



Anita Desai's Women Characters: a Special Study of Monisha in Voices in the City

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English is one of the quite notable and renowned areas of literature among the world literature today. It started with verse as its form initially and later on moved to the other genres of literature. Indian fiction said to have come of age in the 1930s. Many great writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand are the pioneers of Indian English novels. However, the share of the women novelists is not at all negligible in this creative task and at times equally contributive. In this context one cannot but think of Anita Desai. She is a sincere writer engaged in probing reality. As a woman she is capable of understanding woman's psyche better than the male writers. This paper focuses on the portrayal of women characters in Anita Desai's novels with a reference to Monisha in *Voices in the City*.

KEYWORDS

Indian Writing in English, Anita Desai, Women Characters, Monisha, *Voices in the City*

Introduction

Indian English Literature began as a by-product between India and Britain. Even before Macaulay's famous '*Minute of 1835*' advocating English education, Indians had been trying to write in English. At first, verse was more popular than fiction: poets like Derozio, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu appeared before many novelists. Indian fiction in English can be said to have come of age in the 1930s. Indo-Anglican writing has made significant strides particularly in fiction. Our society – its rich and varied customs, the independence struggle, caste-based conflicts and such contemporary issues are taken up by great writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Robby (et al) states "*Indo-Anglican novelists are mostly committed to issues like social reforms, Gandhian Philosophy, the Partition, terrorism, revolutionary activities and so on.*" (P1676) However, the share of the women novelists is not at all negligible in this creative task and at times equally contributive. In this context one cannot but think of Anita Desai.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 to a Bengali father and German mother. She had the advantage of being nurtured in a highly cosmopolitan city – Delhi and the study of English literature at the University of Delhi added a new dimension to her view of human life and hence writing in English is an obsession with her. She is a novelist deeply concerned with 'the changing rainbow' of human relationships in all their colours and shades. Robby observes "*Her (Anita Desai) novels offer us artistic and absorbing pictures of the relationship between man and woman, parent and child, individual and society and so on.*" (P09) The sense of frustration that troubles her and tireless search after the truth of existence are the motivating factors behind her creative effects.

Anita Desai started her career as a novelist with her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and her other novels are *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye, Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where shall we go this summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *Custody* (1984) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988).

The persistent themes of her novels are: human relationships, alienation, loneliness, East and West encounter, violence and death. Regarding her novels K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar beautifully observes "*Since her (Anita Desai's) preoccupation is the inner*

world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestible enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters." (P 464). Most of the critical writing on her novels centers on her pre-occupation with her urban sensibility and a style of what she herself calls 'the language of the interior'.

Anita Desai is essentially a sincere writer engaged in probing reality. As a woman she is capable of understanding woman's psyche better than the male writers. This can be seen in her portrayal of women characters in her novels with a rare insight and fineness of sentiment. The characters of Anita Desai's novels are basically tragic for even as they accept their destiny, they refuse to surrender. Apart from their temperamental aloofness, the outside forces, such as the city, nature and family play major roles in making them tragic. The physical, moral and spiritual misery of urban life results in alienation, loneliness and loss of human values and the protagonists fall victims to them. It eventually results in the attitude of defeat and disillusionment leading to preoccupation with the idea of death and dying.

Anita Desai is the novelist of the inner weather of the mind. An uncanny ability to probe into the recesses of the heart is her fort. *Voices in the City* is a crystal evidence of her inward sensibility. It is also one of her novels that clearly visualize the inner sense of a married woman, who live in an entirely re-located surrounding and environment. This paper focuses on the portrayal of women characters in Anita Desai's novels with a reference to *Monisha* in *Voices in the City*.

Monisha

Anita Desai's portrayal of Monisha in her second novel, *Voices in the city* makes her the most sensitive and the most poetic of all the characters in the novel. She is an extraordinary woman who reads Kafka and Camus. She is a sensitive woman and cannot understand the taboos of tradition. She reveals herself in minute details.

Monisha arrives at the ancestral house of Jiban, the bow bazaar house. It is a joint family of large size that welcomes her in the traditional manner. A number of uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins and in-laws crowd the house which has four storeys.

The novel presents a moving account of marital discord. Her incapacity to bear a child is ridiculed by the elderly female members of the family. She is not shown any sympathy. There is total lack of dialogue with her husband and she is all the time suffering from an oppressive sense of loneliness.

Monisha is not only a highly educated woman but she has intellectual accomplishments of a high order. She has a library of her own which consists of the classics of different languages. But she gets no leisure and privacy to go through these books and feel delighted. She is deeply pained to note that her love for books is also ridiculed.

Monisha suffers from a terrible sense of alienation. Her husband Jiban is practical and down to earth and is essentially mediocre. She has to suffer the slings and arrows of taunts and tortures of the joint family. Attending on her brother Nirode, who is seriously ill, Monisha has many occasions to muse on the meaning of existence. His illness, gives her many chances to leave the house. During most part of the day she is asked to do household chores. There is no privacy. She meets her husband only in the evenings. A free thinking woman, she starts hating her routine life with Nirode and returns house.

