

Existential Dilemma and Quest for Self: Anita Desai's '*Voice in the City*'

Dr. Shilpi Mishra, Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, N.A.K.P. PG. College, Farrukhabad.

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to focus on the themes and theories that are an extension of the inner quest of man for self-realisation. Existentialism, humanism, pragmatism and psychology are just a few concepts that are centered the crucial question of identity and existence. Although the conceptual history of alienation is atleast two centuries old, it has acquired popularity and significance in the last three or four decades only. Anita Desai is one of the most distinguish writer who uses the theme of alienation or isolation in her works frequently. Her fictional characters in their various struggles, unusual facts, dreams, fantasies and disappointments seek to represent our time. She portrays the silence, solitude and dark world of shadows which envelops her characters. All her novels exhibit her existentialist concerns particularly, the enduring human condition.

Keywords: Alienation, existentialism, identity crisis and loss of self.

Alienation as a subject matter or theme could seriously attract the attention of writers, scholars and general public in sixth decade of this century, when social conditions were such so as to intensify the feelings of alienation in society. The existentialist notion of alienation or estrangement has many dimensions. Alienation has become the hallmark of the modern age as described:

Loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, purposelessness, meaninglessness, social disorganization, pessimism and the loss of faith or values.
(Mary Josephson, 12-13)

Voice in the City, Desai's second novel published in 1965, deals with the problems of the young generation of modern era. It is mainly concerned with the growth and working of human psyche. The novel 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 more

realistic than Desai's first novel. It deals with the corrosive effect of city life of an Indian family - a bohemian brother Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla caught in a cross-current of changing social norms and values. R.S. Sharma says that, "the novel communicates the tragedy of human existence in the dehumanized society" (R.S. Sharma, 24). H.M. Williams observes in this concern:

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 narrowly saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end (H. M. Williams, 91).

In the novel Desai has delineated characters as rootless misfits belonging to "a deceased generation" (VIC, 179). They are not

ordinary human beings. Nirode is a well educated young man, Amla is a commercial artist and Monisha is married in a well-to-do family. All of them are caught in the cross currents of existential dilemma and endure a sense of alienation. All their efforts for escape lead them to nowhere. Their disintegration and dissolution seems to be inevitable. As remarks:

In Voice in the City the author tries to bring out the dark domains of the psyche of three characters, Nirode Ray and his sisters Monisha and Amla.

The central figure of the novel is Nirode, a clerk of a newspaper, varying, rising and falling according to his own moody reaction to diverse situations in life. A Kafkaesque figure, he is the self that is ever alone despite its continuous search for connection. There is an obsessive repetitive quality in his terror of happiness and suffering and his existential angst of the abyss of the self. Some critics find in him as a figure who has walked out of the pages of one of Camus's novels. It is pointed out that Nirode's experiments with failures are an indication of his quest for an abiding meaning in life. He achieves nothing in the end and

remains a rootless drifter who can neither compromise with the world nor reject it as absurd like Camus's Meursault. Nirode is incapable of human emotions and constantly wishes to reside in shadow, silence and stillness and craves for nothing more than 'three drinks and a room - a princedom'. Nursing his bitterness against all normal well to do persons, he makes it a point to frequent the company of disgruntled intellectuals in a coffee house, the, "notorious gathering place of the displaced and dangerous reiterates of Bengal" (12). In his effort to attain his goal Nirode meets failure after failure. As he says:

I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth I want to get their quickly (40).

This is hardly a healthy attitude towards life and its challenges, which makes Nirode a shadowy cipher, an alienated soul, crusted with his anonymity and incertitude.

Nirode commenced his career as an anonymous and "shabby clerk in a newspaper", (8) but in order to work in a free atmosphere he starts his magazine 'Voice'.

However, it does not provide him the desired freedom and satisfaction. It requires communication, contact and competitiveness which irritates and horrify him:

He respected no single contributors; his letters of acceptance and rejection were equally formal and uninspiring. He has found no glorious bridge of contact between them and the dwindling number of readers. He wondered if contact had ever been the intent of this venture (63).

Feeling of insecurity and loss of freedom was the main obstruction in the way of his enthusiasm for 'Voice'. He discontinued the magazine just when he is about to get success with it. His next venture is to write a play which also proved a fiasco because he is intrigued by the expectations of others. He has Hamlet like hesitation and agrees that his undoing is because of "this lack of faith and this questioning (39). He is obsessed with the desire to fail as he wants to have no reconciliation with life. It is a

negative attitude. In his idealized self-image, Nirode becomes a hero of a modern *Sisyphus*, rolling the boulder uphill. He says to his friend David:

. . . I want to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom (40).

