

Anita Desai's Voices in the City: A Discourse of the Postcolonial Modernity

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Abstract

The present chapter aims to explore Anita Desai's concern for the impact of the modernity in the era of the postcolonial India which she fictionalizes in her novel *Voices in the City*. She draws a map of the cracks and fissures the postcolonial modernism left on the society. Postcolonial theory tries to interrogate structures of changing social mobility after the colonial period ends. *Voices in the City* voices the cry of a city which undergoes through multiple wounds which the era brings in the name of better human civilizations. The chapter attempts to re-read the novel as a significant discourse on structures of postmodernity in the postcolonial India.

Keywords: modernity, modernism, postcolonial, colonial period, postcolonial modernity.

The writing of Anita Desai begins to take birth at a time when the earth is in its fully-matured postmodern shape. Desai could neither shut her eyes to the aura of the multi-faced and multi-dimensional postmodern waves and write back about the traditional beauty of nature and generosity and magnanimity of human race, nor could she go unaffected by the sharp whack and bang of postmodernity. Desai tries to measure the epochal changes the postmodern brought over the human race and its habitats. She captures the real colors of human psyche that get distorted and vandalized in the postmodern era and observes the human hearts very neatly at a very close distance. She survives the poison of the postmodern because she struggles to maintain all the tunes of its dances merging into the darkness of the postmodern with her own distinguishable luminosity of identity.

The postmodern begins to engulf the earth during the mid-twentieth century, and it is the West that experiences its first drops. It reaches the East later and Anita Desai is among the first from this part to sense its impact. After surviving the two Great World Wars, The west sees the human approaching towards loneliness and alienation, depression and hopelessness, doubt and unfaithfulness, and that leads to challenge the legacy of traditional values and beliefs. It changes the way people look at everything offering new meaning and significance to it. It changes the direction of human journey to something that is marked with quest for identity, search for meaning of life but only ending with emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness. People see everything vague, impure, and untrustworthy. The whole habitat of human race turns into a dystopia that contaminates all the beings in it. Philosophers come up with new ideas and creeds to re-define the earth and its beings; writers repudiate the traditional way of looking and emerge with new artistries and approaches to paint the distorted human psyche.

Apart from the burden of the postmodern traumas, Desai experiences the laceration of the postcolonial legacy that infected a lasting wound on the civilization of Indian subcontinent from which India hardly recovered till date. The postmodern cry for freedom for the marginalized sections of the society is another fact that shapes Desai's writing, which emerged in the form of different movements—feminism, Human Rights movements, and so on. Like Margaret Atwood, Desai feels the need of voices for the hitherto un-noticed feelings of female hearts; like Virginia Woolf, she unbinds the flows of human conscious; like Toni Morrison she dissects different family relations and makes them aware of their status in that family and society. In the present chapter we discuss Desai's novel *Voices in the City* (1965) and show how the novel projects a dystopia of the discorded family relationship, a dystopia of torn marriage life, a dystopia of unsuitable waste land.

The novel tells the story of middle-class intellectuals in Calcutta and paints a picture of 'the cross-currents of changing social values' that came after the uprooting of the British colonial legacy and the arrival of the postmodern upheavals. It is a family drama of four members and narrates their sweet and sour feelings for one another. Nirode is the brother of two sisters Amla and Monisha who are each living separately from their mother. The novel divides into four parts that are named after the three siblings and their mother. The first part 'Nirode' portrays the struggles of some educated adults in the fast-changing modernity and delineates the failure of Nirode to ensure a mental and social sustainability. He loses belief in the traditional inheritance of ancestral property and tries to see his surrounding on his own. He does not like others to pose their ideas upon him. He works as an editor in a magazine but finds it impossible for him to continue this. He thinks this job quite impersonal bereft of any personal involvement. In the end he runs into delusion and disappointment. The second part 'Monisha' unravels the failure of the modern society to arrange and sustain a compatible marriage life. Monisha is married to Jiban and continues to live in Calcutta with her husband and in-laws. She finds no one in this city compatible for her company and tears contacts with the world and lives in her own world of loneliness and alienation. She finds no one in her husband's house who can hear the inner voice of her heart. Her marriage was a failure which was arranged on the terms of money and property. And at last she ends her life in suicide.

