Ars Artium: An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed
Research Journal of English Studies and Culture
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 8, January 2020
Pp. 32-39
http://www.arsartium.org

The Conflict Between Traditional and Modern Awareness in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

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Abstract

In modern times, joint families are breaking up and sense of brotherhood among people is fading away. The result increases feeling of loneliness, alienation and selfishness among individuals.These are a few evils of our modern world. Novels of Anita Desai have the glimpses of tradition and modernity between which the Indian society is swinging. The Indian woman now presents herself at a new threshold, different from middle age. She is now a developed woman, competent and worldly, but when she sees her shadow, she identifies it with a stranger's face. She is not that woman who had waited in her dreams. What she looks, is a worldly woman bound with chains and shackles. These chains and shackles are the traditions which had made her to accept the compulsion of the given roles that she had never integrated into her personhood. She had been a daughter-in-law, wife and mother but not herself.

Keywords: Alienation, Tradition, Modernity, Middle age, Personhood.

Indian traditions are famous worldwide. They are the backbone of our society. Tradition has ramified meaning. It can be an idea, a practice, a belief coming down to us from generations. Sometimes they tend to be social, sometimes spiritual and moral and at the other time they encompass some blind faith or dogma.

Indians are famous for their tolerance. Their capacity to submit themselves to the fate, gives them power to face all calamity. Another quality of Indian tradition is that the society welcomes every person of any religion and of any country and even absorbs them in its fold, while in the western society, any outsider is looked down upon as a second citizen. In India, there is a joint-family system, in which people live together harmoniously shedding of their respective egos.

Apart from these commendable parts, some bad practices have crept into our social system, i.e. blind faiths or dogmas. Another malpractice in our tradition is the old fashioned *Zamindari* system, which creates a painful yawn of superiority and inferiority between individuals.

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Our ancient books and scriptures i.e, the *Ramayana* and the like, are constant source of inspiration of our society and they constantly remind of how a person should behave in a certain situation. These rules are part and parcel of our own tradition. Most of the rules are moral in nature. This heavy yoke of morality has been foisted upon Indian woman rather than the Indian man.

Tradition says that a woman should regard her husband as her master (Nowhere in the entire world can we find such relationship of a master and servant between two sexes). She should submit to his wishes always – be it a matter of sex or any other matter. Many Indian festivals have come down to us in the form of traditions. A Perfect Indian woman is expected to keep fasts for the long life of her husband on the festivals like *'Karwachauth'* or *'Vat Savitri Vrata'*. All such customs are perhaps to buckle down woman, while man is totally free from all such restrictions. Though there are some rules laid down for the men also, yet these are seldom given heed to or observed.

On the other hand, modernity can be a state of mind where one rejects old dogmas and faith. Present day's social traditions are somehow more or less under the western influence. In the modern world of industrial growth people have developed a flexible bent of mind. They do not follow traditions with blind faith but test them on the touchstone of their reasoning. Women specially have questioned the routine roles attributed to them – of motherhood, of wifehood, etc. They do not want themselves to get fixed into any type of rigid slot. Realizing one's individuality is modernism on mental level, Indian men on their part have started treating woman as an individual and his partner.

After a large psychic travel, some women have arrived at this new threshold. The soul of woman is tensile, and resilient, having travelled through the endless and arid wastes of social and psychological space. In this process she has attempted to search the completeness of the self which is a spirit of human existence. Every society and culture has some women who have crossed this threshold and ascertained a place. These women are the pioneers who add something more wholesome and dignified and graceful than before.

Novels of Anita Desai have the glimpses of tradition and modernity between which the Indian society swings. Basically, the protagonists of Anita Desai appear with tragedy. They are weak characters, they fail to overpower their surroundings and overthrow their familiar terms and society. They seem psychologically disturbed, melancholic, self-centered and hesitated in their manners and expression. They do not have the determination and power of will to pursue a definite line of action. They are introvert characters, temporarily fallen into a state of obsessiveness of sensation in which again the association of ideas is not directed and controlled by a sense for conduct. The novelist justifies her selection of solitary and introspective characters in the following words:

> Well, I think, solitary and introspective people are always very aware of living on the brink. I suppose every one of us is in a sense of aware of living on the brink. Anyone of us might one day have an experience which may push one

> over, but perhaps my introspective characters are more aware than others are of what lies on the other side. (Desai 1987:10)

In Anita Desai's novels, the characters create their own private world and restrain it with wonder, sublimity or evil figures. A critical study of her novels reminds of Jung's observation and affirms the fact that the activation of fantasies is "a process that occurs when consciousness finds itself in a critical situation." (Jung 22)

Anita Desai's protagonists, in their phrase of alienation, distress and fantasy play three major acts of escape, of consolation and a moral and psychological support.

