



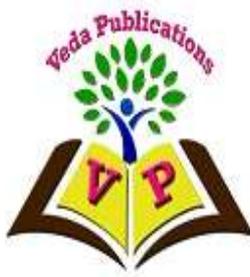
**UNSPOKEN VOICE OF EXASPERATION AND VISION IN THE NOVEL  
 VOICES IN THE CITY BY ANITA DESAI**

Dr. B.S. Arun

(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College (Autonomous) Erode – 638009.)

Email: [arunsadasivan83@gmail.com](mailto:arunsadasivan83@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**



The *Voices in the City* is one of the best constructions by Anita Desai. This great story has a life of the middle class rationales of Calcutta. A story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the crosscurrents of changing social values. The story tries to show a vibrant picture of India's social transition—a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead, and the emergent ones not fully evolved. *Voices in the City*, as the title suggests, deals with the voice of anger and visions of fear in the city of Calcutta. This research paper focuses on the theme of the picture of lower-class society in Anita Desai's *Voices In The City*. The very title *Voices in the City* itself indicates the central theme of alienation and isolation of the modern man. As Matthew Arnold says: "In the sea of life enisled ..... we mortal millions live alone" (Anita Desai 5).

**Keywords:** *Rational, Crosscurrents, Social Values, Social Transition, Realization, Alienation, Identity, Indomitable Courage, Self-Sacrifice.*

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Anita Desai, a prominent contributor to the development of Indian English novel is commended for her art of characterization. As a novelist of high order, she has the deftness to generate characters that are unique and introverted. Her characters are lonely, reclusive, gloomy, thrown off balance, aggravated, free minded, stubborn and catastrophic. Her galaxy of characters is a world of richness, variety and complex. Her characters are life-like and represent the world which we live. Each of her characters is an unsounded mystery who reveals their realization of self, the agony of hopelessness, their sense of alienation, their search for identity, their unconquerable courage in deciding their own way of action, their unrelenting fight against the social and economic oppression, and their psychological conflicts.

Anita Desai was born on 24th June 1937 in India. Daughter of a German mother and an Indian father, she grew up during World War II and could see the anxiety her German mother was experiencing about the traumatic situation in Germany. After the war she found her known Germany devastated. Her mother never returned there. Anita herself did not visit until she was an adult. She has taught at Mt. Holyoke and Smith Colleges and is a member of the Advisory Board for English in New Delhi. She is married and has four children. She is known as a novelist, short story writer and also children author Presently she is working as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Girton College, Cambridge and Clare Hall, Cambridge. The author has won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for her novel *Fire on the Mountain* and her children's book *The Village by the Sea* in the year of 1982. She has also won the Guardian Children's Fiction Award.

This research paper focuses on the theme of the picture of lower-class society in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*. Anita Desai is one of the leading Indian women novelist writing in English most of the theme found in her novels are the problems of alienation, immigration, marital disharmony and so on. In the *Voices in the City* Anita Desai portrays how people, especially poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead the life. Thus the society makes a lot of sudden changes.

Anita Desai repeatedly deals with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation for the individual's identity and relation to reality. Virginia Woolf is a remarkable figure in the field of psychological novel. To her, the business of the novelist is the exploration of the human personality so as to attain a vision of life's meaning. Her characters live, think and unfold in time and hence her preoccupation with the problems continues.

Mrinalini Solanki observers:

The novels of Anita Desai depict the workings of unseen forces on the human mind and psyche...she portrays with amazing accuracy the inward odyssey and psychic upheavals of hyper-sensitive people struggling to survive in difficult human situations. Desai's characters are exceptional beings who are victims of anguish, anxiety and a terrible self-consciousness, and are unable to accept life as it comes. Consequently, they suffer from terrible inner conflicts. (Solanki 4)

The very title *Voices in the City* itself indicates the central theme of alienation and isolation of the modern man. As Matthew Arnold says: "In the sea of life enisled ..... we mortal millions live alone" (Anita Desai 5).

