

The Picture of Lower-Class Society in Anita Desai's Voices in the City-A Study

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I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, which was published in 1965 and which won Sahitya Akedami Award in 1978 has received adequate critical response. The title of the novel made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. *Voices in the City* is "the unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values". It is a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk; there are four children, two sons and two daughters-Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Father is no more now, mother leads a lonely life because all the children are outside Kalimpong; she gets company of her neighbor, one retired Major Chaddha with whom seemingly she is also having an affair which is much resented by Nirode. Anita Desai portrays how people, especially poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead the life. Thus the society makes a lot of sudden changes.

Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 at Mussoorie of Bengali-German parentage. Very little is known of the life of this Indian English fiction writer who published 14 novels. A keenly observant writer, she cannot be faulted on the specifics. In *Voices in the City* she has captured the spirit and the essence of Calcutta. Anita Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, which was published in 1965 and which won Sahitya Akedami Award in 1978 has received adequate critical response. The title of the novel made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Anita Desai's skilful handling invests the city with a character. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid. Discussed in depth by A.V.Krishna Rao who also feels that it is Calcutta which is the hero of the novel and not Nirode:

"Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as a fore of creation, presentation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali".

It is true that the city of Calcutta is the locale for most of the actions of the novel and serves as a background and it influences and affects all the major characters in the novel. But the novel itself is primarily a family drama around which the story revolves. Even the blurb of the novel says that the novel describes the corrosive effects of the city life upon the Indian family. It is this city that affects the protagonist and forces to go out of the city and to find a good place to live on. The situations and circumstances in the city make a rapid change in the life of

the many characters in this novel. Thus Anita Desai took a gentle effort to exemplify the surroundings of the city and makes the reader to understand how a society can change the human life.

Nirode and Amla feel the pressure of the city. He is rather afraid and is threatened by the deserted look of it. "On all sides the city pressed down, alight, aglow and stirring with its own marsh-bred, monster life that, like ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking [...] the city was as much atmosphere as odor, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death". It seems, he is morally afraid of the city of the odors of 'open gutters' and 'tuberose garland'. Monisha's reaction is similar. She feels trapped in her husband's house. "There is escape from it", she cries. The city, to her has two faces; its devilish look and its hapless, vacant one:

"Has the city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up to me from beneath a bottom block with the dirt than it sits on?"

In fact, *Voices in the City* is "the unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values". It is a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk; there are four children, two sons and two daughters-Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Father is no more now, mother leads a lonely life because all the children are outside Kalimpong; she gets company of her neighbor, one retired Major Chaddha with whom seemingly she is also having an affair which is much resented by Nirode. What perturbs him is his dislike for Calcutta, the dirty city. The sordidness, brutality and the sheer dreariness of the physical world are the unwanted things. Desai's characters of this novel rebel against the dirty or ugly reality which also hidden in materialism. It never appeals to their sensitivity. In this sense, the outward dirtiness which is enshrined in the buildings, ugly gutters, street hawkers, beggars, and the narrow and filthy roads is personified here. It is rather repulsive. In fact, Calcutta plays an important role as a dirty character against which these voices are raised.

Though he has reminiscences of his childhood and of his mother at Kalimpong, he recalls with destruction his mother's attraction for their neighbor, which he believes has deprived him of his mother's love towards him. When he reads the letter from his mother, he expresses such resentment about his mother mentioning Major Chaddha's name "how unashamedly she wrote the hideous name, so like a cooking pot full of yellow food, or a rag of dirty underwear. How helpful was this Chaddha, providing her with male company and admiration". Nirode found that the whole world runs behind material success and fame.

On the other hand, *Voices in the City* depicts how the corrosive effects of city life on an Indian family caught in the cross current of changing social values and norms make them to

suffer a lot. Disillusionment and frustration are their lot in the city. Nirode doesn't voluntarily leave his city and come to another city which is unfamiliar to him. Nirode is employed as an "anonymous, shabby clerk on a newspaper, calling himself a journalist" while his real job is cutting out "long strips of newspaper and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out to verify a dull fat in some airless office room. " He is not happy with his lot in the city and desperately wants to escape.

