

Analysis of Voices in the City: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

Anita Desai, a great analyst of human mind portrays her characters with great tenacity. She presents a panorama of vivid, realistic and appealing portraits of characters with all their weaknesses and potentialities. They are interested in life with it hopes but suffers dejection. So they live either in illusion or show their reluctance to face reality. She deploys characters having acute sensitivity to all its sordidness and at the same time expresses the magnificence underlying the sorriest things. Not only her women characters but sometimes men are also shown caught in the labyrinth of inner and outer reality. Such male characters also prefer alienation from society and people. They suffer from neurotic sensibility. Like female characters their consciousness is often tormented or darkened by fear and they want to escape from reality.

Key words: Vindictive, Neurotic pride, Compulsive idealism, Escapism

Voices in the City is the second novel of Anita Desai. Published in 1965 the novel won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1978. The city of Calcutta is at the centre of the novel. The city seems to shape the character. As the city is famous for its noise, crowd, frenzied atmosphere; the characters of the narrative also shown suffering from inner turmoil. Nirode is the chief protagonist of *Voices in the City*. He is alone despite his continuous search for connection. He strives to obtain an abiding meaning in life. However he achieves nothing and therefore abuses his intellect and maintains an attitude of resignation.

According to D. S. Maini:

‘He is caught in a kind of intellectual vice....There is something hollow, something phoney about his protestations and diatribes.’ (POAD, p. 24)

In fact he does not strive for freedom but adopt a means of escapism and alienates himself from his the society. He accepts neurotic values which are destructive for normal human development. Causes of his self-alienation lie in his childhood upbringings. He always faces open hostility and contempt between his parents. Their personal prejudices, resentments and contempt, malice seep deep into the minds of their children. Nirode as the eldest son is the worst sufferer of such malice. Along with resentment he also experiences neglect and partiality between the siblings. This becomes the cause of hate between the siblings. Gradually he starts losing inner strength and confidence. His father always neglects him and shows confidence in Arun, his younger brother. Due to this malice he is ‘corroded with hate’ (VC, p. 7) for Arun. The level of bias is so visible that Amla, the youngest of them also notices it and tells

Dharma that her father is 'imperiously unfair' (VC, p. 207) to Nirode.

Children who are neglected by parents lose inner strength and adopt a general philosophy of moving away from others. They shut others from their life and become self detached. Their self-esteem is replaced by self-pity. Nirode too feels solace in his failures and detachment. At the same time he becomes arrogant and this expansive drive proves stronger. As a result he starts taking pride in himself and comes to believe that he has 'done with everything....given up talking and telling.' (VC, p. 130) However in real life he realizes that he is not better than his brother Arun either in academics or in extracurricular activities. This feeling of inferiority rooted in his mind and he feels humiliated and unwanted. He suffers a lot. In order to overcome the conflict and inadequacy, he chooses a way of running away from home several times just to obtain attention. Every time he is searched and brought home. This searching and bringing back home elevates his position in his mind. Thus he feels secure, wanted and this feeling relieves his anxiety.

Looking through a feminist perspective at any work, we always find a victim who is a victim of circumstances and portrayed as a pathetic figure. The story is the record of their psychic turmoil. The victimization gives rise to frustration. When the psychological freedom is shattered, they become frustrated and suffer from existential crisis. Due to the situation in which they are placed sometimes by fate or family they tend to show hysteric behavior and become sarcastic. To get relief from the stress they sometime opt the way of escape. An escapist always relieves their burden by

idealizing themselves, living in the world of imagination and fancy and becomes stoic. An escapist always show the signs of neurotic anxiety and choose to remain aloof from family and society and enjoys the glory of living lonely. Self-alienated people suffer from a complex and glorify their detachment.

An aggressive child generally achieves the capacity to endure pain and fight. The aggressive-vindictive personality of Nirode delineates in his adult character. He is conscious of his self-inflicted personality yet possesses pride in his capacity to fight and endure. However, he is a troubled fellow with an obvious desire for failure. He does not have deep aspirations of a healthy man. He does not long for and attempt for a perpetual rise from lower to the higher. Instead he longs to fall deep down the bottomless rock. He wants to start a journey just to escape from worldly affairs but never makes an effort.

As the novelist points out:

The suitcase is never packed, the tickets never purchased, and the ship sails, leaving one ensnared in the net of sleep. He was not one of those born with a destination balanced like a boiled egg upon a silver spoon in his mouth. He was merely a traveler and the only reasonable thing to do was to accept the journeying as meaningful in itself. (VC, p. 10)

An escapist always relieves their burden from idealizing themselves. This is actually a psychological disorder which is often termed as compulsive-idealism or self-actualization. It works at the unconscious level. A victim of neurosis wants to uplift their position in their own eyes and gains it

by forming and idealized self image. It is not a real self. They enjoy living in a world of imagination and fantasy.

