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PROJECTION OF FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN ANITA DESAI'S "VOICES IN THE CITY"

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ABSTRACT

Unlike other women novelists, Anita Desai concentrates on the exploration of sensibility, that too feminine sensibility by probing deep into the inner life of a woman. Desai reigns supreme in her fictional world by focusing attention towards "the quest inward" and concentrating on the still grimmer and more harrowing presentation of Indian life. In fact all her characters are sensitive, solitary and hyper-introspective. Her fiction balances itself delicately on the fringes between things and awareness of things, between chaos and order of mind. Her primary interest lies in exploring the disturbed depths of the female psyche. . The most prominent feature of her fiction is her mode of individualizing the character. She is preoccupied primarily with the portrayal of women protagonists as living in a regimented world in which fear, doubt, and confusion prevails. She presents each individual as an unsolved mystery. All these feminist issues projected in her novel are examined in depth in this research analysis.

**Key words:** feminine psyche, man-woman relationship, marital disharmony, frustration, loneliness, existential predicament, self-realization.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel, *Voices in the City* has been written by Mrs. Anita Desai to touch upon the essential questions of being through the delineation of psychic conflicts of personal origin and presentation of psychological strains of individual behavior. However, the most significant basis of the characters' psychological conflicts and dilemmas is their inability to transcend the social conditioning which compels them to view women and analyze their actions as pre-defined chauvinistic concepts of behavior instead of treating them as individuals. Almost all the major and peripheral characters refuse to treat women in their own right and, compelled by the traditional mind set to treat women basically as secondary beings, pass harsh unsympathetic judgment on them. Their refusal to dissociate themselves from the social myths governing feminine behavior leads the women to take extreme steps about their need of self - expression in diversified contexts. The idea of male superiority and stereotyped notions about female behavior acquires the status of unshakable truths and reflects a strong societal bias against the autonomous identity of women. It is a well-known fact that 'Anita Desai's preoccupation with the feminine sensibility is unique in the annals of the Indo -

Anglian novel. Her feminism is not of the demanding, obtrusive, clamouring kind, but constitutes sensitive portrayals of intelligent, gifted women married to gentle, dutiful but insensitive men and who are slowly sinking in the bog of a dull matrimonial relationship.” (Rao 168) The modern society is in a state of transition with our cultural values in the melting pot. One could sense in Desai’s novel a compelling urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearning of women for freedom and self-dignity.

Here in *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai presents a set of young educated people- Nirode and his sisters Monisha and Amla. As signified by the title, the City of Calcutta with its dark Pandemonium takes the role of living spirit. It is the city of Death. It turns to the tragedy of man in a society where both art and life are in lack of love. Nirode is a person without family who meets failures after failures. And he refuses to make even the most necessary compromises that life demanded. He is neglected even from his mother. His elder sister, Monisha, finds him reduced to shrunken waste thing. Married against her will, to a blind moralist, Monisha finds her life a real prison and develops an incurable claustrophobia. The other members of the family are not favourably put. The mother’s action is quiet disturbing. The elder son, Arun, has married a clean, efficient, blue eyed nurse never to return home. The younger daughter, Amla is like her brother and sister, real extrovert. She decides to lead a gay life with the painter Dharma, but in vain. Thus they are all the product of the same social ethos and are the subject of the same kind of pressures under joint family.

Anita Desai very sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern woman particularly in male-chauvinistic society and her annihilation at the altar of marriage. However, the novelist does not challenge the futility of marriage as an institution but discloses the inner psyche of the characters through their relations. In Desai’s novels, most marriages are proved to be union of incompatibility and men are shown to be highly rational where women are sensitive and emotional. They are supposed to have their different attitudes and interests and so they are shown looking at things indifferent ways and women have been both culturally and emotionally dependent on men, any disruption of attachment or affiliation is seen not as a loss of relationship but “a total loss of self “ (Miller 87) which is later on seen as ‘neurosis’.

