

Existential Agony of a Woman in Anita Desai's

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Abstract: Anita Desai's women characters suffer because of their inability to strike an emotional chord with their spouses and to vent out their feelings freely. In this novel, Desai portrays Monisha, the protagonist's plight very graphically and carefully relates it to "the women who are like the female birds in the cage". All her novels revolve around the traditional status of women in the society dominated by the male chauvinists. As with the other feminist writers like Gita Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy etc. the crucial issue taken up by Desai is women's freedom. Freedom which men always possess but is denied to women flatly. Monisha like a caged bird trapped in an incompatible marriage with Jiban yearns to put her "head out of the window" but the "bars are closely set". And here Monisha is characterized by a remarkable quest for the self. But unlike Sarita in Deshpande's "Dark Holds No Terrors" or even Ammu in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things", Monisha succumbs to the existential problems within the family fold. The novel ending in the tragic death of Monisha is a grim pointer towards the typical predicament of women in our times. And this is the tragedy of Indian Women leading to strings of suicides day after day. The present paper aims to dilate over this poignant social problem crying for urgent attention and remedial measures in this direction.

Keywords: Woman, freedom, caged bird, Quest, social problem

Existential Agony of a Woman in Anita Desai's "Voices in the City"

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist. She emphasizes a whole range of themes like man's sense of alienations depicted in new modes of narrative techniques, in what has come to be termed as "The psychological novel", also present clear contrast to the earlier modes of simple narrative techniques.

In her novel *Voices in city*, (1965), Anita Desai is not concerned with the physical aspect of the city, Calcutta, but on its influence on the three characters of family. The novel is divided into four sections, namely, 'Nirode', 'Monisha', 'Amla' and 'Mother'. All these sections are devoted to the characters as named by the title. The first section 'Nirode' is about the alienation and conflict in the mind of Nirode. He is an artist who is struggling with art form and his life. He brings out a magazine Voice but is not happy with its success and ultimately sells it.

He is a person who loves anonymity and runs away from success and prosperity. Nirode also suffers from Oedipus complex, like Maya; and like her, he too, wants to destroy the figure of his obsession, his mother. He believes that his mother has an affair with Major Chadha, her neighbour. Nirode wants to forget this episode and so alienates himself from his mother. The novelist has probed into psychic working of the disturbed artist, who has lost his faith in life. Madhusudan Prasad feels that,

"Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious of the major characters in this novel."

Monisha, like many heroines of Anita Desai, is sensitive and suffers from an ill-matched marriage. She lacks understanding and love from her husband, and finds it difficult to adjust into the joint family. She takes to diary writing and alienates herself from everyone. She is an example of maladjusted woman who is an introvert. Monisha is unable to bear the charge of theft by the family members and even by her husband. She commits suicide by self-immolation. Amla, her youngest sister, a commercial artist, too suffers from conflict in her life. She rises above the

complexities of relationships to realize the destroyer. She is described as an onlooker, not getting involved with the affairs of her children.

In this novel one sees faulty adjustment in the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ray, the father and the mother. It was a marriage of convenience, the husband priding himself in his family name and title, and wife on her tea-estates and a house. Both of them have a soul-destroying hatred and terrific fury towards each other. The father transforms into a drunkard, debased, and dishonorable creature; whereas the mother changes into a practical, possessive woman, losing all her womanly and motherly charm and warmth.

She is polished and balanced, yet very cold, with a frosty love of power - like a concealed fluorescent bulb. Their marriage was something of a financial settlement. Amla, the daughter, says to Dharma about her father whether he regretted it later on because

"he hadn't quite bargained for mother, just for her houses and tea-estates."

The father did nothing except that he spent his life sleeping, drinking and idling. Only thing he did with his sons was he taught them play cricket and he loved horses.

"He was always drinking and smiling, his knowing, spiteful smile, with an emotion in him that must have been very violent to show at all in his face, even so faintly".

There was hardly any common liking among the couple. The mother loved music, nature and all the fine things of life :

"My father always got on her nerves by simply never doing anything. I always see him lying back indolently, like an overfed house cat, against mother's embroidered Tibetan cushions, toying with a cheroot or a glass of whisky or both."

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So, it is clear that there was hardly any common liking among the couple. The wife loved music, nature and all the fine things of life. The musical soirees arranged by her were of no interest to the husband. The sweet music would affect all the guests and even the children, but the husband would remain immune to it. He lay against a bolster, smiling a vacant, feline smile and drinking; and with the passing of hours he fell asleep - his head drooping forward and his mouth open and wet. The sweet 'shehanai' was no better than a noisy pipe, a piece of plumbing to him. Wife, too, had contempt and resentment for him. Husband had the same hatred and malice towards her:

“When he came to Kalimpong and saw her wandering about her garden, touching her flowers, he never followed her. He used to lie back against his cushions, idle and contented - contented I think, in his malice.

He had contempt for his wife's love for nature. He used to taunt and make fun of her when he tells his daughters to look at a butterfly and 'Forget yourself in that study. Then you will be fortunate - like your mother.' The truth was that the wife had deliberately forgotten him; shut her mind to him by concentrating it on flowers and music and fine food, and things he shunned. This hatred between the father and mother leaves a scar on the mind of the children. They are the real sufferers.

The private hell of the couple is enveloping and destroying their lives and pursuing them step by step. Monisha, the elder daughter, is childless and is a victim of a ill-matched marriage. Jiban and Monisha had nothing in common between them and were married because he belonged to a respectable, middle-class Congress family which was safe, secure and sound. Her father thought that

“Monisha ought not to be encouraged in her morbid inclinations and that it would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a solid, unimaginative family as that, just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance.”

