a universal appeal with emotional profundity and technical excellence. Her exploring into the inner world makes her works a systematic and analytical interpretation of not just what her characters do by also what they think. Anita Desai's intention of writing is to discover herself and then aesthetically portray the truth. She is widely distinguished as the pioneer of psychological novel in modern Indian English Literature.

Voices in the City (1965) has intricate structure of symbols and stereotypes. At the same time, it is a realistic picture of a self-indulgent city culture who can exert only negative and pessimistic influence on the young minds. *Voices in the City* is an intense and expressive novel in which Desai's main concern is to describe "the enduring human condition."

Anita Desai was the propounder of the psychological novel in Indian Writing. She herself observed:

"My novels don't have themes – at least not till they are finished, published or read, flashness of insides, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this inside, and some how came to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand."

Anita Desai takes up the existentialist question in her novels and show profound influence of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Marcel, Camus, Sartre and Beckett. Her novels talk about themes with a universal appeal with emotional profundity and technical excellence. Her probing into the inner world makes her works a systematic and analytical interpretation of not just what her characters do but also what they think.

There have been many women writers like Toru Dutt, whose novels delineate her reactions towards the "Pardah" system in India. Kamala Markandaya's works focus on the plight of woman in a sensitive and intelligent manner. Ruth Jhabvala describes the interaction and commotion resulting from the confrontation between the east and west, from the encounter between traditional and modern.

Another significant name in the genre of novel writing is Nayantara Sehgal who wrote largely on political themes. And many other like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Mahashweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri focused on the themes like agony faced by women in a male dominated world, significance of sex in modern life, liberty of women etc. Thus women writers have come a long way, concerns and describes "the enduring human condition." She reflects upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity, meaning in life, decision, aloofness and isolation.

She focuses on how women in the contemporary urban milieu fight against discrimination of various types but some do surrender symbolism and imagery she tries to relationship and also the varying states of human psyche. Desai is a great artist and has employed techniques of stream of consciousness, flash-back, montage and reveries which are suitable to her existential themes and her externalization of internal emotional chaos and uproar.

Consequently, her novels do not follow a story line with well constructed plot and tightly knit structure. There are episodes, happenings, incidents, encounters, reminiscences. The characters depicted in her novels are both typical as well as individualistic. Desai's canvas is reasonably large i.e. circumscribing a large variety of characters representing various hues of humanity.

Anita Desai turned novels into a serious, intellectual endeavour rather than an object of mere entertainment. In her hands, novel is a mature, evolved and creative genre fit for expressing dreary and reflective thoughts.

Desai is highly redolent, earnest and fascinating novelist who makes the modern reader aware of a new perspective to perceive life. Her principal performers lead a convoluted and exacting existence which is made apprehensible through Desai's own keen and profound sensitivity towards life. The novel 'Voices in the City' has a complex structure of symbols and stereotypes. At the same time, it is a realistic picture of a decadent city culture which can exert only negative and pessimistic influence on the young minds. In the novel Anita Desai has provided the reader a true and detailed picture of contemporary human experience in one of the metropolis of Asia. With her highly metaphoric style and technique, the setting of the novel is immensely widened and the context made complicated yet pertinent.

"Voices in the City" reminds the reader of what William Walsh might have said about writing art being an imaginative activity of "registering focussed and significant experience and making it available for the future as a source of standard." Anita Desai feels strongly about the existential of her characters. Her characters are singular and sensitive beings and not as strong as their creator herself is.

With reference to the present novel *Voices in the City*, Nirode, Monisha and Amla feel strongly the power and grip of the city on their lives. It attacks their psyche, their desire to life and their hopes. Desai has beautifully painted this internalized action with her forthright probing into the minds of her characters.

Desai has brought in a large number of transpiring strands of sub-plots related to Nirode through Dharma, David, Sunny, Sarla, Jit and Geeta Devi. Monisha through her marital family and Jiban and Amla through her friends and acquaintances.

Desai does not flummox her reader in a maze of sub plots. This is her attempt to make the mental landscape of her protagonists clear to the reader. That explains her making the canvas of her novel rather large and including many characters. But at the same time, it would not be wrong to vindicate that there characters are nearly of the same shade and colour. They all are inhabitants or even survivors of Calcutta & their lives are a long drawn tale of inactivity & reflection.

In *Voices in the City*, Desai employs third person mode of narrating the story of the three voices in the city. The novel presents the bewildering variety of sights and sounds of the city of Calcutta. In the opening pages Desai bewrites the agitated disturbance and confusion on the railway platform. The red-shirted coolies, the tea vendors and the station master in sweat stained white clothes, all tired and overworked, the large number of passengers..... this is a picture of chaos and confusion.

Somewhere in the same city the three protagonists struggle against odds and try to exist. The city is an antagonist a huge monster, against whom the destinies of the people are pitted. The dirt, damp and bereavement is evoked- through powerful word pictures. Monisha is flustered by "the hour upon hour." Even the birds are affected by the contamination of the city. They are a "vision of disaster, symbolized by the stirring birds who were not afraid, who waited." Anita neatly categorizes her major and minor characters into two groups. The major characters symbolize the patrician who are bohemian, affectations and worn out. The minor characters are monotonous, vacuous and senseless. However both the major and minor characters form the social fabric of which Calcutta constitutes.