Mrs. Desai skillfully explores different aspects of feminine psyche which also includes man-woman relationships. *Cry, the Peacock* is a family story mainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between husband Gautama and wife, Maya. The novelist not only portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also the sub - normal bordering on abnormal woman. The very first woman who comes to our mind is Maya who is hyper sensitive and because of her alienation she is almost a mental wreck. H. M. Williams aptly says that “*Cry, the Peacock* is a disturbing first novel, mostly takes the form of interior monologue delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya “(Williams 88) One critic by name Ann Lowry Weir rightly assesses the character of Maya in terms of man- woman relationship, through Indian ethos and culture and he aptly but critically suggests:

“Maya is an Indian and her thoughts have Indianness about them, despite their disturbed state. She reflects on Indian weather, Indian flora and fauna, Indian religious and mythical figures” (Gupta 157)

In *Voices in the City* Mrs. Desai dexterously depicts feminine sensibility chiefly through the delineation of man - woman relationship. Firstly, the novel presents an eccentric and inconsistent figure of a conjugal life through Nirode’s parents. Their marriage is portrayed as a comfort and convenience. Nirode’s father prides himself on his family’s name and fame where as his mother prides herself on her tea estate and a house. Both are capable of soul- destroying contempt and dire fury towards each other. The marital conflict changes Nirode’s parents into psychic demon. The father diverts into a drunkard, adulterate and dishonourable being, whereas the mother is converted from a sweet, sensitive consummate beauty into a coldly, practical and occupied woman having no human heat and delicacy even for her own children.

Another feminist element gets projected in the marital relationship of Monisha and Jiban who signify the most usual and painful instance of conjugal conflict. Monisha has been married to a bureaucrat Jiban for three years now. She lives in a large house in Bow Bazar in central Calcutta with Jiban’s extended family. The elders in the family are addicted to the “feel before faces” syndrome. Here Monisha has to touch their feet all the time and this is totally detested by her and her feminine consciousness is tested all the time to the core.

She also cannot stand the noise, the sights and the smell of the large house hold where she is consigned to an iron barred rooms upstairs. This claustrophobic existence in sharp contrast to the life Monish has led in the hills in Kalimpong- gets on her nerves. In spite of doing her household chores, she is treated indifferently by everyone since she cannot bear a child: her fallopian tubes are blocked and Monisha is filled with distaste when others talk, of her organs and the reasons why she does not have a child. What Monisha yearns for more than anything else is just 'privacy' because she is not left alone even in her own room and she needs time to read the books that she has brought with her. She gets nostalgic about her days at Kalimpong and the solitude of the jungles there. Calcutta, with its crowds, is choked, "even the gutters are choked, they are so full....." when she goes out to see the sights with the uncles, Monisha is taken to the new market- this bright temples of commerce where there are no ethics. "Ethics are shunned, and all is shunned except the swelling and flattering of the iron safe and of mortal, male flesh". Monisha sees another face of this devil city 'a dull, vacant, hopeless face and her life is found to be broken in relationships with all even with her husband.

Jiban asks her to be "a little friendly" to his family. "That is all they ask of you – a little friendliness". When he takes her to the zoo, several children from the family accompany them much to the relief of their mothers. Monisha has no faith, no alternative to her 'confused despair'. She leads a life dedicated to nothing and she concludes, "Ay, yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice". She leads "a life of utter humiliation and desolation.... Life for her is only a conundrum" (Batra 43) Amla puts it very sharply when she asks, "Aunt, why did they marry"? (VC 198). This paradigm presents an acute complication and heart-crushing agony. Monisha's winding journey towards her horrible ending paints her physical and psychical diversion in black, mourning colours. From a simple, silent, sensitive, beautiful sterile, insane, diary-writing woman: "Her head ....was like that of a stuffed ragdoll with a very white face, nodding insecurely on its neck, its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark" (VC160).

