

## Initiative in the Novel *Voices in the City* of Anita Desai: Freedom in Life

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### Abstract

*Voices in the City* of Anita Desai, is a novel which discusses the idea of freedom in life. The idea of freedom in life is initiative in the subjective novel, *Voices in the City* of Anita Desai which eventually emerges as the recurrent theme. The novel in stream of consciousness technique delineates the struggle of the people with brutal forces. The novel in discussion also focuses on human relationship and their freedom of life in its real but inner perspective. The people, characters, in the novel seem to be products of the social ethos which get subjective. The movements and patterns both physical as well as mental get self-analytical but introspective. Therefore, the character's individual quest for a personal meaning in life or can be called freedom in life, is the recurrent theme of the novel in discussion *Voices in the City* which happens to be unavoidable interest of the novelist, Anita Desai. The investigation, 'how the protagonists in the novel of discussion try to make their lives significant, meaningful and ambitious by struggling with the conflicts'. The paper researches the struggle for freedom in life in the novel, *Voices in the City*.

A comprehensible and new vision of life has been presented in the novel where new visualization of Indian life has emerged as an idea in this novel, *Voices in the City*. These voices are the different visions of life which have been put into due attention. Through these visions, a concept of freedom in life incorporates itself in the novel, which gives way to forceful characterization of the novel rather than plot construction. The paper investigates three aspects of the novel, *Voices in the City*. It tells about the voices of the characters, their importance and subtleties in the novels, strong characterization as well as freedom of creativity which is the subjectivity and sensibility of the novel. The novel is narration and exploration of new mood. The denial of life's realities has been vividly shown effortlessly. A new way has been suggested, too, in a very clear manner. It's against the dry intellectuality. It is a vivid description of new mood, new sensibility of new generation where, "feelings run riot, and a new mood—'melting' mood of heightened sensibility—should arise in consequence" (Hudson, p. 157). The research has been aimed at presenting the delicacies as well as the obvious feelings towards life and their experiences in individual way which obviously achieves a harmonious effect in the novel, *Voices in the City* written by Anita Desai. It presents a "powerful articulation" (Iyengar, p. 470).

**Keywords:** concept, existence, freedom, idea, initiative, intellectuality introspective, realities, sensibility, subjective, theme, vision

### 1. Introduction and Discussions

Mrs. Anita Desai appears to be an original fiction-writer who can be seen, undoubtedly, in the tradition of English novels, especially, Indian writing in English. She is a challenging novelist, too. She is undoubtedly an inimitable fiction writer. She is a natural narrator of stories. "Anita Desai is an original talent that has the courage to go her own way, and her two novels carry a burden of rich promises as well as the marks of present achievement."

Anita Desai is a subjective writer and hence, she starts writing and gradually, but very slowly, the novel starts taking its own course, its distinct plot. It is purely a world of her own where experiences make her travel through the world of her own. Yet, the readers find a charm and interest to go through the novel to experience the same feelings and emotions which she felt "The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions ..." The technique which Anita Desai has applied in the novel of discussion is new to the world of Indian writings. The

stream of consciousness is very much unknown to the subcontinent writers. It has never been tried, and never been used.

The skill of narration, the mode and style of Mrs. Desai's fictions are out rightly revealed through the characters of her novels. And so is the case with the novel in discussion. The characters in this novel have been made free to act spontaneously, think in their own social norms and way, and seek very normal way of existence. The form of the novel tells about the meaning of life. And, this is the idea of life. Hence, recurring themes of freedom of life shine here and there, and time to time. A perusal of the novel in question does give us enough hints that Mrs. Desai has a clear and comprehensive idea of life, the world and the world of her characters. She obviously tells about the vision of life, the idea of living through her characters. The characters in the novel, "Voices in the City" share perceptions to set out in search of meaning. She regards freedom as one of the realities of life in the same way as Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) believes in fidelity, and as Henry James (1843-1916) regards man's desire to live as the great truth of life, or as Hardy holds the injustice of life the cruelty of blind fate destroying innocent and guilty alike, or as William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) thinks that man is in constant search for freedom from bondage of all kinds.

It has been found that a novelist either deals with the external reality of life or with inner reality of life. These are the two different methods which novelist usually adopt. However, they differ in their method of treatment of their characters. And, this treatment of characters distinguishes one novelist from the others. The novelist can bring together a series of incidents and a variety of characters, not knit together into a compact whole, but loosely bunched. In *Voices in the City*, the novelist, Anita Desai sees life from a particular perspective. She, a product of the age, is found characterized by complexity, employs a new device, stream of consciousness, in her novel of discussion. It's an entirely a new technique for any novelists in the subcontinent. This new technique enables her to explore the inner actions as well as the inner natures of the character of her novel. She is a James Joyce in the novel in discussion.

