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Exploring New Womanhood: An Analysis of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

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Abstract:

The Indian social structure and culture considered family as the only basic unit of the society and hence it was given more importance than an individual. Women were considered marriageable commodities since times immemorial and were groomed for this role alone. When marriage became the most important and inevitable sacrament of woman's life, she was taught and conditioned to upkeep tradition and follow the rigid unwritten norms of the society with piety. She was made to believe that she was born to be the 'other' and any violation from this assigned duty was a sin. Thereby she accepted her role with great servitude and readily agreed to serve her husband and his family. However, in recent years Indian society has undergone a change with many young women revolting against their subservient position. They are trying to write a new chapter of freedom by defying the institution of marriage and deciding to remain single. The present paper explores and analyses one such attempt in the novel, *Voices in the City* written by acclaimed writer, Anita Desai. It goes to study in detail the role of Amla in the novel and to follow the trajectory of her life where she achieves emancipation by remaining single and thus emerges as the 'New Woman'.

Keywords: Culture, Emancipation, Marriage, New-Woman, Single.

A writer of novels and short stories, Anita Desai has been active on the literary scene for more than three decades. Starting with *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai has penned several novels including *Voices in the City* (1967), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village by the Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1996), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *The Zigzag Way* (2004) and *Rosarita* (2024). She has also written a book for children, *The Peacock Garden* (1974), two collections of short stories, *Games at Twilight* (1978) and *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000) and a collection of novellas, *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011).

Voices in the City is the second novel by Anita Desai that narrates the tale of four siblings, Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The siblings initially belong to one world but with the passage of time their experiences shape their thinking differently. Amla, the younger sister of Monisha and Nirode, who is the protagonist of the third section of the novel, stands apart. The present paper analyses her role in the novel and her decision to remain single. Amla is a sprightly young woman who keenly looks forward to her life and career. She comes to Calcutta, after completing her training in Bombay and works as a commercial artist with a local firm, "I have come here to work...I have heaps of ideas – I wonder if I will get the chance to use them, as a commercial artist" (Desai 153). Amla is initially excited by her new life in Calcutta and is determined to enjoy the city, her new job and her independence. She says, "Calcutta doesn't oppress me in the least-you can't imagine how exciting it is to arrive It excites me ..." (142).

Her attitude towards life is marked with youthful excitement, wonder and vivacity. She is totally different from her siblings, Monisha and Nirode. Unlike them, she avoids absurdity and leads an independent life. Indeed, the section dealing with Amla is light and gay and provides a relief after the dark and hopeless world one shares with Nirode and

Monisha. In Calcutta, Amla tries to experience gaiety by plunging into a world of parties in order to escape the suffocating realities of life that have overwhelmed Nirode and Monisha. Soon, she is disillusioned by the superficialities of the society she encounters, “Lassitude overcame her like a fever, weighing against her temples, making her rest her elbows on the tables and her head droop over unfinished work” (173). She craves for something elevating.

Amla’s quest is directed towards becoming self reliant and self sufficient. She strives to master all fears and anxieties of life so as to give meaning to it. The self-confidence and spirit with which she lands in Calcutta demonstrate her capacity to enjoy life and give it an aspect of a positive approach. She gradually finds a sense of hollowness and futility sapping her interest and vitality and loses her sense of camaraderie. Flabbergasted by her unbearable isolation in Calcutta in the lack of any meaningful emotional communion with her mother or with Nirode and Monisha, Amla is psychologically lacerated and weak and so finds a refuge, a relief in Dharma’s presence. She requires communication and reciprocation, “One must have someone who reciprocates, who responds. One must have that – reciprocation I think” (194) and so falls in love with Dharma, a married man much older than her. Dharma is a painter by profession and attracts and arrests Amla’s attention at the very first meeting, “There Dharma reclined on his mat, geometrically folding his pan leaves and watching his pet geese with those heavy-lidded eyes that cast shadows of darkness on to his cheek-bones, crescents shadowing crescents with a kind of sad but attentive symmetry” (184). Dharma casts an immediate magic spell on her with his immaculate talk about the socio-political upheaval in Calcutta and his fastidious hands that prepare a pan leaf for her. Amla readily accepts his offer of making a portrait of her, his wish to paint a human figure as, “She saw Dharma was chivalrous, tender, subtle, prophetic” (185). It is love at first sight.

