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## Existentialism in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

**Ashish Srivastava**

Research Scholar

Dept. of English and Modern European Languages  
University of Lucknow, Lucknow.

Nirode, the chief protagonist of the *Voices in the city*. A Kafkaesque figure, he is the 'self' that is ever alone despite its continuous search for connection. There is an obsessive repetitive quality in his terror of happiness and suffering and his existential 'angst' of the abyss of the self. Some critics find in him a character 'deeply influenced' by Camus, kafka, Baudlaire, and tend to see him as a figure who has walked out of the pages of one of Camus's novels. It is pointed out that Nirod's experiments with failures are an indication of a 'quest for an abiding meaning in life.' He achieves nothing in the end and remains a rootless drifter who can neither compromise with the world nor reject it as absurd like Camus's Meursault. Another critic argues that Nirode is an introverted romantic. He cannot become a torch-bearer of a true revolutionary spirit. He abuses his intellect in the name of freedom and goes to seed. 'He is caught in a kind of intellectual vice..... There is something hollow, something phony about his protestations and diatribes.' (Perspectives on Anita Desai, 24)

Whereas some critics have studied Nirode's Hamletian disgust and Lawrentian Oedipus complex, it is arguable that his difficulties do not arise out of sexual urges in the Freudian sense. In Horneyan terms, 'Nirode does not strive for freedom in the manner of a healthy individual, but tries to adopt the strategy of withdrawal so as to escape conflicts.' A deeper probing into the workings of his mind will show the psychological causes behind the dislocation of his psychology. Nirode, the 'congenital failure' goes astray while searching for his glorified self. If aunt Lila finds him a disgusting bohemian, Monisha thinks of him lovingly 'as a broken bird .... In the aviary.' (*Voices in the city*, 125) These images do not redeem the personality of his psyde.

As Nirode's basic needs have been frustrated, he alienates himself from his essential nature; his value system is damaged. He accepts neurotic values, thereby developing neurotic wants which are destructive, both for self and for others. Bernard J. Paris underlines the importance of Maslow's value theory and points out that some values are healthy whereas some are neurotic. All values are derive from human wants; but while healthy basic needs are 'conducive to a fuller realization of human potential:' neurotic wants are destructive. 'Frustration of the basic needs so alienates the individual from his essential nature and so disturbs the course of his development that he is no longer aware of his own best interests or able to pursue them.' (42)

Nirod idealizes himself in two images-one, that of an independent person free of all ties : familial, social or emotional; and second, that of a hero who would rise in spite of his failures. This is a typical characteristics whereby the neurotic is not motivated by his wishes but by his needs emerging from his pride system. This is 'the shift of energies from developing the given potentials of the real self to developing the fictitious potentials of the idealized self.' (Neurosis and Human Growth, 166). By denying his past, his family name and claim to property, he asserts his freedom. This disavowal is an attempt of the self to create its own identity with nothing but its own volition. But Nirod does not have a 'will' only an emptiness and a vacuity to fill in. To David he speaks of his longing to do away with 'happiness and suffering..... disregard them, see beyond them to the very end.' (Voices in the city, 40) Gradually he learns to look at himself as a person 'for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring' (40).

Nirode's ardent desire, throughout the novel, is to fail at everything. It is a negative attitude. However, Nirode adopts it in order to fill in the unbearable vacuum created in him since childhood. In his idealized self-image Nirode becomes a hero, a modern sisyphus, rolling the boulder uphill. What he tells David is significant from psychological perspective :

I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off-fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly.  
(40)

To fail and to start on a new project gives him, in a way, heroic dimensions. That he regards himself as a hero is substantiated by the text. After the above statement on failure, he quotes Camus. It cannot be denied that Camus and Sisyphus are working deep down his sub-conscious. It is arguable, nevertheless, that Nirode's desire to avoid climbing up is in itself a denial of Sisyphus-image. But, the yearning to fail quickly in order to start a fresh, denotes the process of climbing up. Further, authorial intrusion, 'how the young can believe in their attitudes, till the attitude becomes the self.' (VC, 40) indicates the glorified image becoming the glorified self. David derides Nirode for his defeatist tendencies and interprets it as 'absolute negation.'

