
Monisha, the Lost Princess in Anita Desai's Novel "*Voices in the City*"

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Abstract

The paper attempts to highlight the inner consciousness and predicament of Anita Desai's protagonist Monisha in her novel "Voices in the City". The paper unravels the high strung sensitivity, alienation, suffering and the inward unsatisfied life of the most pathetic woman character 'Monisha'. Marital discord, difference in social strata, suspicion and lack of Love in Monisha's life are some of the elements that need to be analyzed in this paper.

Key Words: Hypersensitive, silent rebel, alienation, marital discord, social conformity.

Anita Desai, eminent writer of international aura and towering status explores the delicate inner emotional world of women. She externalizes the internal and delves deep into the jaded consciousness of the contemporary women and the meaningless social norms. Her novels faithfully portray the picture of female resistance against patriarchally patronized concepts. All her heroines from "*Cry The Peacock*" to "*The Clear Light Of The Day*" lead an unauthentic existence and make an unsuccessful attempt to fulfillment through search for identity. Desai projects the problems of the contemporary educated woman in India, "through incompatible couples- acutely sensitive, dutiful wives but un-understanding insensitive husbands. Each woman persona in her novel yearns for the self-emancipation and dignity. Anita Desai has shown a remarkable feat in using the novel as an artistic vehicle projecting life realistically and emotionally.

In view of the society her women characters are rebels. Dissatisfaction, alienation and mania have been delineated as dominant aspects of the feminine consciousness both in the Indian English fiction and the Western World. Studies related to the theme of madness and suppressed desires have been made in the Western Literature too, for instance, Patricia Stubbs in her **Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel**, (New York: Barnes and Noble 1979) makes a thorough survey of radical feminist resistance through fiction in European Literature. Desai very pertinently focuses on the issues of sanity too. This paper explores why Monisha in "**Voices in the city**" commits suicide.

The novel "*Voices in a City*" 1965 reveals the ugliness of modern civilization and the torturing impact of modern city on the lonely individual. In the din and clamour of the "unrelenting city", of Calcutta are heard the agonized cries of Nirode, Amla and the shrieking

taciturnity of Monisha, a woman trapped in marriage, who silently rebels to protect her individuality against pressures of social conformity. The three characters are distanced from their mother, who lives alone and remote in her "secluded paradise" at Kalingpong where a Major Chadha a "soul of helpfulness" showers his attention on her. The mother's neglect affects the lives of the three children, who stand alienated from each other and everyone in the society with lack of love in their lives, they try to fight their individual struggles, "facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence.

Monisha's portrait reveals the most pathetic and tragic situation of an educated woman in the midst of an illiterate circle. A figure, turned alienated, withdrawn and uncommunicative, lays bare her soul not to a human being but confides all her feelings in the pages of a diary. Each word speaks volumes of her isolation and humiliation. The diary reveals her mind and conscience. A childless loner she is, there is no one in the world that is her's.

*"I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless, meaningless uninvolved....
(pg 140 Voices in the city)*

Monisha's predicament is the result of a complex joint family system that denies her freedom of self-expression privacy, lack of opportunities, an uncaring husband who takes for granted that his wife is not an individual but a woman kept to serve his family and fulfill their needs.

Belonging to an educated liberal minded family, Monisha, a girl of an academic temperament, having a taste for writers like Kafka, Dostoevsky, Hopkins and Russian, French and Sanskrit works is trapped by marriage in a business minded middle class family, "completely unsuitable to Monisha's tastes and inclinations" (Pg 199, *Voices in the City*). A woman refined and polished, of a higher mental caliber, Monisha does not stand in the row of those Bengali Women who follow five paces behind their men or "One of those vast, soft masses- of rice Bengali Women with a bunch of keys at her waist and nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront." (Pg 81, *Voices in the City*)

How can an educated young woman reconcile herself to a colourless monotonous life restricted only to the cutting of vegetables, everyday womanly gossips and waiting the whole day in the Kitchen only to serve her Uncle & Aunts fresh hot chappatis. It is a die-hard conservative family, lacking refinement.

Jiban Monisha's husband is the prisoner of a conventional static & stable social structure. It is a family where she is not allowed to meet even her sister Amla in privacy. The Mother-in-law guards all her actions and also takes away in her possession the silver pan box that Amla gifts Monisha. This really is an impossible family (Pg 201, *Voices in the City*) which reduces a woman of high intellect to peeping out of barred windows only to catch glimpse of the stars.

Tragically Monisha is estranged from the family. At the back of this unfortunate alliance has been the neglect that she has faced as a child. How could her parents knowingly give her to a

man of colourless personality and a family? Convention ridden & shallow minded. "With father dead and mother selfishly absorbed in herself most of the Ray brothers and sisters feel orphaned and unwanted and a tinge of unnecessary prejudice and bitterness against everything in life enters their personality." The tender feelings of love have never been showered on her. She failed to get the affection of her mother-in-law or the companionship of her husband a child would have melted her frozen emotions. Her parents did not know what love between themselves was nor were the children nurtured by it. Monisha proclaims,

"The vital element that is missing from Nirode and myself is 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. If only love existed that is not bending, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, then but there is no such love. It is not there is my relationship with Jiban, which is filled with loveliness.... Nor is it there in my relationship with mother which is filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty of honor of concern." (Pg 135, *Voices in the City*).

In Amla's words she is the *LOST PRINCESS* of a fairy-tale doomed to destruction. Monisha turns a silent spectator Listlessness pervades her entire soul. Her inability to bear a child, lack of intimacy with her husband, suspicion of her in laws and lack of privacy, respect and dignity drive her to commit suicide. Such stifled emotions burst in form of insanity, violence and ultimately suicide. Monisha defies and rebels. Having set fire to herself, she dies but screaming for life. Being a woman in India does not permit for happiness or fulfillment. Life is to be lived for others negating the desires of self-fulfillment.

Anita Desai's women are no Cinderella's or Juliets waiting for the Prince Charming or Romeo. It is not a fairy tale world where everything ends happily. Desai's women question the meaningless existence that they are subjected to. They are women given to a deeper sensitivity and dwelling on a higher plane of consciousness. The novelist explores the emotional inner world of loveliness, isolation, resultant angst and agony in the deserted lives of her heroines. They stand unsatisfied & unfulfilled for there is the lack of element of love in their lives from parents and husbands.

The remarkable ingenuity in her art lies in skillfully articulating the thoughts and opinions of her own characters through the indirect interior monologue and the innermost speculations of the mind. Thus, giving new dimensions to the portrait of the woman in Indian English fiction.

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