



# **Alienation of Monisha in Anita Desai's 'Voices in the City'**

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**Abstract--** Anita Desai is one of the most prominent names in the arena of the writers of feminine sensibility. She writes about a domestic world with a focus of delving deep into the interior of mind. The novelist illustrates the anxieties of the middle-class women involved in the family's isolation and alienation by making marital disharmony in their lives. Her novels correctly depict the exact notion that women need something more than food, clothes, and accommodation. She is one of the Indian writers who tried to change contemporary society with her pen. Each of her novels is an endeavour to tackle the central problem of modern man – the problem of identity-crisis. In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai creates a fictional world delineating four characters of the Ray family – Nirode, Monisha, Amla and their mother. All these characters are intense, self-absorbed and possessed by a conscience that never allows them peace of mind. The present paper 'Alienation of Monisha in Anita Desai's 'Voices in the City' focuses on life of Monisha. It is an attempt to explore the predicament of Monisha in a dehumanized society. It is an attempt to explore how she gets a release from a life of gloom and despair.

**Keywords:** Monisha, self-realization, truth, sensibility, alienation, loneliness, explore, despair, character, relationship, compulsion, concern,

**Introduction:** --The subject that divides Anita Desai's novels from the novels of other novelists is alienation. Female alienation stands out heroically in her novels. Her characters are an investigation into the psyche of women alienated by a lack of fellowship. Their dilemma is even more poignant because these women have longed for their husband's human trace, sensitivity, and friendship. Although Desai's characters are uncomfortable with their reality, they have a sense of isolation, alienation, and pessimism

in mind. Anita Desai is known as an explorer of her woman's interior life. The inner turmoil and tension of her female characters are always very aware of her. Therefore, it becomes a recorder of the dilemma a person faces in the urban set-up in India. In the analysis and depiction of human relationships, she is more interested. Anita Desai always uses novels to explore the inner psyche of her women characters. All the characters in her novels, such as Maya, Nirode, Amla, Monisha, Sita, Sarah, and Uma, are physically and mentally isolated.

In 'Voice in the city', from the beginning to the end the theme of loneliness, alienation and loss of identify of the characters, is often stressed by the novelist to create an atmosphere of dramatic tension and conflict. Anita Desai's concern, in the novel, is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of a meaningful relationship the individuals suffer. She probes the psychic compulsion that may pollute an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is affected if he or she is unable to forge such relationships.

Desai analyzes Monisha's characteristics psychologically in 'Voices in the City' to reveal the world of a woman's nature. A close study of the 'Voices in the City' reveals that women live another life, like Monisha in her mental state. The second part of the novel, 'Monisha,' addresses Monisha's inner experiences in her lawyers' family. This part reveals the inner psyche of Monisha, which has been recorded in her diary. It is Monisha's personal experience and the collective voice of the Indian Women that reflect Monisha's personal experience. Desai tries to focus on the nature of a delicate woman who tries to escape the oppressive system. Monisha's personal experience is feminist. She feels as if her personality's grain is being caught in evil forces. Monisha marries Jiban and enters a new phase of life. Her marriage is arranged, and so she starts to live with Jiban in an ordinary family. Silence plays an important role in her life. Monisha records in her journal her personal experiences, which reveal the inner world of her private life. She likes to escape from the monotonous world, as Monisha takes refuge in Kafka. She has a melancholy and mental disorder. Monisha's love of art is shown in detail in her diary. Music is a temporary refuge for Monisha from the complexities of the world. Only music reveals the inner trials and trials of Monisha. She silently accepts the defeat and is invisible all her life.

The novel mainly deals with the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha's husband is the prisoner of conventional culture. He believes that a woman's most important roles besides child bearing are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a step mother-in-law. Monisha feels that her privacy is denied to her. Her husband is busy with his middle rank government job with no time for Monisha and no desire to share her feelings.

