



# Pathetic Resemblance Of Woman And Nature In Anita Desai's *Voices In The City*

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**Abstract:** Nature is the spirit which runs in the veins of human being. In this material world having no solace or balm for human suffering, nature has this power of healing. It takes human being through a therapy for his/her psychological or physical instability. In this contemporary scenario environmental concerns have gained prominence. The perfect instance of these issues can be found in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*. Her novel displays how the characters are stuck in unbearable conditions and their cravings for a peaceful environment. She also adds the dimension of feminine sensibility and their struggle for existence in a patriarchal society. The only escape from the monotonous household chores is in the shelter of nature. The theme of this novel revolves around the interconnectedness of the suffocation of woman and nature in the city of Calcutta where happiness has been overshadowed by smog of the city. This paper seeks to present the pathetic atmosphere in which the characters are surviving and how discourse has rendered women as willing slaves. The characters -Nirode, Monisha and Amla are trapped in the physical and psychological barriers that society has created for them which eventually leads to suicide as the ultimate relief.

**Index Terms** - Suffering, healing, freedom, humanity, nature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism, a critical approach having its roots in 1970s intermingles the study of social and ecological concerns. It is the perspective which traces the common reasons of separation of human beings from nature and the otherness of women. This outlook proposes that the sufferings of woman and nature share a similar root cause- the patriarchal superiority. The progress of man in scientific fields has overshadowed his connections with mother nature.

This distance has led him to take pride in his strength and knowledge. The social concerns like environment and feminist perspectives are paid no heed. This growing indifference has paved the way for the thinkers to

develop such a remarkable concept as 'ecofeminism' that raises empathy and responsibility of mankind towards these issues.

Nature has always served humanity in its best possible ways. It has bestowed gratitude even on the ungrateful ones. The great poets like William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron believed nature to be the shield of humanity. They displayed the true colours of human heart by painting their creations with the brush of nature. Similarly, Jane Austen enhances the beauty of her heroines through her splendid rustic imagery. The emotional and social trauma of their lives are captured through the change in seasons and surroundings. In accordance with these themes, the novel under survey *Voices in the City* is a brilliant instance of how human beings eventually take shelter in the lap of nature.

Keen in her sympathies and observations, Anita Desai is a remarkable novelist in the way she has painted the roles and needs of woman. Her psychological fiction begins with her debut novel, *Cry the Peacock*, the story of a helpless woman trapped in pleasing the society around her. She continues to weave her other novels also around the same sensibilities of a woman. Here, in the novel *Voices in the City* she deepens this idea of suffering of woman by bridging it with that of nature. This emotional world of woman is woven in the absurd urban environment which intensifies this pain. The portrayal of this misery has been handled very swiftly by Desai. She captures this agony in its true colors as it exists in the real life. She continuously makes her characters compare the frivolous thinking of the city people to their atmosphere as they don't seem to understand the rural sympathy. She beautifully depicts how togetherness of the rural community has been replaced by the individualism of the urban mass. The peaceful life of countryside has been interrupted by the loud voices of the city. The connection between man and man is only for material purpose. Eternal suffering has been accepted as destiny and no efforts are being made to overcome this dilemma. Through this novel Desai brings forth the dark and unpalatable realities of contemporary era and serves the message of "drink life to the lees". The novel is divided into four sections focusing on the siblings- Nirode, Monisha and Amla. It seems as if there is a competition of survival for existence in them which eventually is an outcome of their choices.

The novel is inaugurated with a crowd full of impatience in a hopeless search. The opening sets the gloomy mood of the novel. A continuous comparison between the natural imagery and the condition of men serve as foregrounding to the upcoming disasters. The character of Nirode is introduced in utter despair. His job is that of cutting and pasting for some newspaper which has become an unbearable baggage for him. He continuously compares his condition to his brother, Arun whose future he saw as having an "undimming brightness" (Desai Anita 10). Everything around him seemed to upset him more and more and he utters, "Unfair, life is unfair" (10) but in this city of traffic and commerce no one heard his cry. The lights of the city irritated him as all he wanted was "shadows, silence and stillness..." as this was the reality of his present situation. The house where he lives is garlanded with paper rose and cuckoo clocks that smelled of stuffed birds. He considers his job as senseless and he even limits himself and his expectations. This artificiality of urban life has destroyed his mental peace to the extent that he does not even realize that he is living. All he needs, he himself admits, is "three drinks a night and a room of my own" (33). This yearning of Nirode for his

own room is very much similar to the demand of a room by Virginia Woolf to distance women from their alienation and create something magical in that solitude. The absurdity of Nirode's situation lies in the notion he has developed of himself from the very beginning. He doesn't want to celebrate success, instead he just wants to keep jumping from one failure to another. This lack of confidence and spirit on his part has made his survival in the city of Calcutta so tough. The commercial and social rules of this city seem unacceptable to him. He cannot survive in the bondage of this environment. This meaninglessness tempts him to end his life as he asserts "better to leap out of window and end it all instead of smearing this sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live" (18). Living becomes a punishment for him. In this fast city Calcutta, he identifies himself with people such as tea sellers, vendors, coolies and more in the crowd who seem to be surviving as meaninglessly as him.