One day after her husband's exit she takes money from her husband's savings. Her uncles and aunts look at her with suspicion and Monisha cannot tolerate this atmosphere anymore. The incident highlights the Indian women's economic dependence. Her tragic suffering is a classic example of the educated unemployed women in our times.

Monisha is frustrated, lonely and alienated. Her longing for touch and intimacy, her lack of communication with her husband make her life dull and insignificant. She broods on the futility of her existence. The only escape from this state of existence is to accept solitude and to be in exile. *"I find on this level that solitude that becomes me most naturally I am willing to accept this status then, and to live here, a little beyond and below everyone else, in exile."*

Monisha thinks about the Bengali women who work for centuries inside the 'barred windows'. They await death as they do everything. *"The eyes of these silent Bengali women are not dead but they anticipate death, as they do everything with resignation"* (P.121).

She frantically tries to find a real meaning in her life, but feels utterly frustrated. She has a feeling that her life is devoid of any meaning and the only choice for her is between death and the meaningful life. She realizes that not only her life but human life as such is an irresolvable mystery: *"Is this life is then, my life only a conundrum that I shall brood over for ever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum is that, then life?"* (Pp. 124-125).

The concert she attends provides her with any searching questions about life. She reads the Bhagawat Gita for answers to her questions. She debates whether to go back to her mother in Kalimpong or dismiss it as she is afraid of her mother's disapproval. So, that leaves no opinion to her but to choose suicide as an answer to her torturous questions.

Her last words are significant: *"I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless meaningless uninvolved – does this not amount to non-existence, Please?"* (P. 140).

Monisha is a victim of conventional society. Monisha's problem is how to be by herself in a room of her own. She hates the rapacity and the uneasy lassitude of conscience of the city of Calcutta. Her sensitive nature and her educational background do not make it easy to accept her role as the eldest daughter-in-law of traditional joint family. Monisha is untouched by the world outside, broods on the futility of her existence.

In the great metropolis, Calcutta, the city of goddess Kali,

Monisha searches for silence. Monisha discovers two faces of Calcutta "one rapacious, one wary". The garden of Kalimpong is Monisha's abode of peace into which she escapes through memory to forget violence, the crowd and lack of privacy in the city of Calcutta. She experiences a death-like stillness in the city and most of the time she thinks about Kalimpong, the district away from the city and the family. Monisha's dull existence in the house and the lack of any communication with others drive her towards her an inner garden of her own creation. She considers her life to be waste, a life that is lacked in a steel container. Monisha has a sort of terrible destructiveness in her personality. She is basically pessimistic in approach and attitude in life.

Monisha's mean existence leads her to think death is the only alternative to her agonized living, to her confuses despair. Monisha failing to cope with her psychic problems commits suicide.

Conclusion

Anita Desai is significant and prolific writer of fiction and one among those who handled the 'stream of consciousness' novel. She has undoubtedly given a new outlook to Indian English novel and deserves special mention for her treatment of women in her novels. She may be said to be the representative of the trend that is to turn more and more inwards and deal with the individuals' problems which are mostly of an existential nature.

Anita Desai's female characters are highly sensitive human beings. They are driven to the limits of despair and living within a limited conventional structure. Her women characters depict the sad lot of the Indian women. Normally, Anita Desai does not give any solution to 'What is life?'. But she offers a glimpse of the moment of vision, a sense of reality, which is too elusive to be trapped in definitions and this elusive quality is a hallmark of Anita Desai. The feeling of the terrible isolation of the individual underlies her work. There is no doubt that this quality will survive the test of time.

Anita Desai never portrays her protagonists as a pitiable lot needing sympathy and compassion. But in her novels they are depicted as dignified strange unpredictable and beautiful individuals and their psychic depths are totally explored. She is a committed writer who tends the art of fiction with utmost fondness and tenderness and sets values in order to translate them in fiction.

No character lives alone but is formed to be the victims of the society. Withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, their material wants are taken care of by affluence. Whatever action there is in her novels is a part of the integral role composed of the human psyche, the human situation and the outer and inner rhythms.

Monisha grows sorely conscious of the passion of love, lying dried in her when she fails to respond like other spectators. It is only that she feels bereft as she has forgotten and lost touch with it because of her situation. *"They put me away in the steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me."* (P. 247) As the awareness of having wasted her life dawns on her, she grows resistive to seek release from her captivity and begins her 'panicked search for feeling'. She hurries out of her room, which is filled with sounds of other people's emotions and commits suicide.

Anita Desai as a novelist is morbid. She does not have a sense of humour and irony and as a result of these things; her style begins with rhetorical flourish and ends in stereo typed clichés. This paper is an attempt made to study the portrayal of women characters by Anita Desai in her novels and to sum up the views expressed on Monisha in *Voices in the City*.

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