



An Appreciation of 'Voices in the City' by Anita Desai

Mr. Ware Shailesh Pralhad

Introduction:

Anita Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) also, offers a similar kind of confessional discourse, this time on the part of its heroine, Monisha. The novel is divided into four parts, and like the previous one, except Part-11, all other sections are in third-person narration. In Part-11, however, Monisha takes the subject position to produce her subjugated knowledge about the patriarchal oppression towards her. Through the construction of a confessional discourse in the form of a personal diary she assigns power to herself by representing herself as a resistant female subject. It is, in fact, in her personal diary that she is privileged to enjoy power and autonomy, which she has been denied in her in-laws' house.

Monisha is not a common woman, but a highly sensitive and stubborn one, knowledgeable about European literature, as well as the Gita. But female as she is, she is denied an identity of her own from the very beginning of her life. Out of malice towards her mother, her father gives her in marriage to Jiban, "a boring non-entity, a blind moralist, a minute-minded and limited official" (198), who is not a perfect match for her. Here her father treats her not as a human being, but as a site on which he inscribes his masculine powers. One may argue that Monisha's compliance with her father's decision contributes towards the perpetuation of male hegemony and thereby makes herself a complaint subject. But it would be a phallic judgement to label her as a complaint subject because though her father exercises a form of patriarchal power over her body, yet he cannot capture her 'soul'. She resists the oppressions in her own way, because her silence, as she herself thinks "has power upon others, if not on mine" (130).

After marriage, Monisha longs for love "that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations completely" (135). But she finds that "there is no such love" (ibid) in a male-dominated world. What she is offered in the name of love is



nothing but a male-domination over her feminine self. She is the daughter-in-law of the house, but is not regarded as an integral part of it. Rather she is excluded as an intruder, who is even "dangerous and infidel" (119) to the family. Even her in-laws always indirectly try to make her understand that she is barren, and a barren woman has no honour and dignity in a patriarchal family/society. Mentally isolated, she craves for privacy, but that is not also given. Monisha describes vividly how all lay bare her inside:

My ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood,
washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny (113).

Realizing that "there is no escape from it" (146), she begins to behave like a frigid woman, and it is through her frigidity that she opposes the heterosexual marriage norms.

Monisha shows her disobedience to her mother-in-law by her act of going out with Nirode. Not only that, instead of complying with her husband's request to "be little friendly" to his sisters (118), she labels them as mean: "They have indoor minds" (139). There after she shows "a violence of action" (133) against submission of her subjectivity to Jiban by disallowing him to read Nirode's manuscript:

I snatch it away in fury ... I'll save Nirode as much as of it as I
can; as I save my own self from it (133).

Conclusion:

Through this "violence of action" Monisha indeed resists the power that Jiban tries to exercise over her. She also differentiates herself from the passive Bengali Hindu women whose lives are spent in "waiting for nothing, waiting for men, self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city.

Reference:

1. Voices in the City 1965