All that he desires are three drinks a night and a room of his own-three drinks for inspiration and a room in which to write- so that he can devote himself to creative pursuits. He leaves his room at YMCA and starts living with his friend Sonny Ghosh, scion of an aristocratic family fallen on bad days. He starts a magazine, *Voice*, which is not much of a success. He is full of contempt for people like Jit Nair because he is lucratively employed in a British tea firm as a box-wallah and leads a high-society life with his wife, Sarla, who has her own string of admirers and who eventually elopes with an Englishman to Malaya.

Nirode wants to pack up and escape from Calcutta, but he can't (as David does) because he is doomed to failure. Nirode is appalled at the vulgarity of the high society and remembers that his own mother had been a part of it during her Calcutta days. The lower strata are equally repulsive to him and he feels like "a leper" amid his squalid surrounding living in a tin-top room in one of the old buildings. His sense of loneliness is heightened when David leaves for Sikkim to become a Buddhist monk. There is "a familiar disgust " that envelops him in spite of his sessions of heavy drinking with Jit, Sonny and Bose, who are stuck in rot and cannot get away even though they occasionally desire to do so. He becomes impatient, peevish and aggressive during his three years of working at the *Voice*, but knows that there is no way out for him. Finally he falls sick and is alone and is looked after by his sister. Now he is experiencing poverty. From this we can understand how a man, Nirode, has been suffering because of money. Till the very end, he can't able to stand on his own legs. From this we can understand the materialistic world in which people give more respect only to money and not to humanity.

His elder sister Monish, on the other hand, has been married for three years to a bureaucrat Jiban. She lives in an iron-barred large house with her husband's extended family in Bow Bazaar in central Calcutta. Like Nirode, Monisha too is stifled by her surroundings and the tradition-bound household in which "feet before faces" syndrome rules. Since she has not bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked, she is consigned to an obscure room on top of the house and is merely tolerated by Jiban's mother and Kalyani di. The sights, smells and sounds of the household rebel her. "Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows-other bars," she writes in her diary. The once healthy and lively daughter of the hills leads the life of a recluse. Monisha immerses herself in the household chores:

"I am glad they give so much work to do. I am glad to be occupied in cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone, I could work better, and I should

feel more-whole". Monisha's restlessness is simply because of her circumstances. She has been considered as a bare woman who can't able to bear a child. This shows that a woman in this society is considered as a machine which is producing babies.

Amla, through whom we are shown the world of the upper class society, also hates the lower-class society in Calcutta. When she sees Nirode and Monisha, she can hardly recognize them. She wonders what the marriage and the society have done to them. To Amla, the city and its people appear like a monster. She asks Nirode, 'this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?' The descriptions show the sordidness, spiritual disintegration, menaces, that threaten the integrity of the individuals. It makes her to hate the city and the lower-class society. So she plans to marry a rich man to lead a peaceful life. The monsoon rains make the city look like a symbol of dissolution. So the city is called, 'a black, dead devil', 'a poisoned city' and the like. Here is yet another passage that vividly symbolizes the evil forces of the society in the city:

Calcutta, Calcutta, like the rattle of the reckless train; Calcutta, Calcutta-the very pulse beat in its people's veined writs. The streets were slaughtered sheep hung beside bright tinsel tassels to adorn oiled black braids, and a syphilitic beggar with his entire syphilitic family came rolling down on barrows, like the survivors of an atomic blast, then paused to let a procession of beautifully laundered Bengalis in white carrying their marigold-decked Durga [...] Kali- on their shoulders down the Ganges, amidst drums and fevered chanting.

II. CONCLUSION

If the people, particularly his mother and the society had not affected Nirode, he would not have left the city. If the family of Monisha had not behaved rudely, she could have led a peaceful life. If the mother had been good, both of them, when suffering in life, would have gone to the mother. From the mother, who is poor and seeks money through ill-manner, Anita Desai portrays how people, especially poor, are forced to lose their moral values because of money which is indispensable to lead the life. Thus the society makes a lot of sudden changes.

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