In a saner moment, he realises that his boyish escapades have been a nightmare, not a real journey, because he has never been able to start, to take the first step forward.

Nirode's inability to start a journey denotes the basic uncertainties in his temperaments. He is in perpetual quest for an abiding meaning in life in his experiment with failures. Here he seems to be in quest for self to realise his worth to know himself as Henderson in *Henderson, The Rain king of Ten* cries 'I want! I want! I want'. Similarly Nirode wants to know the meaning of life in the mundane world. "He is caught in kind of intellectual vice. . . . There is something hollow, something phony

about his protestation and diatribes." (D.H. Maini, 24) Nirode's problem is not only lack of communication but also his inability to choose. He puts this question to Prof. Bose in a straightforward manner:

The lack of an audience is not a problem,...it is the choice of one. There are too many levels of education, they run into each other or they keep so distant from each other, what does one do about it. And unless one has decided upon one's readers, what sort of material can one feed them? How put it across? How communicate? (22-23).

Some critics have studied Nirode's Hamletian disgust and Lawrentian Oedipus complex, as one major cause for his exorbitant alienation. Like Hamlet of the Shakespearean drama *Hamlet*, he hates his mother for her supposed relation with Mr. Chadha. Reference to his childhood period discloses Nirode's adoration for his mother. As a grown up, he hates her and addresses her as-the she cannibal, the cobra who

swallowed his father. His words exhibit his shocking disregard of filial pity and reminds us Hamlet's soliloquy which he utters about his mother, "frailty, thy name is woman". One cannot, however, assert that Nirode's abhorrence is sexual in nature. Third force psychologists do not align Oedipus complex to libidinal urge as Freudians do. Erich Fromm, in his work *Psychoanalysis and religion* (1950) transfers it from the sphere of sex to that of impersonal relations. He points out that child incest wish is not sexual craving but a desire for security, the urge to remain protected. Horney also believes that mother or father obsession arises out of environmental situation.

Culturally his mother's behaviour and her affair with Mr. Chadha, violates Nirode's moral and social standard. Womanhood in India is defied, particularly for motherhood. In one of his lectures Swami Vivekanand observed to his Western audience that in India woman is mother. Dr. Radhakrishnan states that the Hindu view of woman is an exalted one. She has been assigned the most important function of bearing and rearing children and is seen capable of great heights of self-denial and self control. With such a sublime picture of motherhood as its backdrop, Nirode cannot digest the loose conduct of his mother. It

creates severe repugnance in him and heightens his alienation. Devoid of her reassuring and confirming touch, he experiences extreme loneliness and separation.

In Horneyan terms Nirode does not strive for freedom in the manner of a healthy individual but tries to adopt the strategy of withdrawal so as to escape conflicts. Withdrawal is an important solution Nirode prefers to counter the difficulties generated by his ontological insecurities. Nirode goes with his friend David to a lake where only lovers used to go. There he listens to the whistle of a train. He turns his head and raises his arm above his head. Being Over-powered by the sense of alienation, he utters, "God, that makes me want to get away pack up and clear out as far as I can get from here! There's nothing but good-bye, good-bye in that sound" (38). He soon alters his mind and observes, "I never go, David, I never shell, I pack my bags, I arrive at the station and when I have one foot on the train, I hesitate" (39). Nirode is fast heading towards his alienation. He is proved an unsuccessful man in life, and that is why he wants to go somewhere. The urge to start the journey assumes, intermittently almost pathological proportions, it is mark of his lack of volition that he is powerless to act and set out on his journey. The novelist points out:

The suitcase is never packed, the tickets never purchased, and the ship sails, leaving one ensnared in the net of sleep. He was not one with of those born with a destination balanced with a boiled egg upon a silver spoon in his mouth. He was merely a traveler and the only reasonable thing to do was to accept the journeying as meaningful in itself. (10)

Until Monisha's death, whatever pain is experienced remains at the superficial level of the pseudo-self of Nirode. He believes that he has adopted silence, and that Monisha's death makes him understand the real meaning of life. Horney opines that the real suffering has a therapeutic effect on an individual. It has the power to broaden and deepen our range of feelings of others" (Horney,163). For a brief duration, Nirode experiences a communication with his real self in the hour of agony. This awakens his sense and at least he achieves ultimate peace which is the aim of his long search and struggle. He expects that Monisha's death will bring his mother, who arrives but remain unaffected and

indifferent by this tragedy and tolerates it with God-like detachment. This detachment of his mother gives him new insight that life and death are one; if there is life there is death vice-versa. Monish's death teaches Nirode the theory of oneness of life and death. With this new-awakening his search in life is over and he says, "I know why I'm living, at last, I know now where i am going towards her, towards her. She is waiting, can't you see." (257). This restless state of Nirode's mind and heart indicates his fathomless alienation in his life.