Anita Desai, in *Voices in the City* represents Nirode, his two sisters Monisha and Amla as an 'individual' and their 'terror of facing, single handed the ferocious assaults of existence' 7 with the help of memory. As Prasad says:

The past is not past but continues into present through the vehicle of memory. But memory does not recover the past as it was. For each person reconstructs his past in a unique way dependent upon his experiences, prejudices and opinions. Thus the way a character experiences time, helps the reader to grasp the very essence of that character. ( *The Novelist* 8)

The title of the novel made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Anita Desai's skilful



handling invests the city with a character. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid. Discussed in depth by A.V.Krishna Rao who also feels that it is Calcutta which is the hero of the novel and not Nirode:

Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as a force of creation, presentation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali. (*Voices In The City* 15)

It is true that the city of Calcutta is the locale for most of the actions of the novel and serves as a background and it influences and affects all the major characters in the novel. But the novel itself is primarily a family drama around which the story revolves. Even the blurb of the novel says that the novel describes the corrosive effects of the city life upon the Indian family. It is this city that affects the protagonist and forces to go out of the city and to find a good place to live on. The situations and circumstances in the city make a rapid change in the life of the many characters in this novel. Thus Anita Desai took a gentle effort to exemplify the surroundings of the city and makes the reader to understand how a society can change the human life.

Desai's protagonists are basically tragic and they fail indefatigably. They are psychologically disturbed, moody, self-absorbed and confused in their manner and disjointed expressions. They are face up to with a aggressive social environment and they fall into a state of passiveness. They share their experience and perceptions about life and try to search for the real meaning of life. The characters live a lonesome life and love privacy.

*Voices in the City* is an enormous conception by Anita Desai. The story is based on the life of the middle class rational of Calcutta. This is an unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the countercurrents of changing social values. In many ways the story reflects a vivid picture of India's social transition. The story is basically based on the life of the middle class intellectuals of Calcutta. Anita Desai being the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award wrote the captivating

novel and describes the sarcastic effects of city life upon an Indian family.

Brought up in luxury by an pathetic mother, Nirode settles down in Calcutta and becomes wrapped up into its bohemian life, while his elder sister, Monisha lives out a servile existence within the inflexible confines of a traditional Hindu life. Their younger sister arrives from the country and becomes involved with an artist; but the outcome of this and the horrible decision Monisha eventually takes, makes this novel a doubly haunting and a accomplish work of art. This novel is beautifully demonstrated and states that Calcutta can be the place for bohemians.

The most significant part of Anita Desai's works is, first of all, her strong demonstration of the feminine sensibility as well as the focus on the predicament Indian women had and still have to face nowadays due to the lasting patriarchal norms.

Anita Desai is unquestionably one of the celebrated Indian English writers. She holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India she succeeds immensely in analyzing her characters from inside and unfolds their desires and inner motives. Anita Desai is much conscious of the modern life and so she fixed her attention not only on its consequences but also on the feelings of human beings. The characters in the novels of Anita Desai are the representative of self identification. The nature of revolt and insurgence is at the very core of existentialism. The uncertainty of 'to be or not to be' haunts the mind of the character. Anita Desai has used this technique very beautifully to express the inner most thoughts of her characters in her novels.

Anita Desai's main thematic concern is how people cope with society extraterrestrial or not alien without losing their sense of self identify and individuality. The protagonist as shown in her novels is a lone individual and not a social man. Her major characters are tormented by their fears and phobias as they feel circumscribed by the frightening conditions of their existence. Her contribution to fiction writing has been quite commendable and substantial she comes face to face with the intangible realities of life, the innermost depths of human psyche and the chaotic underworld of human mind



through her novels. Her novels are the exploration of sensibility the inner working of mind that assumes the most important place. She unravels beautifully the mystery of the inner life of her characters.