The third part 'Amla' details the character of Amla, the youngest sister, who is, in the beginning, presented as a positive girl, but, in the end, is dejected and disillusioned with her personal relationships. The fourth part 'Mother' presents her vain attempt to unite with her son and daughters.

The very opening of the novel echoes a tone marked with a touch of postmodern anxiety—people hopelessly rushing here and there in search for something they do not really know. The story opens with an account of a railway platform, where Nirode came to give farewell to his friend Arun who was leaving for London and where he noticed people rushing here and there with nervousness and anxiety on their faces. "On the platform people loitered in various attitudes of nervousness, impatience and regret...and latecomers pounding along with baggage wobbling and disintegrating in the seemingly hopeless search for the right carriage"(VC 7). The journey of these men in train symbolically turns a journey of life that has no visible and concrete destination. Nirode thinks people are in their search for something that cannot be really achieved on this meaningless earth. He does not find any hope in their journey. Nirode possesses some awareness of the hopelessness of people's vain journey and struggle. He thinks "that this is no actual journey but a nightmare one in which one is unable to start". There is nothing actuality in this journey but a vain attempt to gratify the human queries that ends in crushing on grounds with hopelessness and disillusionment. Nirode says:

I'd never go, David, I never shall... I hesitate. That's my undoing—this lack of faith and this questioning. I just stand and watch the train rush off, leaving me behind like a ghost in a bloody nightmare. (Desai 39)

Unlike Vladimir and Estragon in Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, who are in total disillusion of their journey and destination, Nirode thinks he would rather not start the vain journey. He is dead with the meaningless journey of life and "what he wanted was shadows, silence, stillness... that is exactly what he would always be left with" (VC 10). This is not Nirode, an individual who desires silence, stillness and shadows, but the whole human race that are infected with the virus of modern diseases are in search for this. Vladimir and Estragon start an endless journey or rather a waiting for their fate to be opened by an unknown authority. Their journey or waiting results in nothingness and ends with the message that life is really meaningless. Nirode is also a traveler who thinks that he has to travel alone. He converses with his friend David: "you and I will always be travelers, David and we'll always travel alone" (VC 90). But like Vladimir and Estragon who could never determine their minds whether to stay or move away, Nirode moves back and says: 'I haven't even begun yet'.

Nirode finds no solace or sense in the life's journey: "unfair, life is unfair—and how faint and senseless it sounded in that tumult of traffic and commerce" (VC 9-10). This is no more a holy journey of Bunyan's Christian, nor a crusade of Arnold's Arthur. As Desai writes:

He (Nirode) loathed the world that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage and he loathed himself for not having the true, unwavering spirit of either within him. There is only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for. (Desai 63)

Unlike many of the Western writers—Kafka, Becket, Camus—who see life only as an entity filled with 'absurdity' and whose works are quite concerned with the absurd and meaningless journey of humanity with no sign of hopeful attempt to find any meaning and purpose, Desai presents us with characters who possess some instinct and inner inquisitiveness to discover some marks of meaning on the face of humanity. Nirode, in this novel, when he finds it difficult to reach the human destination through the normal ladder, likes to take a different way: "And since I never was any good to going along with the others, I thought, I would take the other direction and follow failure after failure and reach the bottom of the arc much quicker..." (VC 182). Unlike Willy Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* who after finding himself failed in life ends his life, Nirode, though he knows 'it is damned from the start' and 'it's a failure already', confirms:

I have the spirit to start moving again towards my next failure. I want move from failure to 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... (Desai 40)