Monisha, sister of Nirode, sensitive and emotional like her brother, is another version of alienation. Monisha's presence in *Voice in the City*, and her ultimate act of violence-suicide-has been questioned by many critics. Regarding her presence it is felt that she is a side character and hence not worthy of much attention, the focus being on Nirode and Calcutta city. As Usha Bande quotes, "she is very vaguely drawn and felt like a ghost in the consciousness of her brother and her younger sister" (Usha Bande,58). Her suicide, a critic asserts, is virtually a confession of failure on the part of the author. For others she is only a variation of Maya in her loneliness and sensitivity. Jasbir Jain recognises Monisha's struggle to achieve

wholeness but views her suicide and rebellion as an act of rejection.

A will-less, helpless and passive woman, Monisha stands in direct contrast to Maya. If Maya's trouble lies in rich sensuality, Monisha's difficulty arises because of her passivity and isolation. Anita Desai uses the narrative technique of diary in order to record Monisha's psychic turmoil. Married into a placid, middle class family, and to a prosaically dull husband, she is unable to adjust to her environment. She stoically refuses to identify herself with her in-law's family. She says:

I think that what separates me from this family having and rolling beneath me in its dreams of account books, pensions, examination results, stores, room, birth, marriage, ovaries, womb, dowries, locks, keys, property, litigation, wills, bequests, orphans adoptions, relations, marriages, birth and property.

She desires to be an unfettered individual and not to become at any stage a complacent, tame wife who adjusts herself to guild cage, "she is too silent for the family and the world distrust her silence. She wants to be herself and not to compromise (Indira Bhatt, 43). In her in-law's house, she is charged of theft and commits suicide. Monisha suppresses her emotions and make no attempt whatsoever to analyze herself. Instead, she yearns for greater will-lessness, which is symptonic of severe neurosis. From Horneyan psychoanalytical angle, Monisha adopts the strategy of resignation.

Another cause of her alienation is her barrenness. She feels lonely at her husband's house. In this concern she resembles to Maya. She tries to avoid her loneliness through the habit of writing. She feels like a caged bird. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes:

Monisha's claustrophobia and exasperation culminate in suicide appropriately enough the style and imagery in the pages from Monisha's diary come closest to the language of the heroine of cry the

Peacock, another
desperate woman
(Meenakshi
Mukherjee, 190).

She has no inclination towards music because Sitar Players and drummers make life a conundrum. She is deeply disturbed by the miserable life of her brother Nirode. Like Gautama of *Cry, the Peacock*, she follows and reads Gita to cool down herself and draws this conclusion that the total detachment may enable her to achieve peace in life. But the fact is that only darkness and silence sooth her disturbed mind. Amla, Monisha's sister, is unable to comprehend her real mental condition, but she thinks that she has "travelled from reality into a realm of still colourlessness" (146). Monisha's death is due to her inability to understand the aim of her life. She forgets that an individual "cannot grow in a vacuum, without closeness to end friction with other human beings. (Karen Horney, 276).

Anita Desai is interested in characters that are not average and have the courage to choose untrodden paths. Harish, for instance in her short story *Surface Structure* has the boldness to give up his job and a secure life, and wander in search of interesting surface. However, only those who like

Harish have a tendency towards autonomy can gain self-sufficiency and strength by such denials of the ordinary ways of life. Those who neglect their own self and merge in non-self, giving up wills, freedom, self control and autonomy, endure self alienation. Both Monisha and Nirode forsake their self and suffer alienation. The quest for self bears fruit when one is able to establish a:

Communication with the outer world to improve along with improvement in the development of the personality, along with its integration and wholeness, and along with freedom for civil war among the various portion of the personality, i.e. perception of reality should improve. (Abraham Maslow, 161-162).

Monisha's Sarcastic reflection on the women "who follow five places behind their men," spending their lives "watching for nothing" (22) speaks not only Monisha's urge to stay distinct and isolated from the ordinary people but also indicate her

relentless quest to elevate herself by posing superior to others.

Parental indifference and familiar disorder characterise one's childhood and mental state. There is an element of unknown in the atmosphere. As a result, she withdraws into a world of her own and remains aloof and retains it in her relationship later. Between her mother's epicurean temperament and father's stoicity, Monisha prefers the later, because her father is a suffering martyr. Her aloofness becomes her wisdom. She feels elevated in her silence because Jiban's family abhors it. Her inability to relate herself to her family creates 'basic anxiety'. She glorifies herself as a lonely individual- almost stoic-different from the mass of women she observes around her. The refrain, "I am different from them all" reverberating through *Cry, the Peacock* also echoes from Monisha's diary. It spells disaster for both. In fact feeling different from others and being a non-conformist is a difficult proposition in itself. If one has achieved an exalted state of transcending one's own individual life and gain atonement, one may get pleasure in this condition, but an ordinary person is confronted with the problem of 'separateness' i.e. he/she clings to the illusion of being unique in himself. There are scattered references to it throughout her diary, "My silence I find, has

power over others" (13). Jiban recognizes her unfriendly behaviour towards his family and exhorts, "Be a little friendly to them,' Jiban begs, 'that is all they ask of you - a little friendliness'" (118).

