

WOMEN BEHIND THE WINDOW BARS IN VOICES IN THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

*Anita Desai can definitely be considered best among Anglo Indian Post independence women writers. Unlike other writers, who focus more on political and social issues, Anita Desai writes around the theme of psychological and sociological problems. She never discusses rural poverty, class and caste conflict in her fiction; instead she writes more comfortably about the psychological dilemma of a person, lonely not in the literal sense but alienated from the relations and society because of lack of understanding between them. Being a woman herself, she focuses her fiction on women's trauma in a traditional society which attempts to obstruct her independent flight by cutting her wings. This conflict is very realistically portrayed in the characters of Monisha, Amla, Maya. The novel *Voices In The City* tackles with the transition of Indian women from a deep rooted traditional house wife to a fast developing modern lady. This psychological trauma as depicted in *Voices In the City* is my topic of discussion in the present paper. These women try to become a part of such a developing world which does not want to accept them and behaves in a cruel and selfish manner, as a result depression follows and personal relations fail.*

Key Words:- Claustrophobia, Patriarchal society, Psychological trauma, Confinement.

Anita Desai, the post Independence English writer of Indian scenario, comes in sharp contrast with other Anglo Indian writers who generally talk about the differences of caste and class along with the problem of poverty. Desai on the other hand, depicts the inner psychological dilemma of post Independence women. The Indian women after post independence, find themselves in a painful situation, the trauma is that the constitution grants them every freedom which is essential for their development but the traditional; society becomes the obstacle in this development. Women want to enjoy their freedom and to make progress but the patriarchal society hinders their way. The most significant part of Anita Desai's works is, first of all, her strong manifestation 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 the main advocate of the psychological novel dealing with the complex nature of woman. She has explained in detail the inner disturbance of her characters in a very superior manner. Her novels deal with the contradictions and predicaments faced by the individual in the struggle for life. She belongs to the group of Indo-English writers who have studied in detail the actual problems faced by the individual political, and cultural importance. Anita Desai has chosen to deal with the particular event which threaten the normal tempo of life. She has explained the effect of emotions and sentiments about the behaviour of man and woman and how they react to different situations. She has explained the behaviour of people under strain.

This dilemma is depicted in the famous novel *Voices in the city* through the character of Monisha. On the whole, it is a pessimistic novel like *Cry The Peacock*. One of the four protagonists of the novel Monisha remains detached; self centered and aloof from others just like Maya in the other novel. The most significant part of the novel is Desai's strong manifestation of feminine predicament Indian women had always and still have to face now a days due to the lasting patriarchal traditions. Through apt and vivid symbolism, the novelist has narrated the mental turmoil and spiritual crisis of our hyper sensitive heroine which are of great relevance in contemporary Indian society. All we know about Monisha is direct description given by her to the readers through her diary. Readers come to know about her that she is one of those present day intellectual women who when are face to face with a traditional patriarchal environment, find themselves in claustrophobic atmosphere which drives them either to madness or to suicide. Married in a traditional Bengali family she never gets that support and affection which she expected from her husband Jiban,

...If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all strings of mind or conscience then but there is no such love. It is not there in my relationship with Jiban...

Once when Monisha is accused of theft by her in-laws she expected assistance and support from her husband, but instead of understanding her situation he questions her." Why didn't you tell me before you took it" of the house at her. This is the last thing she wanted from Jiban. Apart from this, she is not provided any freedom to go out of the house at her will. The time when her brother Nirode is hospitalized she is permitted to see him but gradually when he recovers Monisha is confined to the family house. This sense of isolation inspite of being a part of a joint family was the feeling that gradually was killing her. Her mentality was higher than that of other illiterate in-laws which caused between them such a gap which she could never surpass. Being of a different mental perspective,

she wanted some time in privacy with her husband or with her books which was never given to her and this made her mentally aloof and alienated from them-

“Mentally isolated , she still longs for physical solitude which is not available even within the privacy of her own room: “Even my own room which they first regarded as still bridal ,now longer is so(the tubes are blocked, it is no good) and sister-in-law lie across the four poster bed discussing my overies and their’s.” The barred windows which offer her no glimpse of the outside world only compound her sense of isolation.”²