Some of these feel strongly about the things around them, consequently their reactions are strong, even volatile. Others are contented towing the conventional line. However, Nirode, Monisha and Amla are sharply contrasted with the conformists. These three non-conformists are elitists whose sufferings are of existentialist nature. They are rebels who seek to uphold their individual entity in the face of conformist forces. They undergo spiritual crises and their tragic sentiment cannot be identified with because most of their troubles are self- imposed .

Desai's novel is deficient in significant, overt action. Incidents and characters are not organized in terms of states of mind. For this reason, feels a critic, Shiv K. Kumar: "Never does the writer relax her grip on the style which often freezes into a strange academic anaemia. Stilted and petrified, it abounds in such tritely compounded, palpably alliterative style." So it looks as if Desai is occupied with the skill of communication, irrespective of "the nature of experience" in her novel. Madhusudan Prasad rightly remarks: "Barring the suicide of Monisha, no other event takes place throughout the novel."

Desai has an inclination for the sound of words which recur in her novel. For instance, this extract from Monisha's diary: "But Nirode was clever, he came when he knew Jiban was away at the office,.... Rumble, rumble creak jolt and tumble. Down the street and down the street we go. Where to, sir? Leave us on the Maidan." Desai also makes use of Indian words and expressions such as lungi dhoti, pan, tandoori chicken, carrot halwa, mohalla, patrika, box-wallah, sandesh etc.

Sometimes she also gives English equivalents for Hindi and Bengali words – Zindagi, O Zindagi (Life, O life) and cholbena (won't do), etc. Some other metaphorical expressions in the novel are: the women in Monisha's house look at Amla "with faces like freshly baked bread", the cousin smiles "a white coconut smile", people in Calcutta are compared to "gutter rats." Desai is also fond of using too many adjectives together. For example – Gita Devi was "large and placid and bovine." A bus going to office becomes an "office-going bus" and an open verandah becomes "the verandah becomes "the wind-wild verandah."

Voices in the City may be regarded as an epic on Calcutta. It is made up of four unequal parts – Part I, "Nirode", Part II, "Monisha: Her Diary", Part III, "Amla", Part IV, "Mother." It tells the story of a brother, two sisters and their mother. Only Part II, being an extract from Monisha's diary is written in the first person, while the remaining three sections are in the author's own voice. Though the four parts deal with different characters, Nirode is the most imposing amongst them.

Part I portrays Nirode as a young man of twenty four who is restless, sensitive and garrulous. As the novel opens, he is seen brooding over his own failures in comparison to his brother's brilliant career. Arun has gone abroad for higher studies and while bidding him adieu at the Howrah Railway Station, Nirode expresses his disgust for his mechanical job of cutting and pasting strips of newspaper. He looks forward to a life where he could have just three drinks and room of his own. Then he starts editing a literary magazine 'Voice' but soon gets fed up and indulges in writing a play. Later, he opens a book-shop in a filthy area. Thus moving on from one job to another, he becomes obsessed with failure and confesses, "I want to move from failure to failure, step by step, to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth." Nirode also suffers from mother-fixation.

He is jealous of Major Chadha who is an admirer of his mother now living in Kalimpong. So he reacts violently when he receives her letter. Later in Part IV, when he goes to the airport to receive his mother who has arrived on Monisha's death, he is once again trapped and charmed by her beauty and clings to her in a prolonged embrace. But he also hates her for her enamoured liaisons and coquettish ways. He equates her to Goddess Kali as the mother has the indifference and detachment bordering on fierceness as displayed by the statue of Kali. She seems to be satisfied with Monisha's death and therefore maintains a cool indifference. In Part II, the diary technique, lends a tone of immediacy and anguish to Monisha's account of her pensive, agonizing and lonely married life. Monisha is Nirode's married sister whose well-off but indifferent husband, Jiban, has neither the time nor the inclination to look into her aloneness. Her incapacity to bear a child, her noncommunication with her incompatible husband and the rigid and stern attitude of the in laws. All these compel Monisha to choose between death and a degraded existence.

Part III deals with Nirode's younger unmarried sister Amla. She is a training to work as a commercial artist in an advertisement firm. Amla feels sorry for her married elder sister who seems very unhappy and alienated in her married life. Since she (Amla) is of a happy, jovial temperament she enjoys going to parties, dinners, cocktail parties and so on. But slowly she too realizes that she had been pursuing a mirage and she tells Nirode, "... this city. This city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it..." She develops an emotional attachment with Dharmas, the painter friend of Nirode, also working as his model. However she repents coming to Calcutta after her disillusionment with Dharmas in their amorous affair: "Why ever did I come to Calcutta? Why didn't I stay away in Bombay or go home to Kalimpong?" Part IV, dealing with "Mother" is the briefest section in the novel and brings before the reader the complete physical and mental picture of the mother of Nirode, Monisha and Amla. She is beautiful, indifferent and awe-inspiring character, specially to Nirode who has always remained under her powerful influence.

Thus the structure of the story is kept cohesive and intact with the help of the overarching symbol of the city. Calcutta acts as the background of all the subplots related to different characters. It is omnipresent, omnipotent and all-inclusive.

Bibliography

- [1]. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English. (Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd., 1987).
- [2]. Madhu Sudan Prasad, Anita Desai: The Novelist. (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981).
- [3]. J. K. Dodiya, K.V. Surendran, Indian Women Writers; Critical Perspectives. (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 1999).
- [4]. Amarnath Prasad, Indian Women Writers in English. (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1983).
- [5]. Ramesh K. Srivastava, Perspectives on Anita Desai. (Ghaziabad: Vimal Parkashan, 1984).
- [6]. Anita Desai's: Voices in the City. (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965).