Although everything in the novel seems like adding a layer of suffering to Nirode's life, the one and only uncorrupted joy he seeks is in the lap of nature. The descriptions of the first heat of summer and the blossoming of tress in the spring are the only pleasant aspects of the novel. Ralph Waldo Emerson has rightly remarked in this context, "In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows" (12). Even Nirode with so much pain and helplessness in his heart forgets his worries for some moments when he walks at the lake's edge noticing the calmness and depth of it. Nature acts like a ray of hope in the darkest corners of his heart. It illuminates the foggy areas of his spirit. He utters, "Happiness, suffering – I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end" (42). The flowing river, the scented earth, the sound of trees fills in his heart immense joy. His emotional self realizes the carpe diem philosophy only in the moments close to nature. The disturbed urban self of a man is healed by nature through these sensory experiences. Desai has portrayed nature as a healer and preserver in the city life. She depicts how the night that belongs to the stars has been clouded by the city smog. This is how Nirode is the embodiment of alienation, suffering and frustration.

Desai here marvelously interconnects the power of nature and how human beings and material life corrupts it with the strength and resilience of a woman. She explores those powers that render woman as slaves. In the words of Simone De Beauvoir, "her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly." (731) Her endeavor is to explore how the subordination in society affects the consciousness of woman and how to overcome it. She takes two female characters on the forefront to deliver different ideas through them. Monisha is that woman who is married in a traditional family that treats her as invaluable and even accuses her of theft and kills her confidence every single moment. Suffering has become a truth for her and what she keeps seeking is just a little privacy or escape from the monotony and absurdity of her life but she is not even allowed that. Like nature, Monisha is another aspect of Nirode's life who serves as a ray of hope as she continuously strives to drive him out of that discomfort and irritation. But what actually she suffers in her life is heart-wrenching.

Monisha is a strong and emotional woman. She has accepted her life in the terms as it is with no choices of her own. She comforts Nirode by explaining the harsh realities of her life as she mentions the only business of hers is "My black wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapatis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife"



(115). This is all that is made to matter in her life. This concern is also highlighted by Mary Wollstonecraft as she points out: “The same love of pleasure, fostered by the whole tendency of their education, gives a trifling turn to the conduct of women in most circumstances” (66). Without these the small portion of Monisha’s life is “transparent and vulnerable” (116). The hollowness and cavity of her life is clearly reflected here. But for her it has occupied the most precious time of her life. She seems glad in doing everything but the only desire she expresses is “Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone in privacy...Alone, I could work better and I should feel more-whole” (119). Her personal space has been invaded by aunts and sister-in-law busy in discussing and poking into the tiniest part of each other’s lives. The books of Kafka, Dostoevsky and other dictionaries are laughed at by them as it was very uncommon for a woman to read. Their capabilities are constantly challenged. Opportunities seem to vanish when we talk about a woman. John Stuart Mill, the utilitarian philosopher points out this error of society, “The claim of women to be educated as solidly, and in the same branches of knowledge as men, is urged with growing intensity, and with a great prospect of success; while the demand for their admission into professions and occupations hitherto closed against them becomes every year more urgent” (16). If Monisha had been given the opportunity to read and write freely, she would have never suffered this alienation from her own personality. Her excellence has been covered by the narrow mindedness of the society around her. She is suffocated in this surrounding where people consider her identity as a shadow of the personality of her husband. Jane Austen has rightly remarked, “I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman’s inconstancy, songs and proverbs, all talk of woman’s fickleness.” (chapter 23) Everything seems to remind women of their weakness which creates a wound in their heart. Monisha is also suffering through these painful instances.