Monisha who lives in her husband's house, shares his bed, serves his family is alleged of stealing Jiban's money. This really hurts her so much that she finds total void in her living with her husband, that too in the joint family. What is agreeable is that when two souls combine through their wedding, some kind of distinction is bound to be there. But the marriages established blindly without viewing the attitudes, feelings and views points of the bride and bridegrooms are bound to fail. Only proper conscience of each other, some sense of knowledge and love for each other, are essential for a successful conjugal life. But Indian male - chauvinistic families expect women to adjust and play the second fiddle to the tune of all members in the family. The opposite tendency of the family members, hostile social conventions and backgrounds make these marital discord a great menace. Anita Desai is no doubt an adept in delineating marital disharmonies existing in Indian male- dominated society. Aunt Leila hates men, particularly her fat and self- satisfied long dead husband. Her daughter Rita has lived through a spectacularly short- lived wedding. Sonny's two Sisters, Lila and Rina present pathetic exhibitions. Lila had married for a little and lived now in foul poverty, in a crumbling house in which she took in paying quest who drank or wrote her insulting letter"( VC 84). Jit Nair and Sarla have an intense disgust and distrust for each other. For Mr. Basu, Mrs. Basu is an attractive plaything. Arun's wife, the nurse who lives in a world of medicines has large and rude hands.

Being oppressed by a sense of perturbation, Monisha feels almost insane, for in the privacy of her room, she was harassed and oppressed by frightful nuisance that recurred itself like the motif of night mare from which there appeared no escape and she was also harassed by the " damp pressure of critical attention". Even though she was oppressed at the pettiness of life, she lived in that house of joint family consummating her duties of "serving fresh chapattis to uncles, of listening to her mother-in-law's ways of cooking fish and also of being Jiban's wife. She had no religious faith, no alternative to her disturbed and oppressed despair nothing she could give herself too. She found no outlet to escape from it, so she thought that she must concede unimportance, suppressing all memories, all longings, making herself into a sleep walker which gave her a strange unreality. But she did not like it, as she said, "I am reduced to woman who writes a diary... don't like a woman who writes a diary". (VC 76) The unoccupied aloofness of Monisha created around herself and the boundary she built between herself and the family proved to be too much for her. She cannot tolerate

being part of a joint family that leaves her with no privacy. She rebels inwardly against the servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. She is not like any other Bengali woman, not “one of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali women with a bunch of keys as 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 (VC 33).

Monisha’s story is one of protest against the restrictions on her life imposed by her husband’s family. In a conversation with Amla, She is found listing the components of her degradation within the joint family: “demands, proprietariness, obligations, exhortations, untruths, bullying”. Her forced subservience as she greets her new many headed family combined with her feeling of incarceration set the stage for the battle she must fight in order to maintain her independence and self - esteem. Jiban, her husband, encourages her to act submissively instead of acting in the family rather independently. Monisha’s socialization into the joint family parallels the descriptions by Mies and by Kishwar. Her mother – in - law and eldest sister – in – law head the female hierarchy and they are called her “large, secure, round keepers” by Monisha. She is made dependent on Jiban’s family by being deprived of money. After taking money from Jiban’s wardrobe in order to pay brother’s hospital bills, she is accused of being a thief. This is evident when she says:

“I am accused of theft. These pettiest of people, they regard me as meaner than they. They think me a thief. To be regarded, so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth... when Jiban came in ... I told him quickly. He did not say, “Why did you not tell them at once?” He said, “Why didn’t you tell me before you look it” (VC 86).

Jiban reinforces Monisha’s dependency and his status by requiring her to ask him for money without money of her own, which would allow her to maintain some medium of self – respect, Monisha refuses to humiliate herself by submitting to her husband’s family.

Monisha is further restricted within the joint family not only by a lack of privacy but also by constraints on her movements in public. As a modern woman that too, a protagonist deep – rooted in feminine sensibility, Monisha defies her family by meeting her brother, Nirode, who takes her out when he came to know that Jiban was absent:

“In the house, all lips compress with disapproval as I actually climb up into the carriage, beside Nirode, my sari lifting high enough of the whole street to see my leg right up to the knee, I’m sure, and they watch silently from the window as we go rolling off. Had Jiban been here, I can hear them say, he would not have allowed her to go” (VC 103).

Every aspect of her life is laid open to her husband’s family, including her inability, to have children:

“Like the burst of wild feathers, released full in my face, comes the realization that they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons I cannot have a child.... laid bare to their scrutiny” (VC).