Monisha like Nirode, wants to be free from all bonds but unlike him, she finds it difficult to free herself of her appurtenance and duties. She longs for privacy and solitude and the inviolability that these may bring, but that is not to be. Life follows a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. Jiban's posting to Calcutta and Monisha's childlessness further distracts her from her privacy. Looking at the women around her, she asks herself:

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 (121).

She finds an answer in the bleeding doves who carry their suffering with them, but her own options are limited. For her the choice is between death and mean existence, and that surely is not a difficult choice.

Only a brief moment of self-discovery enables Monisha to become aware of her real self in the brilliant black eyes of the street dancer. Suddenly she fears that a glance of those enormous and brilliant black eyes would dissolve and disintegrate her into a meaningless shadow." (237). This is her glorified self-all her grandiose fantasies about herself as a detached person of steady wisdom parish. Self- contempt emerges with the realization that she has been an escapist. She has run away from the realm of feelings. Her unproductive life, lived in a steel container, like Beckett's hero in *The Unnamable* living in the jar, appears detestable. The consciousness of having been crippled and the inability to share feelings with others on human level, isolate her. Pure violence erupts as ultimate form of introspection. As R.D. Laing points out, "isolation is greatly in danger of passing over into psychotic alienation" (R.D. Laing, 140).

Monisha represents innumerable suppressed and repressed young Indian ladies who long for love, recognition and privacy throughout their life. N.R. Gopal asserts, "In this novel also Desai has portrayed feminine psyche mainly through Monisha." (N.R. Gopal, 24) Meena Shirwadker assigns Monisha's sufferings to her childless state. It is true that

traditional Indian society looks down upon a childless woman. A woman gains status only as a mother. But in Monisha's case, the awareness of her low-profile in family and society punched so unceremoniously daily into her that it becomes one of the reasons for her inferiority complex. Several times she hears them talk of 'blocked tubes; the urge on her part is to look down upon them from a superior height of her silent defiance.

Monisha is aware about the worthlessness and hollowness of her life when she listens to the song full of love and passion by a street woman singer. But she does not understand the language of the woman because she has never enjoyed the desire or passion of love in her whole life. She realises that her life is a waste, and she is imperfect and handicapped. Humiliated by the inability to respond to passion with passion, to sorrow with sorrow she feels entrapped. The vision of herself in the reality is grotesquely unbearable. Under this pressure of despair, she sets fire to end her despise real self. She wants to reject life because she thinks that by rejecting life she will gain calm and peace. She pours Kerosene oil on her and burns herself. However, she undergoes unbearable pain and realises her mistake:

A great fog enveloped her, not the white one of dreams but black, acrid, thick and God, the pain! Here it was on her eyes, her face, here it came there, all over with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted. She screamed. 'No! No! No!' screamed, screamed. Fell unconscious. Very quickly fell unconscious (242).

It is true that "Monisha's suicide is as much the result of her morbid nature and emotional insufficiency as the result of her uncongenial surroundings" (Meena Belliappa, 15).

The third major character, and a victim of deserted self is Amla, who arrives in Calcutta to find a career as a commercial artist, but her search for a career is transformed into a sense of alienation and a 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. Meanwhile Monisha's death reveals to Amla the harsh aspect of her

search for love and communion. She gives up her quest and chooses a life of compromise, she remains an existentialist. 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 render her a character of existential proportion. In fact she commits intellectual suicide which is also a protest against the meaninglessness of existence.

In the novel *Voice in the City*, the dilemma of all the characters is in fact socio-psychological. All are the victims of alienation and existential problem. the doomed. Various invectives are used calling it a monster city, dead city, the deluged city, poised city, horrible city. This master city is presented as the unreal city under the brown fog in a winter dawn and as in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge so many. The title of the novel *Voice in the City* is also existentialist in its nature as it shows that in the bit crowds of the city, the voice of a single person can never be heard and hence the person, whose voice is not heard or recognised, has lost his identity and becomes alienated. The use of the image of marsh bird suggests the helplessness and confinement of the inhabitants of Calcutta city. The city birds crowding a tree near a race ground foreboding death of a horse in a race

prepare the emotional climate of Monisha's death.

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