Desai's central preoccupation as a novelist is with the existentialist outlook on human life. Her novel 'Voices in the City' is existential in character, for it explores the inward subjectivity of its main characters. As H. M. William Observes :

It is an existential novel that explores the inner climate of youth despair, epitomized by the over - acutely self conscious Nirode that quoter of camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all. This existential 'angst' is duplicated in Monisha in whom it assumes a fatal rhythm from which Nirode was once narrow why saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end.(William 54)

*Voices in the City* is "the unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values". It is a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an substandard father who is most of the time drunk; there are four children, two sons and two daughters- Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Father is no more now, mother leads a lonely life because all the children are outside Kalimpong; she gets company of her neighbor, one retired Major Chaddha with whom seemingly she is also having an affair which is much show antipathy towards by Nirode. What agitate him is his dislike for Calcutta, the dirty city.

The filthy conditions, rough treatment and the utter monotony of the physical world are the unwanted things. Desai's characters of this novel rise up against the dirty or ugly reality which also hidden in cupidity. It never appeals to their compassion. In this sense, the outward messiness which is preserved in the buildings, ugly gutters, street hawkers, beggars, and the narrow and filthy roads is incarnate here. It is rather disgusting. In fact, Calcutta plays an important role as a dirty character against which these voices are raised. Though he has memories of

his childhood and of his mother at Kalimpong, he recalls with obliteration his mother's attraction for their neighbor, which he believes has underprivileged him of his mother's love towards him. When he reads the letter from his mother, he expresses such resentment about his mother mentioning Major Chaddha's name

....how unashamedly she wrote the hideous name, so like a cooking pot full of yellow food, or a rag of dirty underwear. How helpful was this Chaddha, providing her with male company and admiration.  
(*Voices in the City* 67)

Nirode found that the whole world runs behind material success and fame. On the other hand, *Voices in the City* depicts how the sarcastic effects of city life on an Indian family caught in the cross current of changing social values and norms make them to suffer a lot. Lack of expectation and aggravation are their lot in the city. Nirode doesn't voluntarily leave his city and come to another city which is unfamiliar to him. Nirode is employed as an "anonymous, shabby clerk on a newspaper, calling himself a journalist"(32) while his real job is cutting out "long strips of newspaper and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out to verify a dull fat in some airless office room"(41). He is not happy with his lot in the city and desperately wants to escape.

The existential problem of the novel is dramatic. It threatens each aspect of the protagonists' lives, making them suffer from pain of the futility of their existence. All of the main characters stand on the verge of death and emptiness in the city, which is engulfed into heavy industrialization and loss of the traditional values. This industrialization brings with it the abundance of things, which slowly start substituting the moral aspect, turning people into self-centered and money-oriented consumers that suffer from the lack of purpose and loneliness as things cannot bring true happiness.

Anita Desai includes some of the techniques in the novel, which show her rich inner world and deep understanding of the ongoing problems of the society. Fantasy, which is revealed through the "stream of consciousness", particularly creates the



feeling that the reader is starting to experience emotions, which are similar to those of the protagonists. On the one hand, this effect is the great achievement of the novelist as she had managed to choose the words which penetrated deeply into the consciousness of people giving them the opportunity to feel the real taste of the issue the Indian people, mostly women, go through. On the other hand, such a depiction makes her novel an extremely negative work of art, which does not give a hope for the change. For example, for Indian people such a depiction can appear to be a sort of a death sentence announced to them through hopeless narrative perspectives and apt oppositions.

The novel brilliantly outlines the world perception of three protagonists-siblings. The narrative is based on the sad realities of the middle class intellectuals residing in Indian Calcutta. The novel is a remarkable story that depicts a Bohemian brother, Nirode, together with his two sisters, Monisha and Amla, trapped in the crossroads of shifting social values. One of the main themes of the novel, which goes throughout the lives of all protagonists, reflects a dramatic predicament of the social transition in India – a challenging period, which signifies the mix of old and rising elements, which cannot co-exist together as they have the opposing nature. The book outlines the sorrowful impact of the urban livelihood upon an Indian family.