David's assessment is correct to an extent. Nirod's scorn of success is partly a negation of a world wherein he feels isolated, and partly a passivity of will due to lack of basic self confidence. Faith in self and in others is an essential attribute of real self-esteem. Nirode realises in rare moments of introspection, 'this lack of faith and this questioning' (39) is his undoing. Unfortunately, this realisation remains only at the level of discussion. It is not strong enough to afford him self-analysis which could

divert his energies towards health. The essence of his problem is aimlessness, fear and a blocking off of consciousness. Human life, says Buber, is life in dialogue, and we can know the self only through it. This presupposes a communication between the consciousness of individual. Since Nirode has no 'I-thou' communion, he cannot develop inter-personal empathy.

Withdrawal is an important solution Nirode adopts to counter the difficulties generated by his 'ontological insecurities.' In the first few pages of the novel we learn that he has opted for a life of 'Shadows, silence and stillness.' (8). This is a defense mechanism to guard his idealized self-image as a self-sufficient and independent individual. Certainly, it is not the healthy striving for inner silence during which Coleridge's 'the unobtrusive song of Happiness' is heard. Dr. Radhakrishnan thinks that silent hours give us time for self-communication which can lead to self-analysis;

In these silent hours .... We strive to free ourselves from the suffocating routine, from the masks and mummeries of existence, cleanse our thoughts and create within ourselves a clean heart and a single mind. (Basic Writings, 57)

Nirode creates for himself dead silence. It does not vibrate with the voice of the spirit. It is not a sign of normal withdrawal but a neurotic compulsion. J. Krishnamurthy also observes that silence is not absence of noise. It is a higher virtue requiring the sound foundation of love.

If you have not laid the foundation, which is love, which is virtue, which is goodness, which is beauty, which is real compassion in the depth of your whole being, if you have not done that your silence is only the ending of noise. (5)

Nirode's life pattern is a negation of all beauty, goodness and compassion. He is sick and he is aware of it: 'I am a leper..... Leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all.' (Voices in the city, 61) Nirode can be compared with Dostoevsky's underground man. Both are sick and both glorify it because they live with it. As Bernard J. Paris points out, the underground man is diseased but "his disease is that of being 'too conscious.', too intelligent; and it places him far above the stupid normal men of action whom he so envies and so despises.'" (A psychological approach to Fiction, 202) Likewise, Nirode's self-conscious superiority and his repulsion for all normal men is evident in the novel.

Nirode is Jealous not only of Arun but of all those who follow a routine. The thought of being one with the office going crowd repels him.

Revolutions filled him, so huge a distaste and horror filled him that he felt empowered by it-as Arun, who did not know it, would never be empowered-to rise like a dumpy paper kite with a candle lit inside it that rises above the sooty chimney pots and crooked pigeon-roosts to fly, fly through an immensity of air-above Arun in his cruising train, above the painted ship on the sluggish river, intoxicatingly light and free and powerful. (Voices in the city, 10)

The appeal of freedom and the strategy of mastery, as expressed in the last line of the above quotation, are the two most important solutions of Nirode. He edifies his detachment. He tells Bose, with the characteristic casualness of a grandiose person, that he has not resigned his job with the Patrika; but 'I am simply not going there' (15). He overlooks the future implications of being unemployed. The fear of starvation or the humiliation of having to borrow from friends is comparatively insignificant against the compulsive neurotic urge to be free of all routine.

As a detached person, Nirode cannot work under others. It is "impossible. Physically impossible to work under any man, by his orders, at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those automations at the top-I loathe their superciliousness, their blindness." (8). This statement matches the description Horney gives of the difficulties faced by detached persons in their work. Such individuals can work better alone. Since Nirode is sensitive to coercion, it is difficult for him to work for a boss or under rules and regulations. In order to work in a free atmosphere, he starts his magazine, *Voice*. Apparently it is given to understand that voice will cater to intellectuals and will serve art. This is a make believe. In fact, it only feeds Nirode's vanity.

