



Anita Desai; a failure story of her characters

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the failure stories of the characters of Anita Desai. The present study focuses on why she has presented her characters as failure ones and how with the failure stories she exposes the untouched and hidden aspects of city life that cause certain mayhem.

Keywords: character, imaginative, mental, observation, skillfully.

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is an imaginative writer but her imagination is not for stories but for creating surrounding and special milieus in which she puts her characters and with her surprising capacity of direct observation and insight, provides us a very clear picture of the psyche of the character concerned. Her probing into the very minute details of the events, action and characters enables her to present a more vivid, realistic and impressive picture of them. About this fabulous fusion between reality and imagination in her writings she herself says at one place:

In countless, small ways scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor character and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely imaginative or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life only very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situations around that while there is otherwise start from one real experience which continuously grows in their imagination. You use it as a base but don't confine yourself to it [i].

In her novels there are no storylines or even a palpable progress in the story in physical terms. There are certainly some mental and spiritual

developments and movements in the lives of the dramatic personas. Characters are revealed to us through their psychic's monologues, not through their actions as happens in traditional novels. This practice comes from writers like James Joyce and Virginia woolf, who writes about streams of consciousness. In such writers and in Anita Desai's works action is subordinate to psychology. Mostly the characters and events of Anita Desai's novels are based on day-to-day life but they are covered with such layers that we will never be able to perceive them fully and rightly until we have such piercing microscopic eyesight as Anita Desai has.

And fortunately she uses this of her ability to depict the higher level of life, that is emotional life rather than the political or social life of her characters. She very often sets her protagonist in a crucial situation and then tries to understand fully, the peculiar reactions of the protagonist. In this process Anita Desai reveals the inner climate of the sensibility of the characters. Her characters are humans with qualities of flesh and blood and thinking mind; still they failed to relate themselves with others emotionally and spiritually. They identify themselves aloof and alone. Such existentialism is the soul or the backbone of her themes – she herself accepted once that she could not write about perfectly natural human beings. This point is made clear by her own statement.

I don't think I could ever write about the mainstream, I would find that extremely boring everyone who flows along with the current, along with all the others. It seems to lack originality. The ones who interest me really are the ones who go against the current [ii].

A communication gap between her major characters like Maya, Nirode, Amla, Monisha and the remaining world is what makes them, separate from their company. There is an opaque wall between them and the rest of the world due to which they don't understand the ways of the world as the world also remain strange to them. In such loneliness and in this state of not being understood they want to escape from here but they have not second world to escape to and thus they are destined to suffer all these tortures. Their lives become exactly the same as Maya observes in *Cry, The Peacock*.

Long black bars at the window shuts us in, and the thin walls of the small room locked us all class together. There was something furtive about our movements, tenseness in our voices, as though we are performing a scene from a play in the confines of a case, for the benefit of a heavily breathing [iii].

The differences, between understandings, clashes and point of views towards various aspects of life, and dissimilarly between attitudes, resulting in unsatisfactory relationship in this false world, run through all the novels of Anita Desai in their own different ways.

All these clashes, differences and dissimilarity could be seen with a little effort in her novels *Voices in the city* [iv] and *Cry, the peacock*. The urban atmosphere affects the lives of all characters of both these novels and my endeavor here is to study the way by which city life has changed their lives and how it affects them. Along with these the kind of mental struggle they have to face in an atmosphere of alienation and disharmony station with such realities is also prime concern of present study. The first novel *Voices in the city* is all about the fatal and corrosive effect of the city life upon the Indian family.

The novel, in a third person voice, introduces us to three voices in the city and a fourth one in the hills of Kalimpony, respectively the voice of Nirode, Monisha, Amla and the mother. The first three characters present a live and critical commentary on the city life and various problems in the city life with which they come to face, in their day to day life. And in this way Anita Desai handled her motive to put forward the problems of city life very skillfully and successfully. As all these characters are flowing with the mainstream of life

before they come to the city. Calcutta, it is the city whose character and nature becomes more important for study. A.V. Krishna Rao also feels in the same way and even forces to give it the status of the hero of the novellas he says.

Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the invisible protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as *a force of creation, presentation and destruction ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali* [v].

The voices of the characters become more pathetic and appalling when they echo in the hollowness resulting from the life lived in Calcutta, which is however full with crowds but empty as far as intellectuals are concerned. The structure of novels is made of four sections separately named after four members of the family but the story of the novel if there is any, is of Nirode. The novel has an unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values. But the story is precisely a story of failures. Nirode's life is presented as a succession of failures, from bringing out the magazine voice and perpetrates till the end of the novel when he failed to save his sister Monisha. Monisha's life is also a failure as she is not able to relate herself to her in-laws family. Amla also fails to establish a healthy relation with her surroundings. And the mother's life is also a failure, as she could not provide a fertile atmosphere to her children to grow naturally. The theory and emphasis on failure goes to such an extent that even all minor characters like Jeat, Sonny, Aunt are also in some or the other way could be stated as failures.