Amla while modelling for Dharma, feels a great change in her life, “Instead of being a commercial artist, she becomes another Amla, a flowering Amla, translucent with joy and

overflowing with a sense of love and rewards” (Rao 36). She drifts towards Dharma and makes him an integral part of her life. The relationship is significant for Dharma too. He achieves a graceful interaction between humility and pride of creativity. As an artist he is able to see the human possibilities and limitations. Amla’s transparent inner self gives him fresh insight and his portraits assume depth and feelings. Dharma exploits Amla’s candidness and freshness as a model to draw him out of his bizarre and absurd existence into the tangible world of realism in his paintings. But once his use for her is over, he discards her in favour of other models, unmindful of her desires or pain. Despite neglect and disregard on Dharma’s part, Amla continues to love him. However, the illusion of love and involvement is broken when she learns that Dharma has disowned his daughter on account of her incestuous affair with a cousin, “when she left the house, I told her she could not return Because she left at the age of fifteen ... with her first cousin.... Do you think I could forgive her that disgrace?” (Desai 224). He cuts off all ties with his only daughter and declares, “... nothing that concerns my daughter concerns me” (225).

Amla feels shocked and deeply hurt to learn of Dharma’s callousness towards his daughter. Truth dawns on her with impunity and she finds Dharma an erring mortal, someone mysterious and forbidding, “Was this revelation tragic? Or ludicrous? Did it prove Dharma a single minded and saintly ascetic Or a self-righteous, blind, unfeeling zealot?” (224). She is shattered to realise that if Dharma could reject his only daughter, he could very well throw her out too. She discovers that their relationship is not well-defined for either. It is just a counterpoise between reality and hallucination, a precarious situation in which Dharma can neither give her tangibility nor permanence. Amla becomes painfully aware of this deficiency:

Before her eyes he became one of the models of his own paintings – the mandarin eyes shadowed with secrets, the mouth tightly closed to danger, the outlines blurring

into a landscape that was at once recognisable and unreal, a nightmare that had obsessed her in her sleep but became formless and nondescript in waking. She stared and stared but the wavering lines would not fix and settle again and their constant movement made her feel sick. (224)

She senses the inhuman power that love wants to exercise and she has the courage to bid farewell to such a futile relationship well in time. She decides to encounter boldly, as stated by Anita Desai in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, “The terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (Dalmia 13), remaining single.

Being the youngest but mature enough, Amla is able to contemplate that her sister Monisha suffers from an internal angst. She is deliberately married into a family with an atmosphere of distrust, drudgery and lack of privacy. It is the extended family of parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews who have neither ethics nor aesthetics. Monisha feels like a stranger amongst them. Here in the family of her in laws, Monisha finds herself cross questioned and contradicted on every small little thing and her privacy extremely violated as almost each member openly and invariably discusses her barrenness, “Her sister-in –law always without any hesitation barge into her room making themselves comfortable on the big bed discussing Monisha’s sarees and her blocked fallopian tubes” (Gopal 25). It is a stereotypical patriarchal family where mother-in-law accuses Monisha of a theft and calls out aloud, “I will not have a thief in my house” (Desai 137). Monisha is greatly hurt by the accusation of theft against her, “Monisha is caught in a truly existentialist contingency when she is accused of stealing money from Jiban’s wardrobe. It is true that she has taken this money but she has done so, with honest intention” (Arun 252), of helping her brother Nirode. Her husband, Jiban does not defend her right to his money. On the contrary, he quietly becomes a party to his family’s collective allegation treating Monisha as an outsider.

Amla feels sorry for her sister and often wonders how her sister could have been married to such a non-entity as Jiban. Amla recalls, "Was it merely because Jiban was so unquestionably safe, sound and secure, so utterly predictable?" (Desai195). Monisha was married off by her father in an alliance of arranged marriage to Jiban because his family was a prominent member of an influential political party. Marriage and kinship, in the words of Gayle Rubin, "... are always parts of total social systems, and are always tied into economic and political arrangements" (553). Arranged marriages reveal the political system of marital unions where men, "... depend not only upon their immediate partners, but upon the partners of their partners, to several degrees of remove" (Rubin 553). That is why even if women like Monisha are unwilling to get married; the choice of decision making does not rest with them but with the elders of the house. Amla is aware of this and tries to find an answer, "Why had their father chosen him from amongst other young men ... was it because fathers did, unconsciously, spite their daughters who were unavailable to them?" (Desai195). An educated girl with a refined sensibility, her expectation of happy life was shattered to pieces when her father married her to Jiban against her will. Everything was different for Monisha. P. Bhatnagar aptly remarks in *Indian Women Novelists*:

Not only is the man himself different, but as often happens in the society of changing values, his family ways, his surroundings to which she is expected to adjust herself are entirely different. The result is that there is a gradual erosion of marital relationship, and for a woman, marriage comes to symbolize nullification of everything she has come to cherish. She feels tied down. This affects her entire psyche and behaviour which soon destroys her sensibility and her very self. (143)

Whatever it might have been it was the beginning of Monisha's death, "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" (Maurya 89). Amla

is shaken by Monisha's self-annihilation. She holds herself responsible for the tragedy to quite an extent and is filled with a terrible sense of guilt for not having intervened timely, "... how it was that she had done nothing about the uneasiness and suspicions she felt whenever she met Monisha, why she had not taken her away from such blatant oppression and destruction, home to Kalimpong" (Desai 251). She thinks that she could have averted Monisha's fate had she pushed a little harder, "If I had taken her away, taken her home" (247).

Amla tries earnestly to find several potential answers to her own questions, "Why had Monisha, with that powerful silent stubbornness of hers, never rebelled?" (195). All possible answers predicate upon an oppressive sexual politics, "Monisha conceivably maintained her silence; because she saw herself as a sacrifice to her parents' floundering marriage; because she felt compelled to play the part of a dutiful daughter conforming to the patriarchal practice of arranged marriage; or because she was overwhelmed by a sense of fatalism at the lot of Indian women." (Mann 83). All possibilities lead Amla to conclude that it is the institution of marriage that is to be blamed for the unhappiness and subsequent self immolation by Monisha. Amla realises that for her sister, "... marriage is the excruciating, destructive and negative of all social institution that trap and torture her isolated, sensitive psyche" (Krishnaswamy 250). Seeing Monisha's fate, Amla is distressed by the joint - family system prevailing in the Indian society and marriage in such a family where independence of woman is totally curtailed. She does not want to be imprisoned by such an ensnaring social institution. She wants, "... something greater than pleasure alone or the security of marriage alone, something rarer, more responsible" (Desai 145). This realisation is one of the reasons why Amla decides to remain single.

It is not just Monisha's predicament that shakes Amla's consciousness but also the maladjustment between her parents that lead her to investigate and distrust the idea of

married life. The marriage between her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ray had been a marriage of practical bargain, where the husband was obsessed with his family name and title, and the wife with tea-estates and property. Their marriage was more of a financial arrangement or settlement rather than an affiliation and attachment for each other. Amla reflects about their relationship, "... by the time my mother was old enough to marry, her family had more property than my father's family.... I'm afraid the marriage must have been something of a financial settlement.... He hadn't quite bargained for mother, just for her houses and tea-estates.... I thought she got the worst of the bargain ..." (202). The father did nothing except sleeping, drinking and idling, devoid of any vigour or vitality.

In fact, their relationship was one of estrangement with no common interests or tastes. The mother had a strong liking for music, nature, sophistication, and all the fine things of life whereas the father had no refined taste at all. As Amla says, "My father always gets on her nerves by simply never doing anything. I always see him lying back indolently, like an overfed house cat, against mother's embroidered Tibetan cushions toying with a cheroot or a glass of whisky or both" (203). Mr. and Mrs. Ray hated one another harbouring a feeling of contempt and resentment against each other. Full of malice for his wife whom he saw as his competitor, his lay back attitude was perceived by Amla. He looked at his wife with contempt and taunted her every now and then. He even humiliated her in front of the children to satisfy his male ego. She in turn, treated him with same contempt and bitterness, as was witnessed by Amla, "My mother, was sitting with her head bowed and her eyes closed in pleasure. Then she opened them and glanced at him.... I saw such terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes ..." (204). The bitter relationship changed mother to quite an extent.