Childlessness lowers the status of Monisha even further since it means that she has failed in the basic female function which will perpetuate her husband’s lineage. Her feminine consciousness gets tarnished when Monisha’s marital family regards her as an oddity and does not understand her intellectual interests, her preference for books over jewelry or clothes. She has no alternative but to stay in the joint family, nor has she the ability to attain detachment. She does not receive love from her husband, for the kind of love Monisha wants is not available to her. Jiban destroys whatever meaning their relationship might have had. Her relationship with him is destroyed only by loneliness and a desperate urge to make it meaningful. It plunges her into the most calamitous pleasures, pains, fears and regrets. All the pettinesses, the trivialities of a mean existence overwhelmed her. She is fully aware of the fact that most women survive, pretending to forget, pretending to believe in these trivialities, in this meanness of stifling existence. For her, the choice is “between death and mean existence, and surely, is not a difficult choice” (VC 122).

Monisha withdraws from the material concerns of the family and retreats behind the barred windows. From behind these barred windows, she advises Amla to always go in the opposite direction. It is an advice to rebel. Amla too notices her sister’s stillness. “But Monisha’s stillness is not steadiness or detachment; it is not even feeling or suffering – it is a death like suffering”, (Jain 34) Comments one critic. While watching the dancer in the street, Monisha feels curiously untouched she alone stands “apart unnaturally cool, too

perfectly aloof, too inviolably whole and alone and apart" (VC 238). She is suddenly conscious of having lost all right to exist, of having given up the ghost too soon. Her fear of touch and intimacy, her withdrawal from passion and its display confine her to her own private prison. Being aware of this, she says:

"I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip – read and misinterpret. Similarly, I cannot really hear them; I cannot understand what they say. I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers or anyone's shoulders, of my tongue on anyone's damp palate. What a waste it has been this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that" (VC 239 – 40).

While listening to a group of strolling musicians singing about love, Monisha realizes that, by distancing herself from emotional attachments, she has been left "without a touch of love or hate or warmth in me" (VC). In a frenzy of excitement and her desire to experience feeling, she commits suicide by setting fire to herself.

Monisha's suicide is an attempt to rebel against this meaningless death – like isolation. It is an attempt to give a meaning to herself at least in death, for her life has not been able to acquire one. She realizes that the drama of life has gone by, neither birth nor death had touched her and that there is complete alienation, "an empty white dance" between her and her fellow beings. "In a flash of visionary intuition, she realizes that her action to end it all would be the most courageous, magnificent of all her acts in an uncompromising, unconventional life". (K Samy 257) Her suicide is preceded by self – knowledge and it asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice. Completely alienated, she sets herself ablaze and dies before help could reach her. Monisha's husband, Jiban is a willing participant in her death by tacitly approving of his family's treatment of her. When Jiban meets Monisha's family after her death, he admits to them, "if this terrible thing is the fault of anyone – it is mine" (VC). By aligning himself with his family, Jiban confirms the superior claims of the joint family and his own male self – interest over the marital relationship which denies Monisha the ability to satisfy her own "signifying self".

### **Conclusion**

In *Voices in the City*, while exploring feminist issues projected by Mrs. Desai in the portrayal of characters, Amla may be taken up for critical scrutiny. Amla is a foil to Monisha. As a modern woman, Amla has freedom of choice, and with choice comes the anxiety and stress of role conflict in deciding which direction her life will take. She is a sprightly young woman who keenly sees forward to her life and career in the big city. Though employed outside the home with career opportunities open to her, Amla hears Monisha's warning against marriage to "go in the opposite direction", meaning not to follow the "path that she, Monisha, had taken. But regardless of the new experiences of her job and friends, "this sense of hollowness and futility persisted" (VC) and the atmosphere of under lit reality, of incomplete life, began to overtake Amla again". The message of Monisha's death is understood by Amla, she realizes that her sister had "pointed the way for her".

Amla searches for the signifying self, an integral, aesthetically and morally coherent unique individual. An artist who paints her recognizes her as different from his own life and family who are "covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudices, convention, ignorance and reticence". Amla eschews the role of wife and mother while examining her choices, refusing those dictated by tradition or convention. Amla's short – lived infatuation with Dharma proves to be "a little sweet, short anesthesia she realizes that in her love for Dharma there is "no possibility of manifestation" but she experiences one uncontrollable desire to communicate". This makes Amla profoundly feminine in principle and consciousness.

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