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## ***A Yearning for A Room of One's Own in Anita Desai's Voices in the City***

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### **Abstract:**

The title taken from Virginia Woolf's famous essay is intended to serve two extremely relevant purposes; first, a recognition of the innate similarity with which both literary greats apply the "stream of consciousness" technique with an utmost finesse, and second, and something even more relevant to this research paper, the desperate longing for a private space by the female protagonist of the novel, Monisha. She craves desperately for a personal space amid Jiban's joint family. The term "room" in the title fits well on both literal as well as metaphorical grounds. Having grown up in a caring and relatively free atmosphere in the hills of Kalimpong, Monisha's marriage is no less than a cultural shock for her, which drives her deep into a sad state of lost identity. This article focuses at this very yearning of Monisha for her individual space in Jiban's joint family.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, Voices in the city, Monisha, lost identity, private space.

### **Introduction:**

Voices in the city is a novel about three siblings and their mother caught in the cross current of shifting social values. The story is set in Calcutta at the time when Indian society was still into infant phase of post-colonial modernization. This was the time of confused individuals, caught-in-between the tradition and modernization prevailing in the society in a state of despair. There was glimpse of a modern society free from age old vices promising a fresh bright future ahead, but still the clutches of the traditional norms were not completely set loose. Thus, it was the time of transition at both societal as well as individual level.

In Indian society, it is almost customary to provide a separate room for the newly married couple, be it in cities or villages. The idea is to ensure a gradual and harmonious amalgamation of the newly added member in the culture and tradition of the house. Monisha, an educated and intellectual individual, undergoes a drastic change of events in her life when

she got married to Jiban, a government servant living in a joint family. Monisha could not get an atmosphere which would help her to gel with the family members of Jiban.

Monisha feels suffocated at every single moment living in Jiban's family. *I (Monisha) long to thrust my head out of the window-and cannot, the bars are closely set-and scream. Stop!* (Desai, *Voices in the city*)

She is so tormented with the atmosphere around her that she eventually chooses death in order to break free herself from the clutches of traditional family of her husband, Jiban.

### **About Anita Desai:**

Having born to cross-national couples (Indian father and German mother), Anita Desai was surely ahead of times in her vision defying the stereotypes of other Indian female writers of that time. She was born at the time when world was facing the massive World War II. In particular, Desai's mother had experienced greater agony and trauma due to disastrous situation in her motherland, Germany. Her mother could never get back to her motherland. Desai's writing style is lucid and tight and most of the time exhibit stark realities in an unromantic manner. In a reply to a question asked in an interview, Desai mentioned that she considered Ruth Praver Jhabvala, another literary great as her mentor, who once used to be her neighbour. Jhabvala, the German-born British and American novelist has contributed significantly in Indian writing as she spent a considerable time of her career in India.

Anita Desai's works indicate her vast knowledge of English literature across the globe. She makes reference of various prominent British, German and Russian writers while describing book closet of Monisha, who is an ardent reader. On the contrary, Desai also mentions about Panchatantra, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita in the novel through various characters, thus exhibiting her vast and varied domain of knowledge.

Desai is praised for her vast understanding of intellectual issues, and for her ability to portray Indian middle-class society so vividly with the way the eastern and western cultures have blended there during the post colonial era. Being a psychological novelist, Desai has innate ability to peep into the insight of the soul of characters rather than the outer spectacle of the world. Thus, there is minimum action and lot of inner thoughts going around in the mind of the characters. In her works, action is always subordinate to psychology. Anita Desai is known as the mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. Desai's characters are largely dissatisfied with their routine existence. They are in want of a more meaningful life.

Looking inward in her characters instead of outside world, Anita Desai explores the intricate facts of human experience focusing upon the central experience of psychic tensions of characters. Anita Desai's characters, especially female characters, are largely fragile introverts. For example, Monisha prefers to live in her own world of solitude, diving deeply into her books without any external interference. When she does not get this atmosphere in Jiban's house occupied by his joint family, she gets into a grave depression and sombre state of despair, eventually driving her to take the extreme step of committing suicide.

### **Setting of *Voices in the city*:**

*Voices in the city* was published in 1965. This phase, referred as post colonial era, was essentially a transitional phase for Indian society post independence from centuries of outsider's rules.

Those were the times when Indira Gandhi started shining in political arena as the President of Indian National Congress. Later on, she became the first woman Prime Minister of India. But those were also the times when middle- and lower-class women held no authority or personal expression; rather they were confined to traditional domestic rigid structure. Such was the mix of culture which had started creating turbulence in the age-old traditional notions of the society, but still quite far from complete freedom from mores and values of the society.