The novel, *Voices in the City* portrays Nirode, the protagonist of the novel, in search of the meaning of life when he utters at the suicide of his sister, "Is this what my life is then, my life?" and again he speaks about the meaning of his unambiguous life and says, "only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution?" So life requires all the bondages broken, a freedom which could solve the puzzle which recurs again and again to agonize it. He is 'like a broken bird' which his sister "saw in the aviary".

To be more precise, Mrs. Desai is quite often at showing and dealing with existential problems and predicaments in the novel. She appears to be primarily interested in exploring the interiors of the characters and delving deep into their psychic elements. Mrs. Desai has tried her best to handle the raw materials of life in the novel, *Voices in the City*. She has tried to put the raw materials, her characters in the novel, into a pattern and design which could suit her delineation of the fabrics of her story-telling techniques. I think she has tried experimenting the stream of consciousness technique in her novels to bring about the meaning of life as vital. She seems to be putting relevance to life with its hopes, purpose and its wholeness from frustration, negations and rejections. She comes out giving shape to the chaotic flow of events as she regards herself as concerned with the art of giving shape and meaning to life. She says about her characters in an interview, "I am interested in characters...but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair" (Dalmia, p. 13) makes it crystal clear that she is interested in the delineations of her characters rather than of plot. She is unique, I think, in experimenting the new way of narration and hence, she is different from the traditional fiction writers of India. She stands tall among the Indian subcontinent novelists, and her technique of the stream of consciousness brings her name and fame. I think she is Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) of India as she is very close to her in the realm of story-telling technique and comprehensively presenting characters. The narration flows, and the plot takes its shape in the novel. Therefore, the tag "Anita Desai is Indian Virginia Woolf" fits justified.

The protagonist of the novel, Nirode, has been portrayed struggling throughout the novel. Idea of living a free and sensible life has been his yearning. He dreams of a beautiful and successful life. He is, however, "anonymous". "He is a shabby clerk on a newspaper but calls himself a journalist. That's fine, a crisp and jaunty word. But the dismal truth was that all he did was "cut and paste". The city, Kolkata, presses down on all sides as Nirode contemplates leaving away from it all. He thinks of "escape", escape. He attempted once but failed. Now, at twenty -four he is still trying to escape. He says, "I haven't even begun yet". What he wants from life? That's the question. The novel gets ahead and the readers get the answer which doesn't surprise them because it's a searching note which concludes the idea of living a life and existence. He doesn't want more, doesn't require much. However, what he yearns.... doesn't get in full. He covets for long He says coldly and decisively, "three drinks a night and a room of his own—three drinks for inspiration...and a room in which to write it". The interior of Nirode is completely vented out. The frustration gets passage and craving for just a simple life is

portrayed in a very justified and subjective manner. The psychic delineation of Nirode's desires touch the very hearts and minds of the readers. They get struck as well as astonished. Dr. Gajendra Kumar portrays the character of Nirode in these words, *Voices in the City: A Tour de Horizon of existentialist philosophy, Critical Theory and the Novels of Anita Desai* that *Voices in the City* sketches the spiritual odyssey of a world-weary, lean and hungry looking journalist named Nirode, doomed to reside in Calcutta, (Kolkata) "the city of death" (Kumar, p. 6).

Nirode's longing sounds like a principled one. It seems that he is a prince and his longing matches with it. Now, a hope takes a shape. Hope for living a life gets meaningful when he says strongly that he is determined to "get it", and not here and there but "at Chowringhee" with its festoons of blue street lights. He is so determined that he lifts his hand and says, "I'll have it—you'll see how I get it!" The readers find him struggling with life. He lives at the top of a decrepit old building which is just a tin shed. He passes a miserable life. He tries many things, yet fails every time. His mother is a rich lady but he doesn't want any help from her as she lives with Mr. Chadha in Kalimpong. Nirode's self is a wounded one and he wants to escape from this life to an ideal living.

Nirode wants to "escape"; but his journey is "doomed from the very start". That's the inner being of a frustrated fellow. He thinks that he can't get away from the city which holds him down. Later in the novel he says and informs David about his new venture, "Voice". I want it to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the guts and courage to start moving again, towards my next failure. He goes on saying, "I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom". This is what idea of living about. This is what ideal satisfaction of life, glory of living about. Joyce Cary, an Irish novelist of repute expresses his views in his book, "... men and women are not unique in an economic structure, they are living souls who are ready to ignore even the primary needs of their bodies for some ideal satisfaction, glory or learning..." "The Case for African Freedom" (Cary, p. 150). That's the ideal satisfaction of Nirode.

Let me try to analyze the two other, but main characters in the novel who happen to be the sisters of Nirode, the protagonist. Monisha, married to Jiban, lives in a large house in Bow Bazar in the central Kolkata. Her husband's family is an extended one. The elder ones in the family are addicted to the, "feet before faces" syndrome. That's what she hates, yet she bears calmly. She also can't bear the noise, the scenes and the smells of the large household where she is consigned to iron-barred rooms. She feels utterly disgusted as well as ashamed when she sees women who follow five paces behind their men, ... like the female birds in the cages. These all make her ashamed of herself. She feels fear of Amla's disapproval, the other imperative character in the novel, and says: "I grow smaller...shrink and lose more...weight, ..., the symbol of existence...I will be invisible yet". She bemoans her non-existence. Here the readers can be introduced to O. P. Budholia who argues in his book, *Forward to Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in her Novels*: "Anita Desai is the first among Indian English novelists to have forcefully expressed the existential problems of womankind" (Budholia, p. 45). The agonized self of Monisha has found a beautiful narration in the novel.