The theme of alienation which results in inner crisis is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha leads an equally fragmented and starved life. She is alienated from her husband as well as his mother. The graph of her mental life can be constructed from her long-searching and self-confronting entry in her life. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of communication. He reckons his wife as worth nothing in consequence. He does not bother to ask his wife, even when he finds some money missing from his pocket. Monisha's ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to breaking point. The bitter experiences that she faces at different levels make her to question about her useless existence. She is in such toughest and pitiable situation where she longs for a sensible touch from her husband. The verbal silence from her husband also makes her so dull, lonely and frustrated and she finds comfortable only in isolation.

"I find on this level that solitude that becomes me most naturally I am willing to accept this status then, and to live here, a little beyond and below everyone else, in exile."(VITC, p. 123)<sup>1</sup>

She compares herself with the Bengali women who do everything and ultimately await death. She wildly tries to understand the meaning of life but she fails and she gets the essence that life is like an unsolved mystery and she finds her life too which stand in between a meaningful life and death.

Marriage is a tomb for her. Rita, her aunt is a scientist. She abandones her marriage for her career. In this novel Monisha, Amla and Nirod are not at all satisfied with their parents married life. Their parents' unhappy life is a warning for them. Marriage is a worst event in one's life. Marriage is not at all a fantasy for them. The characters are tortured. They suffer mentally. They are unable to carry on their

life smoothly. Life becomes a burden for the characters. They cannot face ups and downs of life boldly so they end their life.

Monisha has been married to Jiban for the last three years. She comes to Calcutta as her husband has been given a transfer to his ancestral city. Monisha has been brought up in the hilly region of Kalimpong. She is a new woman with a heightened level of awareness and a strong sense of individuality. She is blessed with extraordinary power of visualization. When she comes to live with her in-laws, she goes through the experience of having a 'surreptitious push from Jiban' to touch 'feet after feet' of various people. She has to spend time in 'the tiered balconies', in the room with 'the bars of windows', 'black' bed and 'black' wardrobe. The entire description makes it clear that the environment creates cold response and threat in her and makes her feel like a prisoner. Monisha finds herself misfit in this new house as she is a well-educated, peace-loving, self-absorbed woman with a philosophic bent of mind. She fervently wishes her solitude and privacy and says that:

“Only I wish I were given some tasks I Could do alone in privacy, ... Alone I could do work better, and I shall feel more whole. But less and less there is privacy. (VIC, p.115)<sup>2</sup>

The situation gets more intensified when Monisha can't find privacy even in her bed-room because of presence of her sisters-in-law in her own room. She needs a room of her own. One can observe her altogether different mind-set. The situation becomes alarmingly perplexed for Monisha, when one of her sisters-in-law comes to her room and asks her to show saris in her wardrobe and when she throws open the wardrobe, the lady gets amused and shocked to find "Kafka, Hopkins and Dostoyevsky" etc. instead of saris there. Monisha does not relate to the shocking behaviour of her sister-in-law. In a way, Monisha finds a cramped atmosphere at her husband's place. Added to this is the indignity of being unable to bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked. She feels really embarrassed when her sisters-in-law discuss her 'ovaries and theirs. This is the encroachment in someone's private life and Monisha disapproves of this very attitude. Here Monisha feels like being objectified in the atmosphere of indifference. Through her acts and thoughts, Monisha seems challenging the popular belief of confinement of a woman in four walls of a house enjoying motherhood. She espouses the quest for freedom as asserted by famous critic Betty Friedan:

For woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfilment, autonomy, self-realisation – is as important as the sexual needs. (The Feminine Mystique. Harmondsworth, p. 282)<sup>3</sup>

Anita Desai explores the emotional world of Monisha who is under the acute alienation stemming from marital discord. Jiban is utterly insensitive to her. Monisha admits :

Monisha feels like a bird in a cage, like a “Bleeding Heart Dove”. (Vic, p. 121)<sup>4</sup>

She is a lonesome, lost person tired of passive, but distressed crowd of Calcutta. She finds a solace in the Zoo where there is rest, a relief from claustrophobia. Monisha is possessed by a conscience that never allows her peace of mind. Anita Desai highlights the plight of a sensitive character who is totally different from other women sacrificing their lives for others. Her anguish and different attitude comes to the fore when Monisha remarks:

I see many women, ..., who follow five places behind their men ... They make me little ashamed of myself ... and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in ... waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical ... waiting for death and dying misunderstood ... in the old houses in the old city. (VIC, p. 120)<sup>5</sup>

Monisha finds herself isolated, and goes through the pangs of alienation. She knows it very well that for living a life, there is the need to communicate, to connect. She tells her younger sister Amla that there must be someone in someone's life who reciprocates, who responds. And this response, this reciprocation should be silent, discreet, pure, untouched, untouchable. But she makes it clear that this reciprocation makes some demands, obligations, extortions, untruths, bullying.