Desai admits to an interviewer:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it... know what the demands are, what it costs to meet them. (Anita Desai. Interview. By Yashodhara Dalmia. *The times of India* 29 April, 1979:13)

Nirode and Monisha both are detracted from the mainstream of the current but they try to continue even against the current. Regarding Nirode's spirit to find some truth even after several failures, we can quote from Desai's interview where she says:

Writing is my way of plunging into the depths and exploring this underlying truth. My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that

incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depth... (Desai Interview 1-6)

In the dystopian world of postmodern times, the word 'survive' comes to carry deep significance when each living species is facing threats to life in its own place. Desai doubts the long-believed security and stability of human life. Nirode here is the voice of those doubts and questions about the safety and happiness that are believed to lie in a family, or friendship or any human relationship. People somehow turn crazy in searching the ultimate truth of existence. Nirode, while conversing with his friend David, expresses his doubt about the happiness his friend demands to have in his life, and thinks that all cannot reach the happiness: "if we were all to become—happy... The world would come to a stand still and no one would move another step" (VC 93). Nirode who voices the modern anxiety of surviving in this world finds it difficult to manage his life in the changing social values of (post)modern society. He asks a professor of his life's journey and tells him about himself of his queries: "I don't know. How can I survive? It seems hard" (VC 19). Philosophers like Camus who propagate the philosophy that "eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny" (VC 41) seem incapable to provide 'right carriage' to human journey. Nirode regrets: "but we do not have even that consolation and worst agonies come to an end one day" (VC41). He continues: "happiness and suffering—I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end" (VC 41).

People in this modern world just exist; they are just breathing and surviving, not living life of humanity. For many this breathing often becomes unbearable inasmuch that they give up breathing. Nirode is from those who see the world changing to the destructiveness. "What does it all mean? Why are lives such as these lived? At their conclusion, what solution, what truth falls into the waiting palm of one's hand, the still pit of one's heart?" (VC 120). He rightly feels the threat to the normal survival of humanity. He tells his sister Amla that he is already undergoing difficulty in his survival and that he doubts of others' survival: "surviving! Yes, I'm surviving—I suppose that is just what one would call this state of existing, just breathing and eating and going around with a perpetual head-ache and stomachache" (VC 181). He thinks it "better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live" (VC 19)

Things that most concern today's literature are death and the fear that crush down the very soul of humanity. The novel presents characters that are chased by the death and fear of total human failure in the meaningless human journey. They are in the fear that the journey they are continuing since their birth may end only in destruction which is accompanied by death. Jit expresses this fear to Amla telling her that she is moving towards the destruction: "you destroy—you destroy yourselves and you destroy that part of others that gets so fatally involved in you. There is—this dreadful attractiveness in your dark ways of thinking and feeling through life towards death" (VC 174). The love that brings the humanity peace is replaced by the destructive fear—a fear of some unknown threats, a fear that eats up the heart of humanity. Amla says:

... The vital element that is missing from Nirode and myself—the element of love. And I discover that it is the absence of it that makes us, brother and sister, such abject rebels, such craven tragedians. In place of this love... we possess a darker, fiercer element—fear. (Desai 134)

Monisha's suicide by burning herself in the kitchen makes the postmodern question regarding human survival more valid and intense. Like Nirode she visualizes the emptiness and nothingness that lie at the end of the journey. She shares many ideas with Nirode about the life and the world. When she, after getting married with Jiban, comes to Calcutta, she finds no person or place compatible with her ideas and thinking. She closes up herself and lives a life of her own, a life of loneliness, fear and disappointment. As the day wears on, she loses contact with everyone and descends into loneliness and alienation. Her loneliness is the loneliness of the modern generation; it is the loneliness of the modern people who live life of terror and suffering. Desai says in an interview published in *The Massachusetts Review*: "the subject of all my books has been what Ortega Y Gasset called "the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence" (*The Massachusetts Review* 1988, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 521-537). Desai writes:

