



"Voices of Resistance and Conformity: Gender and Familial Tensions in Anita Desai's Novel"

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"Voices in the City" stands out as a key book by Anita Desai. It looks at how women live and struggle in Calcutta after India gained independence. The book also shows the deep feelings and mind games within a family. The theme of the novel is suggested quite early in the novel by Nirode himself in his conversation with David. He quotes Albert Camus:

In default of inexhaustible happiness eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies, come to an end one day. (Desai,40)

We follow three brothers and sisters—Monisha, Amia, and Nirode Ray—as they try to figure out who they are and where they fit in society. Their mom Otima, plays a big part in their lives. Her impact shows up in what they think and do. Calcutta itself feels almost like a character in the story. It's a lively non-stop force that pushes the characters to look inside themselves, to rebel, and to change. The story weaves together issues like unfair treatment of women, family bonds, and big life questions. This creates a gripping look at Indian culture after British rule ended. It is interesting to see what Lionel Trilling says about the function of the novel in general. He says that "The novel is a perpetual quest for reality--the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul?" (205)

The book begins with Nirode, who dominates the first half of the tale. This section explores his life as a young struggling journalist trying to start a magazine mixing with Calcutta's intellectual crowd, and wrestling with big questions about life, death, and rebellion. Nirode represents the hopelessness and lack of direction felt by young men in the post-independence period looking for purpose in a society full of limits. For him it is: "Better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live" (AD,18). Though he's shown to be very thoughtful and often pessimistic, his view tends to be quite self-focused drowning out the voices of the women around him. In this first part, women stay on the edges of Nirode's world, their roles often pushed to the background or just there to support. The siblings' mother Otima, breaks this quiet by sending letters to Nirode, but even these sometimes can't pull him out of the bubble he's put himself in. R.K. Dhawan rightly observes.

Voices in the City 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 a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual, who has lost his way in contemporary India.

The dynamics in Nirode's relation with his sisters, Monisha and Amia, hints the level of disengagement and patriarchal social standards of male advantage in pre-1950s India. He makes a very short effort to think how they must get about their father's wish for Arun to study abroad at their expense at the same time but dismisses this, thus highlighting the two biggest weaknesses of his character: emotional selfishness and being a party to patriarchal customs. Historically, Indian society allocated privileges and opportunities to men; women were triumphed under their even more ruthless social expectations



and couldn't evolve into who they had to be. Nirode's indifference toward women is but a symptom of a deeper, more culturally entrenched misogyny, Desai points out.

To him, Indian women are graceful, indeed, but duty-minded, born to be house geese with no ambition to fly. This realization aligns with his view on the chronic aftereffects of colonialism in India as he compares the meekness of women to "slave mentality." However, Nirode's depravity towards women is not a simple trait; it's connected with his troubled history with his mother, Otima. She embodies care and annoyance toward him, exacerbating his mental disorder. These semi-insurmountable problems form a nexus of guilt and repression that color how Nirode perceives his world and himself. He believes that a thinking man like him should not desire materialistic happiness:

"Anyone who feels happy deserves to die. If we were all to become- happy... the world would come to a stand still and no one would move another step. How would you like your trains to stop dead once they've arrived at some lunatic happy station? Wouldn't that be death to you ?" (AD, 94).

It is in tragedy, however, that Nirode's search for meaning finally finds some semblance of clarity, when Monisha dies.

Opposite of his brother, Monisha has the ability to rise above her unstable emotions to love and care for others unconditionally. Her death marks a watershed in Nirode's life, making him realize the hollowness of his earlier, rather self-centered worldview. "It is better to die than to concede" is at least as much a way of thinking for him as it is an operational principle. Monisha's suicide, in part a direct response to the oppressive beliefs of her surroundings, compels Nirode to reconsider his emotional disengagement towards life, urging the character to realize the commonality and interconnectedness of human experiences, as well as the flaws within his past beliefs. Asha Kanwar says in this context:

Nirode is on a restless, unending but futile quest, and wants to understand his identity. But his quest is thwarted by his own nature and predicament. What is still worse is that, being the product of no particular educational or cultural inheritance, he has to face his dilemma all by himself. (22)

But his change isn't complete. His moment of clarity when he begins to grasp the "amazing pattern of life and death," gets overshadowed by his struggle with his mother. What emerges out of this illness is a Nirode who is "a combination of acquiescence and renunciation" (AD 131). Otima, the family matriarch, is both caring and confining for Nirode. By the end of the story, he blames her holding her responsible for his identity crisis instead of seeing her bravery and sacrifices. This unsolved issue shows Nirode's flaws as a character, as he can't move past his personal problems to deal with wider family and social issues.