According to Rollo May:

‘Human wish is the beginning of orienting ourselves to the future, an admission that we want the future to be such and such; it is a capacity to reach down deep into ourselves with a longing to change the future.’ (LW, p. 211)

Nirode also idealizes himself in two images, one, that of an independent person free from all bondages and the second of a hero who could rise again in spite of his failure. An escapist always suffers from emptiness and a vacuum in their life and finds aloneness as the only remedy for their suffering. For Nirode;

‘aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring.’ (VC, p. 24)

As a hero in his idealized self image Nirode sees himself as a Sisyphus, the king of Corinth, infamous for his trickery and is punished by Zeus of rolling the boulder uphill. He also sees the picture of Camus who presents the Myth of Sisyphus. In Camus’ view, our actions are also as meaningless and fruitless just like Sisyphus’ boulder-rolling. He tells David:

I want to move from failure to 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 descent quickly. (VC, p. 40)

The figures of Sisyphus and Camus seem to work in his subconscious. As an isolated human, who is dissatisfied with family and society seeks solace in the self-conceived world of imagination. The real self is always jolted by the glorified self image. He feels that it is necessary to remain secretive if one want to live comfortably. He tells Monisha, his sister that:

‘I made myself inferior to all these frauds by making an attempt to make them read anything I’d written. Anything that is of value to oneself should be kept Great Secret.’ (VC, p. 132)

He shares the same idea of being secretive to his younger sister Amla.

‘...the only thing I wanted to protect, what any sane man needs protect, is his conscience, or as I do, or anything- but there must be this essence inside you, and you must keep it secret in order to keep it-bearable. Mixing, diluting, muddying it—that’s the disease.’ (VC, p. 184)

In his isolated world he feels secure, self-sufficient, successful and independent individual. This type of compulsive idealization results in repulsion for all normal and friendly relations. This further leads to arrogant-vindictiveness. Whenever they fail to achieve anything they start humiliating others and inflict pain in them. Thus they achieve a sense of achievement by showing disrespect for others. To satisfy their super ego and to preserve the self, they insult others. In case of Nirode, he is jealous of Arun for being successful. He envies everyone who follows a normal routine.

Revulsion 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 clumsy 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 crawling train, above the painted ship on the sluggish river, intoxicatingly light and free and powerful. (VC, p. 10)

He laughs at Arun and glorifies his detachment. He suffers from a complex and due to the idealized self image does not want to work under any master and follow rules and regulations. Due to this super ego he quits his job with a newspaper '*Patrika*'. His neurotic urge is stronger than his need to earn money. He admits:

It is 'impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, by his orders, at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those automatons at the top—I loathe their superciliousness, their blindness.' (VC, p. 18)

According to psychologists, people suffering from neurotic disorder can work better alone. In case of Nirode, he fills his narcissism by starting a magazine entitled '*Voice*'. His mother provides him all sorts of help and monetary assistance for this venture. Magazine requires communications and competitiveness which is lacking in Nirode. His habit of withdrawal forbids him from making contacts. Finally Nirode abandons it and takes a task of writing a play. This idea also does not succeed because of his inability to fulfill demands of time. His neurotic pressure overpowers his will and he becomes more inert and more reluctant to start any venture. Eventually he suffers from psychosis a severe mental

disorder in which thought and emotions are so impaired that contact is lost with external reality. When thought and emotions are severely impaired, the most urgent need of a neurotic is to rise in his own eyes. This act of rising high results in pride system. This further gives birth to pride system. Here self-esteem is replaced by self-pity. They start taking pride in the detachment and prefer to stay distinct from the ordinary people. Nirode is a victim of neurosis and wants to uplift his position in his own eyes. He gains it by rejecting the help from his mother and Lila, Jin and some of his friends. He is a hero in his idealized self so he cannot tolerate any suggestions or opinions given of others. His reactions to even ordinary situations are perplexing. High pride tends to convert into cynicism. This works at the unconscious level. Here they project an exaggerated view of their sufferings because of the fear of left alone. They choose weaker target to vent the rage, pain and frustration. When the vent is spent, their purview is cleared. According to psychologists, such persons achieve vindictive triumph by showing disregard for others. In normal human relations, vengeance and triumph are often checked by three factors: love, fear and self-preservation. When these checks are; 'malfunctioning, the vindictiveness involve the total personality- thereby becoming a kind of integrating force, and sway it altogether in the one direction of vengeance and triumph.' (NHG, p. 198)