Slowly she (Monisha) began to realize that in her heart no fountain had spouted and that what he feared was the great empty white distance set between her and this moist, crimson flowering of emotion in the street below. (Desai 236)

The novel ends luridly with Monisha's death exposing the illusory façade of reality. Monisha and Nirode realize that the earth is no longer the heaven for man's living which people used to believe. Monisha hailed from Darjeeling and came to Calcutta to find a better life. She got married here to Jiban. After her marriage she could not settle mentally or physically. Her sadness and loneliness eats up her mind and body. She herself does not know why she is sad and afraid: "why am I sad? Why am I afraid? Do I recall a time—oh an epoch—when I understood as well they? Then I feel bereft because I have forgotten, I have lost touch" (VC 237). And at last she becomes invisible to her people and the world:

I grow smaller every day, shrink, and lose more and more of my weight, my appurtenances,

the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of the world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet. (Desai 138)

Kafka presents the extreme heights of human's incapability to survive on this earth and shows man's gradual detachment from the mainstream of humanity. Kafka, in his novella *The Metamorphosis*, metaphorically presents the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a strange insect so as to show human alienation in the human crowds. Monisha has the marriage family and in-laws but she never finds herself involved in the marriage bonds and rather finds herself gradually being aloof and detached mentally and physically from every relation: "I cannot really hear them. I cannot understand what they say. I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone's shoulders, of my tongue on anyone's damp palate" (VC 237). Monisha, not physically like Gregor Samsa, but mentally is transformed into some strange entity that finds no room suitable for her to exist. Amla, her sister, realizes this struggle of transformation in Monisha. Desai writes of Amla's mind about Monisha:

Amla jerked into wakefulness, overwhelmed by a new fear of this sister who had turned sleepwalker, ghost some unknown and dread entity. This unnatural silence and unobtrusiveness of hers, it seemed to emphasize the distance she had travelled from reality into a realm of still colourlessness. (Desai 147)

Like Melville's *Bartleby* in *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* Monisha travelled to her world of darkness insomuch that she could not get back to the life she left. When people in this postmodern world finds it difficult to survive the harsh reality, they create a world of their own so that they can get rid of the disturbance of the real world. Desai realizes this tendency of man/woman to go away from the reality in hope of getting some relief in their minds. Desai writes: "Monisha she (Amla) saw as seated upright and mute in one corner, her gaze fixed on some mysterious point as though it were a secret window opening on to darkness, gazing and gazing, with not a word to say of what she saw" (VC 198). But the darkness of Desai's Nirode or Monisha does not reach to the extremity of that of Melville's *Bartleby*, or that of Kafka's K or Gregor Samsa.

The novel is a family drama projecting a dystopia of modern family relationships where each member gets separated from each other and lives life of their own. The novel shows the dark island that emerges between the family relations. Jit, a character in this novel, arranges a party to bring Amla and Nirode together. Nirode says: "yes and we sat together and formed a little island of sense and sensibility in the centre of that murky bog—did not we Amla" (VC 170). Nirode used to love Amla much when they were children and 'Nirode was the one in the family to whom she had always been the closest'. But now Amla finds Nirode too strange to have any intimate conversation with him. Desai writes: "obviously he had pulled himself through a crisis, both mental and physical... if she (Amla) worried about him it was because of this wasted appearance and his alienation from their yearning mother" (VC 157)

Nirode feels that he has nothing to do with the family and that 'between him and his mother's brilliant territory was erected a barbed wire fence, all glittering and vicious'. He does not respond to his mother's letters. He wants to live with his own ideas and creeds. He wants to create a distinct identity of his own that will have no touch with family name and obligation. He asserts his sister Amla that he cannot live obliged by the family name and obligation. He thinks the family would 'catch him and brand him with the family name, family money, family honour'. He says: "I have given up using a family name, Amla, and I want no more of a family life" (VC 156). He grows distaste for the family love, bond and affection that, he thinks, binds people to the boundary of a small family. Desai here shows the decline of social and family authority and that leads to individual depression and doubt within society. The family of the postmodernity is no longer a stable institution providing financial and social security and reliance.

