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SPIRITUAL UNDERTONES IN THE CHARACTER NAMES IN ANITA DESAI'S *VOICES IN THE CITY*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai (born-1937) is one of the most respected luminaries of Indian English fiction. In spite of being the youngest among the entire school of women novelists that emerged in India after independence, she has a voice of her own. Her works are grounded in reality of the day and deeply rooted in the fertile soil of Indian culture. She focuses more on the spiritual aspect of human life as is evident in her works. The characters in them can be easily identified. Driven mostly by women protagonists, Anita Desai's works of fiction portrays them in a forlorn environment. For them, this loneliness is a cherished treasure. Despite her works being very akin to spirituality, spiritualism still remains as an aspect of her works which has been the least identified and highlighted. More importantly, the names of Anita Desai's characters bear a symbolic as well as a spiritual significance. In *Voices In The City* (1965) spirituality is evident not just in the story but also in the characters' names. This spiritual reference is not standalone. Rather a fine link between the names of the characters and the actions they perform in the novel is established. This leads to the much anticipated climax.

Keywords: spiritual, city, life, freedom, meaning.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "God is Spirit, is infinite; man is Spirit and, therefore, infinite, and the Infinite alone can worship the Infinite." (Vivekananda, *I Am the Universal*) According to Vivekananda, a spirit has neither a beginning nor an end. It has an eternal existence. Both God and humans are spirits. A limited individual cannot fathom or worship the Limitless. Hence only the Everlasting can truly recognise the Ever-present. Within each one of us, the Divine manifests itself as the soul or spirit.

Voices In The City (1965) is the second novel by Anita Desai. A story of siblings: Monisha, Nirode, Amla and Arun; caught in the crosscurrents of India's social transition. The 'city' here is contemporary Calcutta. Among this middle class family, the author weaves an unforgettable story as the siblings struggle to find meaning, while residing in the city of Calcutta.

Monisha the oldest sibling, whose name implies 'wisdom', 'intelligence' and 'desire', is neurotic. As per Hindu spiritual belief Monisha is the goddess of mind. Here, Monisha is hypersensitive and she is pushed to her limits after being trapped into the role of a devoted wife in a traditional family. She is afraid of emotional involvement. Her barrenness and the meaninglessness of the outside world as perceived by her act as a

catalyst when she burns herself alive in the bathroom. Hence, the one who should act wisely is prone to over thinking. So, the 'wisdom' of her name finds negligible usage as Monisha ends up ruining her life.

Nirode is the younger brother of Monisha. Nirode means 'control – spiritual control over the ever restless mind'. Being the central character of the story, his self-control should reflect in the novel. Rather he has trouble adjusting to life in Calcutta and is a rebel. Unable to find meaning he quits his job at a newspaper. Preferring to fail alone, he rejects the help from his own mother. He too is wary of emotional attachment like Monisha. As various other business ventures of Nirode end up in failure, he starts equating the city of Calcutta with goddess Kali. Spiritually, 'Kali' stands for death and destruction. Here 'Kali' seems to destroy the creativity and self-expression of Nirode. As his name signifies, Nirode should have control over him and be at mental peace. But he is in a state of terrible mental conflict. Nirode dreams of his mother as Kali – the destroyer of evil, who is also the preserver, a motherly figure. This resolves his conflict and he achieves a controlled stable state of mind.

Nirode's brother is Arun. The name 'Arun' carries a spiritual significance. It represents 'dawn' – the first glow of the morning sun. As per Hindu mythology, the Sun God traverses this creation in a chariot pulled by seven horses. The Sun's charioteer is Aruna or Arun. 'Sun' is one of the most ancient Gods worshipped in Hinduism. The 'Chathh Puja' is worship of the setting sun as well as the rising sun over the course of two days. Across the maximum length and breadth of India with utmost earnestness, purity and devotion by the masses it is still celebrated. Spirituality is evident in Nirode's brother Arun's acceptance of a routine life once again. This refers to the Sun God as the Sun follows an exact routine every single day. Over millions of years, rising in the eastern part of the world in the morning and setting in the western part in the evening; is the Sun's constant daily routine. In addition to this, Arun's going abroad and the ever-changing position of the Sun can be linked. The Sun never stays constant at a place, with its charioteer Arun carrying it to different parts of the globe. Hence, Arun in *Voices in the City* relates to the Sun God not only by virtue of his name but also because of his physical displacement; similar to 'Arun' – the charioteer of the Sun God.