While the people were gradually beginning to come out of the long-lasting suppression of colonial rule, this transition for Indian women was still in a primitive stage, as women in Indian households were still trying to catch up to the path of progress already traversed by men. Monisha exhibits these sentiments in the following lines:

*I see many women, always Bengali women, who follow five paces behind their men. They wear saris of the dullest colours, beige and fawn and off-white, like the female birds in the cages, and there is something infinitely gentle, infinitely patient about their long eyes, the curve of their shoulders, their manner of walking, which arouses, not aggressiveness in one, as the women of the north do, but a protective feeling. (Voices in the City, Orient Paperbacks, 2005).*

Thus, having got free from the colonial rule, the Indian society, including women, was undergoing transformation which created a stir in the stereotypes of patriarchal society. Indian society was moving from an agrarian society towards industrialization, of which

alienation, depression were the bi-products. The individual, women in particular, started feeling an urge to break free from the long lost traditional societal norms. This transition and the associated struggles of various individuals in the society is the main theme of the *Voices in the City*. In fact, the very first scene of the novel set on the railway platform reflects in it an aura of post-modern anxiety, of people rushing here and there, in a strange state of despair, in search of something which they themselves are unaware of. *“Those who felt him (Nirode) brush past them- the grimy station master, the tea-vendor, the coolie- thought nothing of a young man in haste, perhaps in despair, so many such passed them each day”* (Desai, *Voices in the city*).

Even years after India got Independence from British colonial rules, Indian society continues to be largely a patriarchal society in many respects in which women are sidelined and are considered inferior to men. In these societies, men treat women merely as servants and use tools of patriarchy to suppress their voices, although they contribute equally, and sometimes more substantially, to the development of a nation but their contributions are not duly acknowledged. In postcolonial Indian society, women are regarded as mere “objects” having no personal opinion and view point of them. Anita Desai holds a vision of feminism that addresses the confrontation of women against patriarchal oppression. In most of her novels, middle-class women in contemporary India strive to overcome societal hindrances imposed by patriarchy. Desai differs from other feminists as she emphasizes individual escape through self-exploration and enthusiasm.

Post modern literature is primarily concerned with the aloofness of people the outside world. When people in the modern world find it difficult to survive the atrocious reality, they are bound to articulate an imaginary world of their own so that they can find a getaway of the disturbances or voices of the real world. People living in the post-modern world are facing a rising situation of alienation and fragmentation that fall on the family. They become unknown to their own parents, siblings or kids.

### **About the novel:**

This novel is about three siblings, Nirode, Monisha and Amla, born in an intellectual family in West Bengal. The story deals with the turbulence of changing social and moral values that came forth with end of colonial era and the arrival of the post-modern mayhem. Being brought up in a free and leisurely environment at the hills of Kalimpong by their dominating mother, Nirode, Monisha and Amla had the potential to become successful

independent individuals in future. As a matter of fact, Kalimpong is known as a hub of educational institutions right from the time of British colonial period, thus making it an appropriate and obvious choice of Desai to choose as the native city of the three intellectually enlightened and modern minded siblings. Unfortunately, things turn around adversely for all three as they grew up further in their life and career. While Nirode is employed as a clerk for a newspaper firm, he is an escapist soul who does not like his vocation at all. His grudge towards her mother adds to his own frustration. Nirode is dismayed at the vulgarity of the high society and remembers that his own mother had been a part of it during her Calcutta days. His sense of aloofness is heightened when David Gunney, his Irish friend, leaves for Sikkim to become a Buddhist monk. Nirode and Monisha identify with each other, their restlessness and alienation and propensity of escapism from everything around them. Both of them lead lives of drudgery- Nirode with his magazine and Monisha with her household chores; they both have nothing to look forward to in their gloomy and submissive existence. Having given up his magazine, Nirode is busy writing a play about which his friend, Jit Nair, holds a very light view and which Nirode hands over to Monisha to read in isolation.

Amla, who is a girl full of life at the start of the novel, too faces her share of sorrows and struggles after having a failed relation with the artist, Dharma. Amla, at the onset, is excited by her new life and career as a commercial artist in Calcutta and Aunt Lila repeatedly drills into her ears that the independence and freedom the generation of today enjoys has been bequeathed by her generation and they should make most of it.

However, since this research paper pertains to the life of Monisha, I would prefer to keep my focus on that character only, while ignoring, only for the sake of this paper, other characters, which are otherwise equally important and coherent to the theme of Desai's novel.

### **About Monisha:**

Monisha, like most of the female characters of Desai, is a vulnerable woman seeking for significance of life. On a superficial level, Monisha possesses every material thing required for sustaining a normal life, her husband has a good and secured job, and she has got a big family for keeping company and a big house. But from inside, Monisha lacks the most essential aspects which she yearns for; respect, privacy and an understanding and cordial ambience.