Monisha is in contrast with the average Bengali daughter-in-law as sacrificing her life for husband and family confined within the four walls of the house. This confinement she feels is not of her alone but each and every woman living in a patriarchal society suffers this slavery-

and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms , spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagvad Geeta and the Ramayan in the dim light of sooty lamps . Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood always behind bars , those terrifying black bars that shut us in , in the old houses in the old city

Monisha’s own words narrate vividly how badly an intellectual woman suffers in a traditional family. Although Monisha symbolizes thousands of daughter-in-laws who suffer in the bond of an unmatched marriage, but her step to relieve herself from bond is quite an exception. Not everyone has the courage to take such a step. Traditionally it happens that women spend whole of their lives confined behind the suffocating window bars alienated from the freedom of the outside world. But Monisha becomes a victory symbol in her defying the patriarchal norms and freeing her soul from every bond like Maya in *Cry the Peacock* who also takes a bold step to relieve her mental tension, Monisha relieves her sense of claustrophobia and alienation, which keep her aloof from the society. In fact, it is her hyper sensitiveness which prohibits her from becoming a part of the whole scenario. The young dreamy eyed , romantic Monisha find marriage to Jiban a very stifling experience for marriage turns her “ in to a women who keeps a diary...Traceless , meaningless , uninvolved . This leads to her final choice of “unimpeachable silence” by meaningless life (Nityanandam).”

Other women novelists have also dealt with the same thematic concern of human relationship, but in a different perspective. Almost all of them are historians of the tension in the wake of India's emergence as a developing nation. Desai insists on loneliness which is characteristic of our times. The main thematic motif of loneliness leads one to describe the contributory factor to it. Anita Desai emphasises it so much that many times it appears to be the main theme. There is a breakdown of channels of communication between husband and wife, mainly by the incompatibility of temperament between the two.

After going through the novel it seems that through the character of Monisha, Anita Desai has “portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman who is suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of her in law’s house .She is happy neither with her husband nor with the family. She seems to have been transplanted in the wrong soil. ⁵ The novelist personally realizes this painful situation of women. Living in India’s she has acquired firsthand knowledge of the facts which compel females to lead such restrained and passive life. In an interview Desai has admitted-

“I come from a country which prides itself on the fact that ever since it won independence from a colonial power in 1947, it has been a democracyI cannot, however claim that there is no suppression in India.....There is secret connivance at the taking away of freedom....for which a whole society and its entire history with its burden of custom and tradition must be indicted.”⁶

The extract from Desai’s speech vividly clarifies the fact that in spite of India’s freedom since 1947, no solid change has taken place as far as the treatment of women is demonstrated that boy and girl are equal, but under this fake show the bitter reality always hides itself from the view.

Psychologists Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi further demonstrate in their studies of Indian women that the post independence. Indian class structure (which persists despite protestations to the contrary) with regard to gender and social hierarchy in the ideological and material realms whereas the caste system dictates women’s subordination in terms of domestic seclusion severe restrictions on education and employment economic dependence and rigid controls over female sexuality, the class system contains its own set of gender inequalities.⁷

Many researchers have proved that the confinement has a negative effect on female mentality. Either her creativity is crushed or she loses her mental balance while craving for freedom. The darker aspect of this situation is that all this happens in the country which claims itself to be free and developing country. Psychoanalyst Sudhir

Kakar quoting tellingly from the ancient texts establishes that “in spite of modernization, urbanization and education, a ‘formidable consensus of the ideal of womanhood still governs the inner imagery of the individual men and women as well the social relation between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community (Kakar).”

CONCLUSION:

The fact is that the domestic treatment of women has never changed since many centuries, contrary to the high sounding claims of politicians and social leaders. The situation has neither changed nor is going to change until the mentality of the society transforms. Society starts from a family and if every home decides to enlighten its mentality for women, definitely a great change may occur. The absence of adaptability was found to generate a sustained conflict and tension, as seen in *Voices in the City*. The realistic aspect of trying to escape from the entanglement of an abusive marriage could also be witnessed. Monisha was presented in the tangle of a conventional marriage where her individuality was shredded. This led her to suicide. The reality of a wife as a psychological jailbird was manifested here. The reality of the callous behaviour meted out in some joint families was manifested. Monisha succumbed due to the utter lack of freedom. The analysis proved that joint family might be a convenient way of living if the atmosphere was congenial and the members sympathetic. Traditional women might have cherished self-effacement. But the same principle may not be applied to an intellectual woman. The reality that even birds stop singing if they are imprisoned rings true to life.

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