The magazine, however, does not provide Nirode the desired freedom. It requires communications, contacts and competitiveness. Since Nirode controls all aspirations and wishes, he lacks competitive spirit. Contracts and communications horrify him. Monetary assistance could come from many sources, particularly from his mother, who will open up her coffers for him :

But the habit of withdrawal had become too strong..... Nirode grew more and more wary of contact ..... The intricacies of relationship-approach, recompense, obligation-these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him hovering on the fringe of the world that invited and spurned by turns, and for which he daily cared less. (62)

The magazine becomes a farce. When it shows some signs of revival, Nirode abandons it. His next venture is to write a play. This also fails because he is irritated and intrigued by the expectations of others. He wishes to disown it as the most abjured thing he ever did. A sense of futility grips him and he feels flat, inert,

reluctant to raise to his feet again. Starting again means putting in efforts. It tantamount to participating in life-its activities, human contacts and ambitions, for which he has a strong dislike. He feels proud in his non-involvement, his society and emptiness.

Horney opines that real suffering has a therapeutic effect on an individual : it has the power “to broaden and deepen our range of feelings and to open our hearts for the sufferings of others.” (Neurosis and Human Growth, 163). For a brief duration Nirode experiences a communication with his real self in the hour of agony. He regains his human capacity to sympathies with Amla and aunt Lila in their suffering. In these moments of interpersonal empathy and tenderness, he reaches out to them, shares their feelings and is filled with tenderness for the world.

... He was filled with an immense care of the world that made him reach out, again and again, to touch Amla’s cold hand ... He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other flesh, others’ pains, longed to make them mingle with his own, which till now had been agonizingly neglected. (Voices in the city , 248).

Nirode turns into a reflective person who can divert the energies of his self to enlarge its perceptiveness. This is an elevating experience for Nirode. He can see the whole pattern of life and death, “the whole fantastic design of ..... incarnation followed by reincarnation, of unconsciousness turning into consciousness, of sleep followed by waking.” (249)

The emergence of mother Kali in his psyche is symbolic of the deteriorating process. The danger-signals of self-destructiveness appear in the form of symbols such as demons, monsters or ghosts. Kali represents the dark half of female totality. She is the principle of destruction as well as pro-creation. Here, cultural factors play an important role. Kali is the mother goddess of Bengal in particular and of India in general. She remains in the ‘collective unconscious’ of the race. There are incidents in swami Vivekananda’s life when mother Kali converged into his psyche. Nirode too belongs to Bengal. In his moments of crisis the real and the archetypal fuse into one in his imagination.

When we explore the psycho-social matrix of the Hindu inner world, we understand full well Nirode’s rage. Erik H. Erikson reminds us that identity is expressed in the core of the individual as that of a communal culture: “A mature psycho-social identity presupposes a community of people whose traditional values become significant to the growing person.” (Daedalus, 145-71 ) Nirode is born and brought up in the Hindu culture of Bengal. The cult of Durga, Shakti and Kali govern the psychic development of the child. He learns that the mother goddesses are the

reservoir of both constructive and destructive energy. His emotional strength resides in his mother. He develops, what psychologists call, maternal feminine identity. As he grows up, the biological factor of his maleness overpowers him.

As a young man he identifies himself with his father, thus ascertaining his masculine identity. This is evident from his dream wherein he sees 'a nicotine tinged hand' protecting him from the wild wind. Nirode may have despised his father, yet in the unconscious he is still a protective figure. He dreams of himself being on the wrong side of the barbed wire fence with his father while the mother is on the other side of the 'brilliant territory'. This identification has further, deeper implications in his unconscious fear that she has killed his father and will kill him, too.

A psychological evaluation of Nirode's character scores the fact that he is a representative of the sickness of contemporary existence which fails to give a unified sense of experience to the artist. In fact, Nirode is a social and psychological portrait of one of the most common effects of anxiety-neurosis. It is felt that he is trapped in an existential predicament and there is no rational solution to his problems. But his trouble is not the product of the poignant human condition; it is the result of his sickness, his disintegrated personality. Mother's rejection in the end only serves to heighten his neurotic anxiety and speed up his self-alienation. Enslavement to his glorified self-image, and the inability to transcend the limitations of the solipsistic nightmare, exercise a dehumanizing effect on him.

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