Monisha is a well educated and enlightened individual and a voracious reader. Monisha reads prominent English and Russian writers like Kafka, Hopkins and Dostoyevsky along with some French and Sanskrit works too. But her life turns around when she is married to Jiban, a government servant who lives with his traditional joint family under one roof. She is robbed of her privacy and has to live under an all-time surveillance of the family members. Monisha, who used to be an ardent reader, could not get a private space and time for reading. In fact, her sister-in-law laughs after seeing Monisha's closet full of books. Apart from doing her household chores, Monisha is treated indifferently by everyone since she cannot conceive a child due to blockage of her fallopian tubes.

Monisha has an interesting habit of keeping his diary. It was her way of venting out emotions which she could not share with anybody. The act of diary writing itself serves as a great symbol for want of privacy without people from outside world peeping into it. But in Jiban's house, Monisha could not get an individual space for her private life thus making her always in want of her own space.

#### **Monisha's marriage:**

Monisha's aunt Lila was the first person in Monisha's family to meet Jiban. Monisha's father considers Jiban to be the right match for Monisha in order to suppress her gruesome inclinations and lead a more practical life.

*I (Aunt Lila) met Jiban and his family before your parents did...they were a respectable, middle-class Congress family, completely unsuitable to Monisha's tastes and inclinations. So your father decided he was the right man, that it was the right family...perhaps he thought he was being sensible-that Monisha ought not to be encouraged in her morbid inclinations, and that it would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a stolid, unimaginative family as that, just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance. That is how your mother excused its happening. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

Jiban's family is obsessed with feet-before-face syndrome which annoys Monisha deeply

*Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another. How they all honour their own feet! (Batra)*

Monisha is perturbed when her sister-in-law peeps into her closet full of books. She is fumed by the breach in her private world of books.

*Kalyani di throws open my wardrobe in order to inspect my sarees. The whole wardrobe is full of books. To my perplexity, she laughs...I see that of course she cannot know there is nothing to laugh at in Kafka or Hopkins or Dostoevsky or my Russian or French or Sanskrit dictionaries. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

She desperately longs for a private space which is not available even in her own room which is almost always occupied by either her sister-in-law or children of the family.

Monisha sees the city as a menace. Above all, to Monisha “the mindless, meaningless monotony of empty sound” hour upon hour is a blow to personal peace as well as her integrity, symbolizing the dreadful image of the city against the greenery of the hills in Kalimpong.

When Jiban takes her to the zoo for excursion, several children of the family accompany them. This is annoying for Monisha who is looking for spending some private time with her husband which she could not get while staying inside. But much to her dismay, her longing for privacy is not fulfilled while going out as well.

Monisha herself sums up the reason for her “misfit” situation as:

*I think what separates me from his family is the fact that not one of them ever sleeps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and darkness. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

Monisha’s habit of maintaining a diary is, in itself, a symbol of a want of private space, without any interference from the outer world. Maintaining a record of the diary is her way of escaping momentarily, from the insensitive and choking environment in the house of Jiban. It is through Monisha’s diary only that Nirode comes to know about the predicament of his sister Monisha, about her circumstances which lead her to the extreme step of committing suicide.

Monisha’s miseries get manifold when she gets to know that she cannot bear a child due to a medical condition in which her fallopian tubes are blocked. This medical complication becomes a spicy household topic for all the women in Jiban’s family. Monisha gets extremely annoyed and humiliated when other women in the house blatantly and insensitively discuss about her private organs and speculates and pass their judgement over Monisha’s inability to bear a child.



*I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to scrutiny.* (Desai, *Voices in the city*)

Monisha desperately yearns for privacy as she is not left alone even in her own room. Thus, ironically, she does not have a personal room of her own.

*I am glad they give me 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 more tasks I could do alone, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone, I could work better, and should feel more-whole.* (Desai, *Voices in the city*)

Monisha has no faith, no alternative to her state of despair; she leads a life dedicated to nothing. It is quite evident from her following lines:

*Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice. She leads a life of extreme humiliation and neglect.* (Desai, *Voices in the city*)

Monisha gradually starts considering herself to be non-existent for the outside world. She receives a letter from her younger sister Amla who, after completing a course in commercial arts from Bombay, has now got a job as a commercial artist in Calcutta. She is staying with their foster-aunt Lila and has invited Monisha to visit her. In her present state of low self-esteem, Monisha fears Amla's disapproval.

*I grow smaller every day, shrink and lose more and more of my weight, my appurtenances, and the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of this world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet.* (Desai, *Voices in the City*)

So, it was clear that the amount and intensity of work which Monisha was subjected to was not Monisha's bone of contention. But all she craves for was some moment of loneliness or privacy.

### **Monisha accused of stealing money:**

Monisha once visits her ailing brother, Nirode, who was down with starvation and exhaustion. His mother wants to open a bank account on his name to aid him financially. But Nirode, out of deep anguish towards her mother, out rightly rejects her offer. It is then

Monisha steals her husband's money, which he has given her for safekeeping, for clearing Nirode's hospital bills. However, her act causes hue and cry at her home. Consequently, Monisha is exiled from the rest of the family. This entire incident, however, corroborate the economic dependence of Monisha, for that matter for any women in Indian society, who cannot take economic decisions at their own, but inherently look upon their masters for their economical needs.