In Voices in the City, Monisha does not have evident notion of her emotional needs and enjoys her intellectual self. She lives in the world of imagination and istotally disregarded of middle class values and traditions. Her incapability to adjust with her in-laws, marital distress with Jiban and her search for meaningful human relationship, at times, lead to mysterious thoughts. She identifies her superiority over her surroundings. Her collection of books instead of saris in the almirah resembles the much needed feeling of importance. The mysterious attitude horrifies Kalyanidi, but Monisha gets a vicarious pleasure by thinking. "I see, that of course she cannot know that there is nothing to laugh at in Kafka and Hopkins or Dostoyevsky or my Russian or French or Sanskrit dictionaries." (116)

Monishais in need of an image for herself. She is fond of reading many famous writers' works. But this attempt of wish fulfilment results in losing consciousness of her real identity. Her desire for supremacy and privacy of the self does not let her comprehend the actual external reality. The outer world seems to her like a stage and she identifies herself as an actress, playing different roles according to the need of her situation. Her ideas are originated spontaneously in response to her conscious and unconscious emotions and feelings.

Monisha's extreme interest in fantasy reveals her fascination for darkness between the stars, which she signifies as merely things on earth that can comfort:

> … me rub a balm into my wounds, into my throbbing head, and bring me this coolness, this stillness, this interval of peace. Sleep has nightmares. This empty darkness has not so much as a fantasy dream. It is one until waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs. (138)

Such notions express Monisha's inner struggle against loneliness, depression and her fear of harsh reality of life.

The younger sister of Monisha, Amla, is the main attraction of this novel. At the beginning, Amla has excited notions about Calcutta but later she signifies that there is no charm and pleasure in this city. Psychologically, she is a wise personality of a rebellious young woman and she is curious to govern her life and wants to triumph over every obstacle. Her ambitiousness enforces her through different psychic values till she achieves her real identity. Amla's representation into a spontaneous woman denotes her developing capability. Monisha's suicide reveals to her the tragedy of the lost self. But Amla realizes as she would not allow herself to get lost like her sister, "she knew that Monisha's death has pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself" (248). Monisha's death becomes the beginning point of her

awakening. This accident ultimately provides her with the appropriate views of reality. Through these views she becomes bewildered and identifies with self-idealization.

The inequality in Amla's idealized personality and reality reflect her two tendencies – the regression and the progression. Her attitude expresses her inner conflicts and need of the external support to develop. Due to unhappiness at home, erotic instincts develop in her. She continuously needs enlargement from others to compensate her essential desires with her imposing self. What her achieves in Calcutta cannot satisfy her inordinate ambition, and her anxieties increase. She is irritated till she gets love from Dharma. This diversion gives her bliss and joy. She comes out from her bad dreams. However, very soon her desires diminish her relationship with Dharma. Then she becomes violent. She realizes that her pride is hurt. Basically, she examines that her suffering has started after the death of her elder sister, Monisha. Gradually, she feels maturity in her behaviour.

Amla's real personality is to govern her own values and desires. She identifies herself as a more superior being, capable to achieve her path through life without being gloomy like Nirode and destructive like Monisha. She is aware of the "cold, frosty love of power" (109) inherent from her mother, and she quietly makes efforts to achieve glory, fame and self-satisfaction. Her eagerness and liveliness are different from her brother and sister who have lost their all faith. Amla has come to Calcutta with a target to become a professional artist. She is determined to enjoy the city, her new job and her independence, "Calcutta does not oppress me in the least…It excites me" (142), she tells Aunt Lila consciously. Primarily, after Nirode's and Monisha's complicated personalities, the third part of the novel expresses Amla's freshness and then soon frustration.

Basically, Amla's despairs are concerned to the effect of the monstrous city on a sensitive soul. Anita Desai declares in an interview with R. K. Shrivastava: "The powerful impression the city created on me." (Srivastava 26) The joys and sorrows are represented in this novel and also the beauty and ugliness of Calcutta. The novelist affirms that she has tried to represent the duality of human activity, she is sure that there is much more about the modern awareness of the traditions. Amla feels the influence of Calcutta. In her distress, she feels that it is a horrible city where one cannot be one's self. Amla has to hide her paintings to guard them as a secret. She tells Nirode:

> I have to keep things secret in this horrible city you told me so wonderful, such a challenge. If I were back in Kalimpong, I wouldn't have minded showing them to you, I should have liked to show them to you. But here, here ... here one must hide such things, cover up their weaknesses, protect their fragility, even destroy them if one doesn't want to see them get covered with filth and blood and rot. Nothing delicate can survive this (182).