Respite having significant and ample space for them, the characters are overshadowed by the barren and destructive city Calcutta. The city is not only in the background of the life history of all these characters but it also looms large over their heads. It effects the very way of their thinking and behaviour forwards infected the genuine human instincts of it's inhabitants and transform them into somewhat less sensitive creature, in such city they are forced to continue a life which is, "no normal healthy, read blooded life but one that was subterranean, under lit, stealthy and odors of morality" (*Voices in the city*, 150). In one line Amla states the kind of impact it brings on an outsider as she says "it conspired against all who wish to enjoy it." (*Voices in the city*, 152). Throughout the novel, the images of unmentionable dirt, of decay and death and dissolution underline the symbolic significances of the city of Calcutta. The city infect behaves as an evil some villain against whom all characters of the novel

are fighting a losing battle. A brief introduction of the monster is given by Nirode as:

Calcutta-Calcutta, lie the rattle of the reckless train; Calcutta, Calcutta the very pulse beat in its people's veined wrists. The streets were slaughtered sheep hung beside bright tinsel tassels to adorn oiled black braids, and a syphilitic beggar with his entire syphilitic family came rolling down on barrows like the servitors of an atomic blast, then paused to let a procession of beautifully laundered Bengalis in white carrying their marigold-decked Durga or Lakshmi or Saraswati or Kali on their shoulders down the Ganges, amidst drums and fevered chanting. In one shadowy doorway, an old crone lit a fire, mumbling. Beneath a brief canvas root a skeleton old gnome with electric white hair served kebabs, still sizzling on their red-hot spikier, first on an urchin who had his day's earnings knotted at his crotch. (*Voices in the city*, 42).

If Nirode presents the pangs and pains of the street life of Calcutta, Amla presents the hollowness of the lapper strata of the city. In Amla's so called sign society, everyone is successful but not in the terms and conditions in which one wants the success should come to him/her. By Monisha's character the traditional and rather conservative way of the city life is presented as it's overcrowded and over possessiveness leaves no space for anyone to breathe easily.

The novel puts forth a question about the kind of care and comport given to an individual in urban settings. Are they really of that type, which are needed by one? Anyone of the character is not devoid of love and comfort absolutely. Even the loneliest character of the novel, Nirode has his friends, his sister's and his mother. But the tragedy with him is that he wants understanding and support from them rather than the direct help which they provide him. In such an atmosphere of contrasts the novel moves like phantom figures in a hellish city, which entices and destroys all the beauty and significance of every theory. The novel seems like a warning note to make some progress in mental intellectual and psychological level along with economical and materialistic level in order to stop turning our cities into ghost chanted cities.

The novel *Cry, The Peacock* is also about disharmony in life, though the prime concern is about marital life. As in *Voices in the City*, clash is between the city and the family, here in the present novel, the clash is between a very sensitive and eras-ridden wife and her pragmatic husband. Maya, the wife, is a neurotic young woman, in search of true love and in this search she is gradually loosing hold over herself. Her problems are not of due to

immediate physical surroundings but are of psychological one. Her miseries are due to her own over consciousness, her very high intellectuality. Over sensitiveness brings for her, her plight. There is one more contrast which is behind the unhappiness of Maya. It is between the surroundings and the atmosphere she is given by the society, before and after her marriage, earlier she lived as a fairy in her father's home where she is taken care very sensitively but after marriage she has to face harsh realities of the world as her husband fails to provide her the kind of sensitive emotional attachment of which she used to be habitual in her father's home. Although Gautama is a faithful husband and he takes care of Maya but not in the way and to the degree which Maya wants but the tragedy deepens further when Maya fails to fulfill the demand for her needs.

If *Voices in the City* is a story of successive features, we can describe *Cry, the Peacock* as a tale of loss. Maya in the novel losses everything from her husband to her mental equilibrium and this phase of losing starts with in the very first chapter of the novel where Maya has to face the death of her pet dog Toto. Being a childless woman, she is very much attached to an affectionate towards her pet. And, in a way, it substitutes a child and a compensation for her as she says.

Childless woman do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance. (Cry, the Peacock, 10).

And this opening incident is again very relevant as it shown the contrast between the approaches of the husband and the wife towards one incident. Where Maya is grief-stricken by Toto's death, Gautama is quite indifferent to it. Being a pragmatic and realistic one he takes this incident very lightly and offers her a cup of tea with a promise to bring another dog for her. This cold presence is brooded over and severely criticized by Maya but she does not utter a word of it to Gautama. This attitude to Gautama and Communication gap between Maya and Gautma is rightly judged and understood by Usha Pathania as she says:

Marital relationships are established with the explicitly purpose or providing companionship to each other. However, the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautma [v].

This retreating reserve nature of Maya prolongs for a longtime but it also comes to an end when Maya turns and moves towards Gautama but this movement is so ferocious that it thrusts

Gautama down the roof top and Maya after this outburst returns to her father's home. But if one tries to calculate why Maya meets the end like this one will find that this is mainly due to her loneliness, her high servility, lack of proper response from Gautama's side, communication gap between her husband and herself. Anita Desai presents very appallingly and appealingly situation where only dangerous way occurs if proper and natural transformations are not accepted.

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