These painful instances in her life again takes her to memories of beloved nature when her husband was posted in a district of Kalimpong. It is very pleasurable to hear when she explains the atmosphere around her: “The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with fallen great leaves” (120). Unlike those memories is here this city of Calcutta with a dull and hopeless environment. Monisha feels a little relieved by comparing her life to the other Bengali women who have spent centuries in this lovely subjugation. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also comments, “A woman at a certain age who is unmarried, our society teaches her to see it as a deep failure. And a man, after a certain age isn’t married, we just think he hasn’t come around to making his pick.” The colours of the sarees and the face expressions of these women arouse empathy in Monisha mind as she says, “I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough...” (124). Desai compares these women to birds in the cage whose lives are spent in nothingness. Margaret Cavendish critiques this absurd life as she comments, “the truth is, we live like bats, or owls, labor like beasts, and die like sheep”. (226) The questions that melt the heart is: “Why are lives such as these lived?” (125). Monisha imagines them having a choice between death and mean existence and they obviously choose to struggle than to give up. As Jean Rhys also mentions, “There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about!” (100)

Till now, Monisha survived every humiliation and treatment without complaining to anyone. But the final realization comes in a very different form which shatters her and her spirit completely. She notices how one day everyone gives her a suspicious look and accuses her indirectly of theft of Jiban's money. Monisha felt sensations in her body when she heard something like this coming from the people whom she tried to please day and night. Sylvia Plath even remarked, "I began to see why woman-haters could make such fools of women. Women-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock full of power. They descended, and then they disappeared. You could never catch one." (133) This power was unquestionable and unchallenged. She did not say anything and sat quietly in her room waiting for Jiban's comforting words but he said, "Why didn't you tell me before you took it?" (142). This incident filled her with a trauma that can never be healed. She takes a deep breathe only when she sits in solitude on roof gazing and connecting with stars. She even admits, "they are the only things on earth that can comfort me, rub a balm into my wounds..." (142). Monisha concludes how she is so different from Jiban's family. She believes, "what separates me from this family is the fact that not one of them sleep out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and dark less" (143). What she conveys here is the idea that the indoor atmosphere with no fresh thoughts, air or ideas has pushed them into such mindless affairs having no respect for the other's emotions. Margaret Atwood clarifies it as she says, "A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere as long as it stays inside the maze." (162) This is what is meant by the freedom of women. Freedom within boundaries is no less than a prison. Monisha here contemplates about how her identity is shrinking day by day and her existence gets the traces of non-existence. She is turned into a woman to keeps a diary to remind her that she is alive and breathing. This feeling of Monisha has a very close resemblance with that of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* when she admits, "What I feared was not death itself, but the emptiness that followed, the nothingness that awaited." This nothingness is what drains life out of them. After sometime she is unable to bear this absurdity of her situation and she chooses death between meaningless existence and death. This is what Desai presents the climax of such patriarchal society and behavior which turns woman into a being completely sucked of freedom. In contrast with Monisha Desai establishes the character of Amla, her younger sister. Unlike Monisha she is not concerned about anyone more than herself and her choices. Her life is totally dependent on her choices not of others. She finds it difficult to connect with others as she prefers her own company. By making the lives of these two sisters contrast Desai explores the importance of right decisions in life that ultimately becomes the reason of upliftment and downfall.

In a nutshell, this city of dreams and aspirations is as hollow as the life of woman as experienced through the character of Monisha. Both represent the dullness and absurdity of human existence. Throughout the novel nature acts as a preserver and a healer as the moments of utter happiness lies in the lap of nature. The distance between man and nature has also been highlighted as if Jiban and his family were close to nature they would have been able to understand the emotions of Monisha and their values would have been liberating and not captivating. If women were free and given personal space, they would never choose death as the ultimate solutions. If their cages were open, they would always return to that place as they could feel sufficient and confident of their freedom of choice. The question that continuously surrounds the mind after witnessing the condition of Monisha is as Vijay Tendulkar asks, "Why is it that a woman must always prove herself, while a man is accepted as he is?" (55) This is the discrimination one should aim to overcome. When it is one's life,

she is the only one responsible for it. She is not bound to give explanations of her every action to society. Virginia Woolf challenges these notions as she points out, “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if the two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only?”

(132) This situation demands for equal opportunities for both the genders so that they can perform their best. This is how Desai excellently intermingles woman and nature as inseparable entities and urges indirectly for more liberty and equality to them so that humanity could prosper more and more with all its entities in harmony. This balance of life becomes the root of resilience, strength and happiness for human being. If one human being cares for another considering him/her as an equal this earth would become a happy place. Kindness costs nothing but it provides everything needed for a peaceful and happy environment. By incorporating these elements, we can create our utopia. As Louisa May Alcott says, “strength and beauty must go together.” (264)

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