Nirode, Monisha and Amla, all are young, intense and talented. Their shared quest for the meaning of life is a sensitive and image-filled experience, yet their responses differ because they are unlike one another. Unlike *Cry, the Peacock* which is a suffocating nightmare of the tortured psyche of an intense young woman, *Voices in the City* is a measured, matured attempt of a novelist to present the quest of three young intellectuals. They demand an authentic and pure existence, fed up as they are with a false, falsifying world. The theme of the novel is suggested quite early in the novel by Nirode himself in his conversation with David. He quotes Albert Camus:

In default of inexhaustible happiness eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that

consolation, and our worst agonies, come to an end one day. (Albert 22)

Nirode's quest is for a destiny that helps him see beyond suffering and happiness. He becomes a rebel against the better judgment of David, who has found his balance and has come to terms with life after his own initial rebellion by running away from his home in Ireland.

The novel 'Voices in the City' deals mainly with the three major characters, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. In this novel the life of Calcutta has been portrayed. The characters of this novel especially Nirode and his sister Monisha feel themselves detached from this city. Living in a small, corrugated, tinted and filthy place his horizon also narrows down and vision gets blurred. Monisha's death brings the emotions of Nirode and Amla to the climax, when at her funeral Nirode for the first time, feels the need of love and compassion from her mother but she refuses.

Nirode recognizes a lack of individuality and commitment to some higher purpose in life in all those who come and flatter him on the success of his magazine. Nirode's quest for identity and meaning in life leads him to a point where he perceives the worthlessness of all art.

Monisha craves for privacy because she is unable to share the world of her in-laws. Her in-laws are materialists to the core. The alienation between Jiban and her is rooted in their temperaments, and Jiban's inability to understand and fulfill the emotional needs of his wife Monisha is actually conscious of her adverse circumstances and suffers from a nervous anxiety which is certainly existentialist. Monisha's anguish and despair increase in intensity with her discovery that in the absence of her present meaningless existence. Monisha is caught in a truly existentialist contingency when she is accused of stealing money from Jiban's wardrobe. It is true that she has taken this money but she has done so, with honest intention. Monisha cannot even dream of such distrust and the accusation of theft brought against her she is pained to think that the people, who themselves have a mean and animal existence; consider her as low as to be a thief.

The third major character Amla arrives in Calcutta to find a career as a commercial artist, but



her search for a career is transformed into an existentialist search for love and joy unmixed with pain and suffering. Amla becomes anxious about the unpleasant change that has come over Monisha and Nirode after their arrival in Calcutta. She begins to suffer from a sense of loneliness. Her consciousness of the evil in life, her anxiety and anguish, her pursuit of absolute love, her despair at her failure in the search - all these make her a character of existentialist proportion.

Desai's interest in the consciousness of the woman in her novels enables us to see the Indian woman adequately from the inside. She is occupied with interiorizing the consciousness of the woman and the economics of life do not bother her except when they are noticed as adding to the monotonous aspect of existence.

The novel has four parts, each deal mainly with a major character, but Nirode, the protagonist of the novel, remains the dominant character in all the four parts. R.K. Dhawan rightly observes.

*Voices in the City* sketches the spiritual odyssey of a world weary, lean and hungry-looking journalist named Nirode, doomed to reside in Calcutta the 'city of death' The novel is a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual, who has lost his way in contemporary India. (*The fiction of Anita Desai* 3)

Nirode is unique in his feelings and thoughts and seeks absolute freedom. Desai distinguishes between the marsh birds (Dharma and David) and the king kites (Nirode, Monisha and Amla). Dharma and David try to escape the suffocating reality of life, yet they are only "like marsh birds who could not fly long, but hopped along the ground about the water, in the rushes" (*Voices in the City* 22). But to Nirode who seeks absolute freedom, "To be a marsh bird was not enough... One must be a king kite wheeling so far away in the blazing empty sky so as to be merely a dot, almost invisible to the urchins who stood below..." (VC72). Unlike David and Dharma, Nirode cannot be satisfied with the clouds, inaccessible to everyone, attainable to every request, tense longing to tear away all the fetters and to be

completely alone, isolated and absolutely free even if it means total emptiness and insignificance. Only in the end does he realize that this type of empty life is next to nothing and has no value even to him.