People living in this postmodern world are experiencing an increasing situation of disintegration and fragmentation that fall on the family. They become strange towards their parents, sister or brother. The postmodern literature is much concerned with this strangeness of people towards their family relations. The American playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote the play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and showed the hollowness of the family bond and disappointment that resulted from the family failures. Each member of the Tyrone family in this play lives in separate island of their own delusion, disaster and disappointment.

Meursault, the main character in Camus' play *The Stranger* feels no shock and sorrows after getting the news of his mother's death, and rather feels annoyed to attend the funeral. One point worth mentioning is that the western postmodernity has left much impact on Anita Desai. She asserts to an interviewer: "I remember the first time I read Camus' *The Stranger*, what a tremendous impression it made on me...Dostoevsky was the other writer I think who interested me so much when I was young" (The Massachusetts Review 1988, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 521-537). Here in this novel Nirode's mother has some kind of Meursault's strangeness that she remains little moved even after her daughter's painful suicide and death. Desai writes about Nirode's mother when she came to visit after the news of Monisha's death:

She did not look at once and he knew it was not out of cold vengeance but out of sheer disinterest. She no longer needed him nor her other children. She was a woman fulfilled—by

the great tragedy of her daughter's suicide—and it was, he saw, what she had always needed fulfill her. (Desai 249)

Desai sets her novel in a city that is undergoing such a phase of period that it neither totally leaves the old dying social values behind nor properly devours the emerging social system, creating a total confusion and disappointment among its people. This city appears as dystopia where children cannot live with their mother, or respond to their sister; where mother does not feel the need of their children; where men cannot trust their friends. The novel shows the city as filled with illusions, disappointment and hopelessness. The city appears to be filthy monstrous, dirty and dark.

Darkness fell on the city. It fell so quickly, naturally and with such ineluctability, that Amla accepted at last that this was the true colour of Calcutta and that the luminous island she had visited, where goose feathers shone like white china and each fold of a rolled pan leaf was sharp in clarity, was only a portion of a dream world, real only by reflection. It had not illuminated by the cheerful sun of her children but by the supernatural vision of those who live always underground, in the dark. (Desai 216)

This darkness engulfs its entire people making them partially blind. They see nothing but deception and depression. Nirode expresses his annoyance to his friend Jiban: "I am so tired of it, this crowd. In Calcutta, it is everywhere deceptively, it is a quite crowd—passive, but depressed" (VC 118). The city appears to him dead having no conscience. This city presses him from all sides transforming him into some strange entity. He describes:

From all sides their moist palms press down on me, their putrid breaths and harsh voices. There is no diving underground in so under populated a burrow, even the sewers and gutters are choked, they are so full. Of what? Of grime, darkness, poverty, disease... has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath black with the dirt that it sits on? (Desai 116)

Nirode is one of the characters in this novel who realizes the violent thrashes of the postmodernity that disfigure the entire social fabric of his land. He sees the city transforming into some new shapes under the postmodern upshots. Nirode regrets: "Once the smoke clears, slowly, I see another face of this devil city, a face that broods over the smouldering fire—a dull, vacant, hopeless face" (VC 117).

To conclude Desai, in this novel, presents us with people who are caught in the trap of the postmodern eccentricity which leaves them self-divided, unpredictable and vulnerable. Desai does not aim to detail the social defectiveness, rather tends to project a sense of the malleability of Indian society in the postcolonial/postmodern aura. Her incorporation of such characters—Nirode, Monisha, Amla—should not be taken as nihilistic. Rather she tries to dig out a way of taking the postmodern at the centre of humanist concerns. She also takes us to the recognition that the postmodern tends to individualism to have self-dependent and that it leads to lose faith on the family and social authority.

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