Like mother, Aunt Lila, a cousin of their mother, with whom Amla stays in Calcutta also influences Amla's way of thinking. She had inkling for emancipation that had led her to explore many career options, "Who had once started to be a doctor, turned nurse, married and

become a social worker...” (145). However, marriage had ruined her hopes and aspirations. She overtly voices her hatred for men and marriage, especially in her conversations with Amla. She hates her fat, self-centred, long dead husband. Her only daughter Rita has lived through a spectacularly short-lived wedding. She is not perturbed by the failure of her daughter’s marriage and as a matter of fact, relieved that Rita is free from a pseudo relationship and is economically independent with a fine job at Paris, “My Rita broke away, I made her and I’m not sorry ... how she has grown young again, how her life has expanded” (217) and also that Rita is “seeking something more rare, more responsible in the Physics laboratories in Paris” (145). Voicing her contempt towards the opposite sex in general and her disapproval about Amla’s involvement with Dharma in particular, she counsels her, “Women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channelled that way, while they go parched themselves” (217).

Aunt Lila feels that it is her duty to caution Amla against falling a prey to Dharma’s contrivance. She is a true feminist who repeatedly discusses about the freedom accorded to modern women to choose their own career or path, that was denied to women of her generation, “You belong to such a uniquely free generation – and that is something very new in our country... how much you can do – and how many careers and vocations and all the spirit and intelligence to do it with” (144-145). She implores Amla to value this freedom and break the shackles of patriarchy, “Our country belongs to men ... but it won’t always be so, not when there are girls like you and my Rita ...” (143). She also advises Amla, just like a mother figure, not to waste her talent and energy for a spurious person like Dharma who seems to be using her for his own selfish motives, “He uses you, something in you that he needs” (218). She asks her to free herself from this bondage, “Give it up. Break it off” (217) and lead an independent life in the true sense, harnessing her creativity and professional skills.

Amla decides not to remain in the subjugation of marriage or a relationship and frees herself from the vicious clutches of Dharma, well in time. However, her decision is not comprehended as correct and is scorned at by majority of people she comes across. The Indian social structure and culture considered family as the only basic unit of the society and hence it was given more importance than an individual. Women were considered marriageable commodities and were groomed for this role alone, "It is marriage which gives to women the ultimate respect and recognition. An unmarried woman or a widow is looked down with suspicion and pity. With the security of the marriage, the all-powerful domination of the husband, a woman is supposed to lead a confined and an ideal existence" (Singh 94). When marriage became the most important and inevitable sacrament of woman's life, she was taught and conditioned to upkeep tradition and follow the rigid unwritten norms of the society with piety.

V.V. Prasada. Rao and V. Nandini Rao in their book, *Marriage, the Family and Women in India* remark, "... marriage is considered as a ritual and a sacramental union ... an indispensable event of Hindu life and the person who is unmarried is considered unholy" (14). Single women were considered to be in risk- physical, economical and psychological:

While women are constantly being victimised and exploited by society single women are victims of a double exploitation by virtue of their being single. They lack the protection of a man and sometimes of a family and therefore are vulnerable to exploitation- economic, social, psychological and sexual.... Economically they find it very difficult to make both ends meet single handedly.... Socially they face a lot of problems and are not accorded a place in society. Psychologically they feel insecure and experience various mental conflicts and the agony of living a life of utter loneliness. (Krishnakumari 7-8)

Even Nirode, Amla's unconventional brother thinks that marriage would be the right choice for Amla and hence advises, "You're earnest about the wrong things, Amla, he snorted. Perhaps you ought to marry after all, like Monisha" (Desai 154). However, Amla moves from revolt to conformity, "Psychologically, she is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. Her ambitious pursuit drags her through various psychic situations till finally she establishes a contact with her real self and achieves equanimity" (Bande 129). The death of her sister Monisha accelerates an awakening and gives her a final view of ultimate reality. The choice becomes very clear to Amla - either she loses her identity and merges with the multitude and gets annihilated in the process like Monisha or she braves the odds and survive, beckoning a ray of hope and better future for herself as well as, the distraught Nirode :

Amla displays a resilience and independence that enable her to live on her own terms. Declining the amorous attentions of several young men, she appears poised at the novel's end to pursue a career as an illustrator of children's stories, thus betokening hope for the future. Amla defies the quintessential ideal of woman as dutiful wife and mother and 'goes in the opposite direction', but after her own fashion." (Mann 88)

As a modern, emancipated woman, Amla has freedom of choice, and with choice comes the anxiety and responsibility of deciding which direction she should go towards or which road or course she should undertake. Amla eschews the role of wife and mother while examining her choices, refusing the stereotypes dictated by tradition or convention. She decides to remain single and thus emerges as "the New Woman" who can survive and sustain on her own.

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