Being a liberated and intelligent woman, Amla wishes as Aunt Lila puts it, "something greater than pleasure alone – or the security of marriage alone something more rare, more responsible" (145). Infact, Amla's search is directed towards this desire. She wishes to triumph all fears and struggles of life so as to give meaning to

her life. The self-confidence and will-power with which Amlalives in Calcutta denote her capability to enjoy a blissful life. Aunt Lila admires it, "That's the spirit in which to start your career, my girl. That's what I like to see in young spirit." (142) Amla's behaviour gives her an abundance of light-heartedness. Jit once remarks that she has a destructive quality in her. Her own unconquerability and her notions tell that there is nothing she cannot win. She is quite conscious of her youth and beauty. She knows herself that she can impress anyone and she does it successfully. It proves from the impressions she has created on Jit, Mr. Basu and even on the determined and alienated Dharma. In fact, it gratifies her pride to be the centre of attraction because it identifies her uniqueness. Karen Horney discusses this attitude and he points out that this can be termed as *'narcissism'* (Horney 123). Narcissism does not simply mean an egocentric love of oneself. According to Horney's theory, a narcissist wins early distinctions and sometimes, it is the favoured and admired child. Although he shows much optimism, buoyancy and self-confidence, he is basically a pessimist and suffers dejection. In Amla's attitude optimism and pessimism, joy and despair appear equally. When she moves optimistically towards life, apparently happy and carefree, there is a "giant exhaustion growing and swelling inside her, of a feeling of sick apprehension and despair overwhelms her" (167). Two opposite emotions toss her. On the one side, she is drawn by the pleasures of her life in Calcutta life, on the other, she is repelled and feels that pleasure is the worst sensation in this city; it has lost its glamour, freshness and utility. Symbolically, at the party all the people in that congested room appear to her as fishes. This resembles the reality of the human situation. At the same party, Jit remarks that Amla and her siblings involve themselves in tragedies of their own making and reach the dead end to find some solution:

> I think you all involve yourselves in the tragedies of your own making. I think you all drive yourselves deliberately into that dead end where you imagine you will find some divine solution. But there is none, not in a life time, all of us discover that and we force ourselves to turn and take another road (178).

In order to come out from his loneliness and insecurity, a person abandons his individuality of the self and diminishes his worries. Amla feels aloof and despair and derives from her continuous but unconscious search to protect her instinctive life from impoverishment. Her quest is directed towards creativity.

In changing from commercial art to pure art, Amla shows her aesthetic inclination. Her profession is a union of commerce and art, and overthrows the very sense of creativity and beauty. In it the aesthetic and the materialistic are juxtaposed in a simultaneity which forbids communication at the deeper planes of consciousness. Amla leads to painting again and again, trying to change her conflicts into art. Her occupation is the routine, normal, pedestrian activity. It does not provide her the excitement and instincts of the glorious moments of creativity. Horrified by it she inclines towards the painting, trees, insects, birds, flowers: 'nonsense rhyme' in Bengali on them. She delights these moments of peace. This can be identified as a short phrase of 'peak experience', when she has lost all self-consciousness and has completely absorbed in non-self.

Anita Desai illustrates her condition lyrically:

> She was frowning in an excess of care, hesitation and mother love over this grackle, patter-footed, whisper voiced little world that seemed to have shot down the central channel of a smooth, green plantain leaf, on a stream of rainwater, to land with a splash on her window-sill, when Nirode came in (181).

Amla's renewed vision is achieved through the instrumental relationship with Dharma. Even after her first meeting with Dharma, Amla reorients herself. Modeling for him makes her "translucent with joy and over flowing with a sense of love and reward" (210). Her real self, obscured so far by her ambitious self, tries to emerge. Anita Desai presents it symbolically as the warm crawling out of Amla's ring in dreams. Dharma paints the ring on her finger with the worm creeping "of her nightmare to push its insidious head out of the painted stone and arouse, in the painted Amla, that very turbulence of disgust, revulsion and fear that so often assailed the dreaming Amla" (213). This shows awe of real self. Dharma's love and art influence her. She correlates the self and the world and overcomes her anxiety. The novelist describes Amla's experiences as the excess of love, as a perfection in which "lay all the joy and the sense of being the right person in the right place that love should have made diffuse and scattered gently through the season" (217).