The youngest daughter is Amla. On a spiritual level, the tree of 'amla' is sacred to Hindus as it is believed that Lord Vishnu dwells on the tree. The origin of 'amla' from the very drops of Amrit or Nectar which accidentally fell onto the earth during the course of the fight between Gods and Demons after the Sagar Manthan is also widely believed. Hence the name 'Amla' sends sacred and pure vibes. In the novel, Amla struggles with similar issues as her siblings. A painter named Dharma has an impact on her. She is excited to be a part of Dharma's cosmopolitan friends initially. But when she finds out about the philanderer within Dharma and his poor treatment meted out to his own daughter, Amla grows disillusioned. The death of Monisha shakes her up and forces her to find a new perspective in her life. Despite the city of Calcutta acting as a monster she finds satisfaction in making illustrations for a translation of the *Panchatantra*. Amla's pious self finds expression as she enjoys the spiritual and meaningful message conveyed through these ancient Indian fables.

Jiban is the husband of Monisha. 'Jiban' means life. Spiritually, the word 'jiban' refers to the journey from birth to death. We can draw reference to the Oriental philosophy's concept of 'rebirth' and the 'cycle of birth and death'. In the novel, Jiban treats his wife Monisha as a caged bird. He pays no adequate attention to the emotional and physical needs of the 'partner of his life'. This detachment and aloofness from Jiban's part is one of the major causes which forces Monisha to withdraw herself from the material concerns of the family. This failure to find meaning in human relationship and 'life' in general drives Monisha towards suicide.

Another character in *Voices In The City* is Dharma – a painter. The name 'Dharma' loosely translates to religion. But at a spiritual level, 'Dharma' denotes – "one's duty and righteousness". In the novel, Dharma helps Amla to emerge out of her suppressed feeling. Being fascinated by the world of art, Amla finds in Dharma a person with whom she can talk freely. But their relationship is utterly based on fantasy. When Amla discovers Dharma's callous attitude towards his own daughter, her imaginative world which is far from the realities of the day is dashed to pieces. Such an action stands in complete disagreement to the name 'Dharma'. And it is something which Amla cannot forgive.

Aunt Lila is also a character in *Voices In The City*. Spiritually, 'Lila' refers to the eternal cosmic play of the Absolute Reality. In Hinduism, 'Lila' also denotes the reality we perceive through our senses. The world we are in, our actions, relationships, and their end result – all this is a part of this perpetual divine play called 'Lila'. It also sometimes refers to the relation between this material world and the Supreme Spiritual Being. In this novel, Aunt Lila speaks highly in favour of individual freedom at times, while on other occasions her stand is just the opposite; thus expressing duplicity in behaviour.

Conclusion

The protagonists in *Voices In The City* being dissatisfied with their routine existence, set out in search of a meaningful life. These individuals confront the problems in their own way. And in the end each one of them succeeds. Monisha triumphs by pouring kerosene over herself and burning to death. Nirode's vision of his mother as 'Kali' – the preserver and the destroyer seems to resolve his mental conflict. Amla shows more promising efforts at wisdom and among the siblings, Amla's spiritual progress and growth is the most convincing. According to Swami Vivekananda:

Now, freedom is only possible when no external power can exert any influence, produce any change. Freedom is only possible to the being who is beyond all conditions, all laws, all bondages of cause and effect. In other words, the unchangeable alone can be free, and therefore immortal. (Vivekananda, *Life after Death* 9)

In other words, only the One who is beyond change can experience freedom in real sense. The All-Pervading Spirit – the Immortal Soul alone can enjoy the bliss of true freedom. The names of the characters in *Voices In the City* exhibit spirituality of the highest order. Hence their spiritually inclined actions for a meaningful and successful life are the end result. Anita Desai poignantly delineates the struggle for spiritual freedom in life through the characters in this novel.

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