In Nirode's case these three factors are absent in his life. So to satisfy his super-ego and to preserve his self; he humiliates others and feels triumphant. Prominent victims of his humiliation are Sonny, David and Jit. Jit

belongs to strata of society which Nirode pretends to hate but unconsciously yearns for. Once under the influence of liquor, Jit comes out with a surprising revelation. He tells Nirode:

‘You rant against us precisely because you realize our danger -we entice you. We hover in the foreground like an oasis-and once you’ve done your little stint of adventuring in the desert, you’ll get very thirsty. So thirsty you will drink anything-anything that resembles the patriarchal security and comfort and the matriarchal indulgence that you broke away from, so boldly and recklessly.’ (VC, pp. 97-98)

Nirode cannot endure this harsh reality. This further gives birth to pride system. Here self-esteem is replaced by self-pity. They start taking pride in the detachment and prefer to stay distinct from the ordinary people. Furthermore family tragedy gives him an opportunity to ponder, introspect and have a glimpse of his inner self. Monisha’s suicide and mother’s behavior affect him. He discovers that he too is vulnerable. He also possesses deeper feelings for the family and he is not altogether immune from the ‘torment of conscience’. He finds himself in a

‘drugged, dull sleep in which he had rocked obliviously for so many years.....scornful of his success, stagnant and dehydrated of all ambition and dehydrated of all ambitions, communion, relationship, joy and responsibility’. (VC, p. 250)

This awakening of consciousness makes a positive effect on him. He wants to experience the feeling of love and affection. According to Horney the real suffering has a

therapeutic effect on an individual; it has the strength to ‘broaden and deepen our range of feelings and to open our hearts for the sufferings of others.’ (NHG, p.163)

In psychological context this situation is called as purgation of emotion. It gives scope for self-examination. It helps a person to liberate from neurotic compulsion. When they are liberated from neurotic compulsion, their perception becomes enlarged. In case of Nirode, the revelation makes him sympathize with Amla and Aunt Lila in their suffering. He reaches out to them and is filled with care and 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. (VC, p. 248)

But this experience does not last long. He suffers from inner and outer conflict. Moreover, the rejection of his mother makes a severe blow on his pride.

According to Bande Usha:

‘Self-contempt and self-hate grip him. Their mother accepts Monisha’s death stoically. She has achieved what Nirode has failed to. He hates his mother for it and then directs this despise towards himself. Severe self-hate leads to self-destructive tendencies.’ (TNAD, p. 87)

He sees the emergence of mother Kali, a goddess of destruction as well as procreation in his psyche. His mind is filled with fear of death. He tells Amla that;

'I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach-death, Kali...while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute, and also closer and closer to my death. ' (VC, p. 256)

There is continuous struggle between his real and idealized self. The convergence of his mother and image of Kali in his mind depicts the state of his withered psyche. Joseph Campbell, in his work, '*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*' points out that the pattern of logic of myths and dreams is correlating. It is 'symbolic expression...given to the unconscious drives, fears and tensions that underlie the conscious part of human behavior.' (THTF, p. 256)

Nirode fails to bring all these psychic energies into action. In his childhood he was attached to his mother and possessed a great adoration for his mother. But as a grownup he hates his mother specifically for her supposed relation with Major Chadha. He held her responsible for his fathers' death and always refers to her as 'she-cannibal' or 'the cobra' who swallowed his father. As a child he craves for security which he gets from his mother. After his father's death he notices a change in her behavior. She often Works Cited.

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favours Major Chadha. He becomes complete desolate and struggles for his cultural identity. He identifies himself with his father. In his dream also he often sees, 'a nicotine tinged hand' protecting him from the wild wind. In his unconscious state his father always remains a protective figure. He dreams of being on the wrong side of the barbed wire fence with his father while his mother on the safe side. A fear that she killed his father and will kill him too engrossed his mind. The spoilt behavior and conduct of his mother has shattered his moral and emotional standards. He feels lonely and unwanted. The feeling of losing her horrifies him. Gradually the feeling of emotional attachment is replaced with rage. Finally when mother rejects him, he loses faith in love. He tells Amla, 'Amla, I know her now. She is Kali, the goddess and the demons are one.' (VC, p.263)

A psychological analysis of Nirode's character reveals clearly that he is suffering from neurotic anxiety and existential crisis. Sometimes he presents himself as an idealized being and at other times wants to escape from the situation. His reactions to the situations arise from his mental sickness which may be termed as disintegration of personality.