Unlike Nirode's self-focused story in Part I, the next parts—"Monisha," "Amia," and "Mother"—give a richer view of the Ray family. These sections highlight the women letting their voices and experiences take center stage. Monisha's part stands out, as it shows her inner thoughts through her diary. By reading Monisha's writings, Nirode learns more about their bond, her worries about his weak spots as a woman, and the ease they feel due to their similar natures. Her diary tells of her fight in a stifling world where she can't speak up about who she is. In fact, Amia's decision to turn a blind eye toward her father and



brother in the support of Nirode in his struggle against vanity and oppression points to her desire to help him fight this evil—a reminder of the imbalance between the sexes in their world.

Chapter "Mother" is the emotional climax bringing the family into a communal mourning and a collective remembrance. For the most part of the novel, Otima had been a distant figure, but now she strides forth as the emotional heart of the family, showing strength and solidarity in the face of loss. Monisha's death becomes the turning point when the characters realize their collective grief and therefore reconnect their bonds. Thus, at the end of the story, a strong matriarchship is rendered; Otima is both the woman who unites her family and the one who lets them take care of their struggles. This approach to the narrative helps Desai to exhibit how societal norms function in personal lives. It explored the more deeply settled patriarchal norms that influenced the closeness between the personas by separating the narrative into alternate male and female points of view. This form outlines the crack of a distinctly male-believe image in understanding; the male perspective are the ones often struggling to unravel the emotional intricacies of the women, e.g., like Nirode. Harish Raizada analyses the reasons of Nirode's withdrawal thus:

Alienated from his mother, Nirode turns rootless. He loses his faith in life and develops an attitude of 'complete negation', he passes one failure after another and treats it as a creed of his life. (31-32).

The book *Voices in the City* delves deep into the issue of inequality between men and women, and social standards that impact the lives of the protagonists, whose stories are deeply interwoven. Through the representations of the Ray siblings, Desai makes it possible to appreciate the fact that these characters are not only developing emotions and relationship patterns but also trying to understand old and new life styles, along with the family tradition and modern lifestyle challenging youth. Set in Calcutta, the city during the post-independence period, the backdrop to this is another argument, as the city is also both liberating and limiting the characters. It is in this place that the city imposes strict morals of high social class that Nirode refuses to abide rigidly. For him, all worldly pursuits amount to bare, nothingness: "Happiness, suffering—I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end" (AD 140). In the case of Monisha and Amia, the urban scene is that vague space where their dreams and aspirations get into confrontation with the events of their potential.

Characterizing the city as a protagonist in the novel adds to the themes that are already in the story. The streets of Calcutta are in a disordered state and the old Victorian buildings and Georgian mansions still exist there while the current social standards are also there as seen in the psychological, emotional, and moral struggles between the siblings. As Monisha experiences it, the city exhibits her rigidity; this is an exact projection of a life silenced under a conformist family scheme. Contrariwise, the youthful man is happy to be the part of it suffering a lot from this diverging dualism. Though at one point the city symbolizes her life, it is the duality of human creativity and the sorrow of her ambition being shackled to the desert of modern urban life that she, Amia, feels. The competition between the upcoming urban life and her artworks incubated by her choices and encouraged by her challenges and passion was the fruitful anguish of her joy and hardship.

The exploration of communication in the novel is very interesting and different from everything else. The way it shapes peoples identities and relationships. Desai chose to split the novel into four parts, each part being told by a different person, which was a very successful way to show the confusion of



their relationships. Nirode, though, is the main character of the first section, and his faults in relating to his loving ones are highlighted, which gives an account of his limited knowledge. He feels elevated to an unimaginably high vantage point where he could see the "whole fantastic design of life and death, of incarnation followed by reincarnation, of unconsciousness turning into consciousness of sleep followed by waking" (p.249). However, this experience does not liberate Nirode. His ecstasy and relief soon vanish at the prospect of once again meeting his mother and being caught in a trap of "communion, relationship, joy and responsibility" (p.250). Nirode's chaotic state of mind indicates the terror of the dark unknown: Death. He tells Amla that he has been sentenced to death. "I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach death, Kali... while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute, and also closer and closer to my death" (p.256). Through whose eyes? the next several sessions show a more real picture of the women's situation and give a clearer picture of the family relations. With this setup, Desai discusses how gender affects communication and how unspoken social norms, therefore, determine the choice of the words actually spoken and not spoken.

Voices in the City at its core is all about finding one's true self, building relationships, and social restraints experienced by India which was then a newly independent country. Desai delicately weaves a touching story about a family that is being torn apart by the clash between the tradition and the modern times. The themes of identity, purpose, and fulfillment are presented through the perspective of a brother, a sister, and their mother, Ray. The novel's well-developed characters and vivid depiction of the setting make it an all-time classic story, which is hard to resist due to its profundity. Desai with the help of the dispossessed and vulnerable raises issues about the sex, power, and affinity.

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