Amla is a sprightly young girl who earnestly looks forward to her life in Kolkata when she returns from Mumbai. She is initially got excited by her new life. But, later, she is found hanging between Jit and Dharma. "She felt herself being torn, torn with excruciating slowness and without anesthesia". She starts living with Dharma and once she feels her living as "a little sweet, short anesthesia". These are the feelings of insecurity, feelings of frustration and feelings of hollowness of life. She has had an idea of living which happens to be very successful, earnest and comfortable for all along her life. She wakes up and feels the reality and, "the curiously lustrous and isolated world of Dharma" retreats to a "bitter latitude". Dr. Gajendra Kumar asserts his point and says in his book, *Voices in the City: A Tour de Horizon of existentialist philosophy, Critical Theory and the novels of Anita Desai* that "Sociologically speaking, the seedy and nauseating industrial backdrop seems to be fatal factor in generating various kinds of mental aberrations psychic disorders. Nirode's wounded self, Monisha's agonized self and Amla's insecure self to cope with the continuous violence" (Kumar, p. 59).

The readers find that the primary characters of Anita Desai are very much dissatisfied with the customary and practiced life. They get fed up and try to get a new life of their own. The new, more meaningful and exciting orientations create a vacuum in their lives and they get dissatisfied with them, too. Hence, a new idea of living recurs again and again which pulls them ahead and they find their end.

It is very crystal clear that the dichotomy of the characters has found a brisk but analytical explanation. The presentation moves artistically and the psych of the characters seems very much sound. It is found here and there that all of the characters who are frustrated adopt their own type of manner of facing the problems of life in search of freedom of life are completely justified. The problem of alienation, suffering and stark uncompromising attitudes have been psychologically proved true. The characters' feeling of the freedom in life

touches the heart of the readers making them feel realistically vivid is very much suggestive. Andrew Wright says in his famous book, *Joyce Cary: A preface to his Novel*, (Wright, p. 41) that “there will always be plenty of luck and bad luck in human affairs, there will always be suffering and disaster.”

The novelist in discussion has been found venting her expression of the idea of freedom in life. The idea which grows in the minds of the novelist compels her to get an outlet. They need expression in the form of writing. Her writing to situations, places and characters, the people in her novel are very much known to her. She has experienced their inner actions. We found that writing isn't a pleasure for her, rather a compulsion, and a duty to vent out the agonies of the people around her who happen to be her characters. Her characters are full blooded people of our life. Therefore, idea of freedom in life becomes a notion. The notion or her belief finds a full and mature expression where readers feel that they are with either with the characters or with the novelist and enjoy reading.

The protagonists of the novelist, Anita Desai, dissatisfied with their routine existence, search for a more meaningful life. Such a spiritual orientation is reminiscent of similar concerns in novels such as E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941).

## 2. Conclusion

The conclusion of this investigation is that readers find Anita Desai developing characters, especially protagonists and other primary characters, of inner selves whose kaleidoscopic minds are of main interest. This novel is a probe into the dark interiors of Nirode, the protagonist who tries to set an ideal way of life with the sensational climax in the novel. The novel has a very contrived, yet utterly convincing ending. At the end of the novel, a very clear and recurring idea of living evolve. Monisha triumphs by burning herself. Nirode has a vision. That's why he becomes the initiate. Amla shows more promising efforts at her wisdom and her wisdoms get sidestepped and her spiritual grow is more satisfying than that of Monisha and Nirode.

In *Voices in the City*, Monisha, an unsettled, manic-depressive housewife, pours kerosene over herself and burns to death. On the other hand, most of Desai's novels also contain a deep-rooted, philosophical concern about the meaning of life. From Maya to Matteo, most of Desai's protagonists, dissatisfied with their routine existence, search for a more meaningful life.

Anita Desai has been found thoroughly engrossed with the psychology of her characters in the novel in discussion. The utopia of the novelist is the inner world of her protagonist and other characters. The kaleidoscopic minds of the characters attract her attention which is the primary interest of the novelist. The novelist says in an interview, “I am interested in characters that are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current.”

Therefore, it is very much evident from the investigations that an idea of meaningful life is the recurring theme of the novel in question. It is obvious also that through the subtle characterization, the novelist has an aim; aim of presenting a vital theme, the theme of living a meaningful, satisfied and successful life. *Voices in the City* is a struggle of freedom in life which has been demonstrated through subjective sufferings of the characters. It obviously represents the initiative in the novel which shows that the protagonists try their best to have their chosen freedom in their lives.

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