Monisha changes after marriage from a sensitive, mild, quiet, sensible girl into a barren, distant, without any compassion, neurotic, diary writing woman, which she herself hates. She is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to a breaking point. Her life is:

“My duties of serving fresh chapatis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife.

Jiban is present at home but 'Jiban is never with us at all'. Monisha feels trapped in Calcutta and in the house with the thick iron bars:

“I am so tired of it, this crowd. In Calcutta it is everywhere. Deceptively, it is a quite crowd-passive, but distressed. Till there is reason for anger and then a sullen yellow flame of bitterness and sarcasm starts up and it is vicious and mordant . . . This boil erupts, every now and

then, now that the weather is so hot, the heart so parched.”

This view of the city expressed by Monisha shows that she has a loveless life and misunderstood by everyone. She feels she is like the bleeding heart doves:

“wounded and bleeding, but scurrying about their cages, picking up grain, these stay on the ground, restless, in flux and bleeding.”

She faces the trauma of living in a joint family, where there is no private life. She wishes to do work in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. She has no privacy even in her own room.

It was first regarded as bridal room, but now no longer, as her fallopian tubes were blocked. "The sister-in-law lies across the four-poster, discussing my ovaries and theirs". They make fun of her, as in her wardrobe, instead of saris, there are books. Monisha is the intellectual type who carries her own personal library to her in-law house. However, nobody bothers about the books she has in her library. Anita Desai has presented the picture of women as daughters-in-law in typical middle class Indian families who are not at all happy. All their ambitions, talents, potentialities are reduced to be mere housewives and they can do nothing beyond mundane household chores. Jiban tells Monisha,

‘Be a little friendly to them. That is all they ask of you - a little friendliness.’

Amla feels sorry for Monisha and wonders how and why it was that she had been married to ‘this boring non-entity, this blind moralist, this complacent quoter of Edmund Burke and Wordsworth, Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore, this rotund, minute-minded and limited official.’ Jiban was dull and prolix. He worked in a dull Ministry and he would go on talking about his work.

Monisha is accused of theft by everyone in the family. She had taken Jiban's money to pay the hospital bills for Nirode. She had to suffer the humiliation from men and women who are mean and low. The mother-in-law shouts,

‘the servants will be dismissed, all of them. I will not have a thief in my house. . . After all, you were the only person who was in the room all day.’
Monisha ‘is willing to accept this status then and to live here a little beyond and below everyone else, in exile.’

But she is not able to bear this for long and commits suicide by self immolation. The maladjustment is menacing by the adverse attitude of the family members and hostile social traditions and background.

The other marriages referred to in the novel are also not happy and satisfactory. Dharma, the painter, bears his marriage as it has become his habit. He expresses his idea of marriage to Amla:

“Our relationship in not all so straight-forward and pat, married relationship never are. There is the matter of

loyalty, habit, complicity . . . things I couldn't talk to you about till you married and knew for yourself".

Dharma and Gita Devi are almost like strangers. Their daughter had married her cousin, who lived with them for fifteen years. They leave Calcutta and come to live in the suburb, where nobody knew of this incident. Amla feels that Dharma has committed a terrible sin of casting out a young daughter from himself. He says,

'nothing that concerns my daughter concerns me.'

His wife prays the whole day, isolating herself even from her husband as if she was repenting in the bubbling prayer of a sinner in despair.

Amla, who was attracted towards Dharma in the beginning, now feels revolted on seeing his other part. She had willingly let herself be lured toward him. The glamour of mystery, his uncanniness, the eeriness about him had lured young girls to his studio. Amla had changed after meeting Dharma. She had grown pale and worked very poorly in the office. She faces swings in her mood after going to Dharma's house, she would become another Amla, "a flowering Amla, translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward." She would like to hear the details. It was only during these hours she felt she was alive. She wanted tangibility and permanence in the relationship which she could not receive from Dharma :

"The understanding between them was an interior volcano, coloring the water of his existence and splashing on to his canvas the tints of the upheaval within him."

Now, at times, Amla wondered whether Dharma saw in his model anything more than inspiration which offered him rescue from the complexities of nature in which he had enslaved himself. Amla gets no peace from this relationship. Her aunt, too, advises her to leave him as 'he uses you, something in you that he needs. But the rest - what does he care for that?' At last Amla breaks away from Dharma. She realises that Gita Devi was the base of all Dharma's actions, 'the spread lotus that bore the weight of the god absorbed in his meditation and the spinning out of his Karma.'

Nirode, too, has no faith in man-woman relationship. He hates his mother as he believes that she has an affair with Major Chadha. He is repulsed to see the pretences and show between Jit and Sarla. This couple belongs to the upper class of society. They have no love for each other but live together as it has become a status symbol. Jit is aware of the many admirers of his wife but doesn't say a word about it. Sarla doesn't want to go and meet her in-laws back in south. Nirode feels revulsion for this relationship. He says:

"Marriage, bodies, touch and torture... he shuddered and, walking swiftly, was afraid of the dark of Calcutta. All that was Jit's and Sarla's, he decided, and indeed, all that had to do with marriage, was destructive, negative, decadent.

All the characters in this novel have distrust for marriage. Aunt Lila hates men - particularly her fat, self-centered, long-

dead husband. Her opinion is that "women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All the joy and ambition is channeled that way, while they go parched themselves." She learnt it the hard way. Her daughter, Rita, is also a victim of maladjustment in marriage. She is divorced and working with some of the finest physicists in Paris. Thus, in all the men women relationships mentioned in the novel, we see a picture of desolation and emptiness. They illustrate that marriage, at best, is a farce, at worst, it is a malignancy that destroys body, mind, and soul completely.

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