In the beginning, Nirode is shown working for some newspaper, which he decides to give up because he has reached the limit where it has become "impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, ... at such senseless jobs?" (VC 18). What Nirode needs, as he himself says at this point in the novel, is "three drinks a night and a room of my own that's all I ask..."(VC 33).The absence of positive faith or a sense of permanent commitment in Nirode makes him drop one thing after another. He starts working on a magazine but does not have high notions or dreams about it; rather he is obsessed with the desire to woo failure after failure in life. He tells his friend David quite early:

I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off-fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly (VC40).

Desai's characters are manifested with the traits of introspection, bashfulness, inappropriateness and inability to compromise makes them lead a life of isolation. His characters are not flat and they change, permeate and grow psychologically under the stream-of-consciousness. Very few writers have surpassed Desai in the demarcation and delineation of the protagonist. Her interest in the psychic life of mankind has made her explore the unexplored arenas of human mind. The chaotic, conflicting and the profound struggle in the inner recesses of human beings make her a distinctive novelist. Her novels are introspective and try to trace the workings of the mind in their struggle against the odds of the social and emotional world.

In *Voices in the City*, the three voices- Monisha, Nirode and Amla are struggled by a process of frugality. They attempt to explore the secret of permanent peace and happiness in an absolutely



physical world dominated by passion. Nirode and Amla are sharp reactions against the degrading social values and ethical deprivation. With her loveless marriage with Jiban in a bustling joint family, Monisha was propelled into the artificial love behind the threshold. She became an object of pity and neglect, ultimately of indifference. It was a household where she was merely tolerated. Her suicide relieved everyone of this outsider who could never adjust to the well-established middle-class set. *Voices in the City* is a record of unspoken reactions. Of all other women characters, Monisha is a victim of the situation that drains out the last drop of life in her. Monisha's suicide is a confession of failure. She embodies the negation of the concept that women place themselves in a bondage to men. Monisha's reaction to her dingy, claustrophobic existence is violent, but it upholds that death is more welcome than a mean and subhuman existence. Meanwhile, Amla questions and reassesses her attitudes after her sister's death.

Nirode is the central character of the novel who is at the verge of losing his essential humanity. However, in the process of the life experience, he regains his human capacity to sympathies with Amla and aunt Lila in their suffering. In these moments of interpersonal empathy and tenderness, he reaches out of them, shares their feelings and is filled with tenderness for the world. He is filled in an immense care of the world. He reaches out, again and again, to touch Amla's cold hands. He presses them in hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other's flesh, other's pain, longs to make them his own, which till now has been agonizingly neglected.

In his eyes, Monisha is a martyr who has met a splendid death. Her death gives him a glimpse of the secret of life and of death. He feels elevated to an unimaginably high vantage point where he could see the "whole fantastic design of life and death, of incarnation followed by reincarnation, of unconsciousness turning into consciousness of sleep followed by waking" (VC 249). However, this experience does not liberate Nirode. His ecstasy and relief soon vanish at the prospect of once again meeting his mother and being caught in a trap of "communion, relationship, joy and responsibility" (VC 250). Nirode's chaotic state of mind indicates the

terror of the dark unknown: Death. He tells Amla that he has been sentenced to death. "I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach death, Kali... while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute, and also closer and closer to my death" (VC 256). Nirode recognizes the duality of knowledge and ignorance, reality and illusion, good and evil, life and death. He has, no doubt, turned cynical superficially, but essentially he is a quester who wants to make his own conclusion. He falls into a fit of despair only to come out with a clearer vision of life

Anita Desai presents the major theme of alienation to literary treatment adequately in her novels. Her main characters are caught in varied trying predicaments caused either by situation or by their own wives or parents. Hapless as they are, they fall as preys to knotty circumstances and become alienates of different kinds. Monisha feel alienation of loneliness in *Voices in the City*, Nirode also suffers in multiple sufferings not only self imposed alienation, but also from alienation of the neurotic alienation of an artist and alienation of the competitive society.

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