Anita Desai explores that Monisha is facing a dilemma, an impasse regarding her existence in this world. She is throbbing between two choices: “death and mean existence”, and death being “not a difficult choice”. O. P. Budholia rightly points out :

“Monisha truly represents the tragic vision of Anita Desai, she burns inside as a woman defeated on all fronts of life” (Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels, p. 93)<sup>6</sup>

Already agonized and persecuted, Monisha is heart-broken when she is accused of the theft in her house. She is more shocked with Jiban’s insensitive, unemotional attitude towards her. Actually, Monisha has taken her husband’s money from the cupboard without his permission to pay the hospital bill for Nirode. After the accusation, she was expecting supportive attitude from her husband. But Jiban’s words to her, “Why didn’t you tell me before you took?” shatter her completely. She finds herself a sort of exiled from the rest of family:

I think what separates me from this family is the fact that not one of them ever sleeps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and dark. Mine is all dark now. (VIC, p. 137)<sup>7</sup>

After this incident Monisha withdraws totally. This “changed” Monisha is sensed by Amla. Through Amla, Anita Desai raises the pertinent question – why Monisha has been married in family completely unsuitable for Monisha’s tastes and inclinations? Thus, the novelist suggests that the compatibility is the essential ingredient for a successful marital relationship. One day Monisha happens to hear the musical notes from the street below. The other women also hear the same notes and they start enjoying the music. Monisha wants to relate herself, but in vain. And she finds that everybody is relating with the music, except her. She feels as if all the others are blessed with essential wisdom. She sees herself merely an imperfect observer watching and listening, unable to understand a single word or gesture and therefore, thinks to “remain alone, apart and enclosed within” herself. Monisha’s categorical deprivation of essential wisdom and suffering make her disillusioned with life, hurt her extraordinary sensibility. She cannot come to terms with the harsh realities of life and she chooses not so difficult option of killing herself. Sharma observes that this act of Monisha

“communicates most powerfully the tragedy of human existence in a dehumanized society” (Anita Desai. Liverpool: Lucas, p. 67)<sup>8</sup>

Anita Desai is preoccupied with a quest for meaning and value that can sustain a human being in the meaningless world:

One's pre-occupation can only be a perpetual search – for value, for ... truth. I think of the world as an iceberg – the one tenth visible above the surface of the water is what we call reality, but the nine-tenths that are submerged make up the truth, and that is what one is trying to explore. (Int. by Dalmia)<sup>9</sup>

Anita Desai graphically depicts that lack of communication and Monisha's unmitigated privation become instrumental in Monisha's plight – her “dying misunderstood”. The element of love is missing in her life and finally she commits suicide. She annihilates herself by pouring kerosene on her and setting herself a fire. Only in death, Monisha explores her truth – gets final release from the meaningless existence.

**Conclusion :** Anita Desai's characters' existential alienation and despair turn into an insistent longing for death as a possible exit out of their hollowness and is sought to be overcome by the inner awareness of protagonists. They try to search within the meaning of life, but ultimately they fail in this search, and they are reconciled to the mental disorders. There is a dominant motif of death in Anita Desai's novels as her characters caught in the mire of existential alienation and turn into a compulsive longing for death as an outlet. The theme of exile occupies the central part of Desai's novels. Most of her characters feel alienated and exiled. Though they visit in-crowd, they not ever texture the lack of culture around them. Her novels deal with the cruel assault of existence. Her protagonists are persons for whom alienation is the ultimate reality. They are mostly women comprising school-girls to grandmothers. They are fragile, introverts longing for their existence. Thus, in most of her novels, Anita Desai deals with alienation with her craftsmanship.

## References

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