The relationship of Amla and Dharma is not well described in the novel. It is just exploration of reality and hallucination, creating a doubtful situation in which Dharma cannot give her anything actual or substantial. For the dreaming Amla, reality is enchanting but it checks her. She, the love-torn maiden, symbolized by the arching palms, is unable to meet her sparkling into water. This denotes, by implication, the impossibility of being and living her pompous individuality. It denotes that she has to find her real identity, however, horrified she may be of it. This happens at the unconscious level.

Amla's escaping from Dharma represents as ambiguous as her fondness for him. But she feels hurt to learn of Dharma's hard heartedness towards his only daughter and that she leaves him in disgust. Amla's attitude expresses that the causes for her decision to leave Dharma are not so common. Amla is specially anguished by her own complications – her pride and irritability. Pride, because she is so important in his life as to awaken his inactive talents. Irritability, because he is lost in his art and is diverted from her. These conflicts are uncontrolled and repudiate in the face of reality.

Amla searches the reasons of callousness of Dharma towards his daughter. When she turns out of his protective, he irritates with a feeling of helplessness and impotence. He tells Amla that he did not wish his daughter to grow, "I wanted her the same, always the same, beside me" (227). When she makes efforts out of his hold to marry a cousin, he becomes irritated, threatens her and in an attempt to save himself from the attack of self-hate disclaims his isolated areas, away from the city. This supplies his ego.

When Amla comes back again, she realizes him as an erring mortal and the identity she has of him as someone mysterious and forbidding is shattered. If he could neglect his daughter, he could ignore her also from his life. His perplexity towards his

profession is an affirmation that she has outlived her utility for him. Amla fears the truth because truth carries with it responsibilities and it is an anxiety producing state. The simplest course is to avoid the awareness of truth. The truth unfolds on her with liberty: that she is crushing horrifying grounds, that Dharma is committed to his wife and society, that he is a conformist, not possessing the power to enrich her life by providing her the joy of love. Aunt Lila's remark hurts her pride that Dharma was 'using' something in her.

Amla rejects Dharma. She tears up the invitation to Dharma's exhibition and goes with Jit for horse-race. This is her regression choice. It is a movement backward and her sick attitude of life symbolizes as a gamble. Then she realizes the bare reality-death. She also analyses the reality of life – life is a race, one has to participate in it and strive to win. A person who spoils and falls remains an 'outsider', occupied by the powers of self-hate, alienation, and self-destruction. In the shade of death she searches the value of life. She decides for progression. This is an eloquent move towards self-realization. Amla is confused between the pressures of her obsessive acts and her affirmative will-power. Her thinking to and fro indicates her doubts. As Nirode realizes in the novel, journey leads to an expanse of power of mind and body. Human capacity lies in making the journey worth and expansive. Amla clutches her actual self and provides the dignity she discloses.

The mother of Monisha, Amla and Nirode, repents for having come away to Kalimpong leaving her children in the monstrous city of Calcutta. The city of Calcutta has separated the mother from her children. She repents for not staying in Calcutta and expresses her grief at the rough life her children live in the metropolis, away from her:

> Now I know I made the decisions and changes too abruptly without thinking clearly. Here's Monisha writing such detailed rot about her impossible family – as though she had actually immense herself in it, or as though it were a theatre to her, I cannot really tell. And Nirode, mute and in exile ... he must be living a sordid existence. I cannot bear thinking of it. And now Arun's gone from us to his blue eyed Nurse Agnes and they will never come to me as son and daughter. If they come, they will come as strangers (201-202).

Anita Desai is one of those novelists who have observed the vitality and changing roles of contemporary Indian women. Almost all of her women protagonists are conscious for their identity according to their own expectation and they prove that they are the dominant figures of their own areas. The frame and notions of Anita Desai aims at assessing her novels in the atmosphere of a shifting sensibilities and changing psychology. At present India is moving from a conservative and traditional social order to a liberal and open socio-cultural ethos. But it does not mean that her novels are only sociological documents or the reflections of Indian realities. Obviously, she is an artist responding to the basic questions of human existence and individuality. Anita Desai's attention is to the sufferings of the individual in relation to social forces that try to weaken human identity. She forces the study of the individual as an aggregate of the psychic and emotional instincts leads of characters.

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