Thus, the steeling incident highlights lack of economic privacy in Monisha's life. She has to depend on her husband's whims and wishes even to meet the smallest or most genuine financial requirements. Desai has touched upon the pressing issue of economic independence by showing predicament of Monisha, when she is questioned by everyone, including her husband, about the money she took to help her ailing brother, Nirode.

### **Monisha commits suicide:**

On the fateful afternoon, Monisha, while sitting in her room, hears notes of music being played by some strolling musicians from the street below. There is something captivating in their mannerisms that draw Monisha towards them. She contemplates her present state of sorrow and listlessness.

*They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubical, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. Similarly, I cannot really hear them. I cannot understand what they say. I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone's shoulders, of my tongue on anyone's damp palate. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

Monisha, in a spur of moment, rushes to the kitchen, picks up kerosene tin and runs to her room. She shuts the door of her room, pours kerosene on her and sets herself on fire. Soon she falls unconscious and eventually dies. Monisha's suicide had a long-lasting impact on the lives of her siblings, Nirode and Amla. Nirode decides to take away Monisha's dead body to Aunt Lila's house, despite all sorts of protest by Jiban's family. Monisha's dead body lies in her aunt's house "in undisturbed solitude" before it is given to flames the next day.

*It seemed a cruel thing to drag Monisha out of one fire, the one of her own making, only to consign her to another. (Batra)*

Her sister Amla is numbed at the death of Monisha.

*And all at the back of a mind that could not grapple directly with the powerful thing at hand, she knew that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark uncompromising margin. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

Nirode too contemplates his own death after the suicide of Monisha.

*Oh, I have such a vision, I don't know if I can hear it- and survive. Monisha's death- Monisha is dead. I am sentenced to death, too, now I am prepared and waiting for it. (Desai, Voices in the city)*

Although Monisha was an introvert and reticent woman, her suicide turns out to be a loud confession of failure to her predicament. She carries the negation of the concept that women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out of it. Monisha's reaction to her sombre, claustrophobic existence is violent and extreme, but it declares that death is more welcome than a dismal and subhuman existence.

Monisha in her quest for an identity, to demolish herself decide to go the whole control, withholding from her every single way of sustenance. Ironically when she actually commits suicide and ends her life, it is not in search of anonymity but in search of passion of her soul. She has longed for passion throughout her life.

### **Monisha: A Victim of Post-Modern era**

Desai's vision in creating the character of Monisha is definitely ahead of the times. It is evident from the fact that her characterization holds the interest of modern-day readers with equal force. The prime reason of the growing alienation and depression in Monisha who was otherwise an intellectual woman having deep interest in reading was the insurmountable labyrinth of society which suffocated her soul all the time. The Indian society at that time was largely patriarchal, and the woman was the victim of long time prevailing social traditional vices. If we imagine the character of Monisha facing similar situation in present day, that is, 21<sup>st</sup> century, she was more likely to come out of her state of despair and alienation into a positive frame of mind owing to the relatively modern society of the present time. On the

contrary, the post-modern era was characterized by male dominated world, leaving a very little space whatsoever for the woman's inner whims and wishes. A woman was rather bound to lead a life in a rigid socially pre-defined structure with no room for personal longing of a woman as an individual. All these circumstances lead to an ever-lasting and unfulfilled desire for a private space which is free of social norms and tradition.

### **Conclusion:**

Simone de Beauvoir, a well-known French philosopher and essayist, in her famous essay, *The Second Sex* states that “*the representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth*” (De Beauvoir). *The Voices in the City* exhibits this predicament of an ordinary woman's life, according to which a woman is expected to lead a domestic, family-oriented life, without thinking about her individuality. The life of Monisha is apparently a normal life which every ordinary woman of that time used to live. Monisha did not crave for any material thing from Jiban's family, but only privacy and respect. She wanted to be given some personal time and space, which superficially sounds quite easy going. Her aspirations and longing for love and for a private space builds, over a period of time, a heap of frustration which makes her feel so suffocated that she eventually chooses to end her life than to lead a one without any meaning. The inner dilemma of Monisha is brilliantly expressed in Desai's writing through the technique of “Stream of consciousness”, in which the readers get an insight of the inner soul and mind of the characters.

The Supreme Court of India states that the right to privacy is a fundamental right to every citizen. It is intrinsic to life and liberty and thus comes under Article 21 of Indian Constitution. Desai's novel, set in the post-colonial era of Indian society, surely raises burning issues of that time while highlighting the importance of basic human rights in the life of middle-class women in Indian society.

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