

Inevitability of Multiculturalism: A Critical Study of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

¹K.THARANI, ²Dr. N. VIJAYAKUMARI

ABSTRACT--This paper attempts to make a conscientious examination on multicultural conflicts in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*. It unfolds the events, the cultural, social, political happenings, occasions, which manifest multicultural conflicts in the Indian as well as Western contexts. It also highlights the Indian conditions that, it is a land of multi-culture, multi-religion, multi-ethnicity, multi-lingual, multi-customs and traditions, there, it is rightly proved what is multiculturalism. In her novel, Anita Desai deals with immigrants' problems, the Indians in western countries with nostalgic sense and a few Europeans in India suffering a lot unable to adjust. Her characters mostly find themselves rootless and are unable to stand firmly in any one culture. It also dealt with concepts of multiculturalism and multiculturalism, the causes of migration, the problems of immigrants and the diasporic and expatriates problems, which is an enigma of the global era.

Keywords--Nostalgia Culture, Immigrants, Multicultural, Social, Political

I. INTRODUCTION

Inevitability of Multiculturalism: A Critical Study of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* Anita Desai is the first among Indian English novelists who has added a new dimension to Indian English novel by providing an insight into the enduring human situation. In her novels, she focuses on the struggles of Anglicized middle-class women in contemporary India and the complexities of modern Indian culture. Most of her protagonists attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by tradition bound patriarchal culture. Her novels set amid the cultural and social changes that have swept India since its independence and in her later novels she had addressed at the themes like, dissolution of traditional Indian values, the western stereotypes of India, the German anti-Semitism. She also deals with such issues like hybridity, shifting identity and imaginary homelands as she always talks of 'roots.' Many critics and reviewers have praised her intellectual rigour and vivid portrayals of India, particularly her insistence on the multicultural dimension of contemporary Indian society.

The ongoing process of globalization has been witnessing a rapid increase in migration across the globe, resulting in the merger of multicultural, breaking the geographical and even the political barriers between the countries. There has been a constant coming and going between the countries so that, the boundaries really do not exist. The countries being global villages and the whole world a single global country, the man a global citizen, bound to entangle in multicultural and hence leads to multicultural conflicts. The term, "multiculturalism," a popular concept on culture is a principle of co-existence of different cultures which fosters understanding and

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar Department of English,VELS University, Chennai

² Asst. Professor & Research Supervisor Department of English,VELS University, Chennai

appreciation of different cultures. A number of cultural groups exist side by side in the same culture. Multiculturalism is not just mere tolerance of diverse cultures but a deep appreciation of their richness as well as contributions to the culture as a whole.

Since its publication Anita Desai's, second novel *Voices in the City*, has been as described by Harveen Sachdeva Mann, in "Going in the Opposite Direction: Feminine Recusancy in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*," as, "an existentialist fiction about the meaninglessness of lives devoid of commitment to a cause, a study of predicament of the artist torn between aesthetic and material values, a narrative about the deleterious effects of urban living and a portrait of the dark, nocturnal side of Calcutta" (155). The aesthetic can be considered as East and the material value as the West. In that sense the novel can be considered as the novel of conflict between Eastern and Western culture.

Nirode, the protagonist of the novel, is torn between the aesthetic and material values. Arun rode the horses like prince, captained the cricket team, and won the top honours in all the examinations. His father while dictating the Will had weighed all the distinctions and had laid aside the sum of money for the education abroad to one of his two sons. It was Arun who won, and became a favourite son of his father. But Nirode was a congenital failure. It was so; Arun was at Howrah railway station leaving for London for his higher studies. But he never disclosed 'nervousness or impatience,' he was as if relaxing on a terrace at night fall, he says to Nirode, "I'm sorry, now, to leave" (5), but Nirode called him "a liar, itching to start" (5).

Nirode the protagonist watching the tail lights disappear felt his brother's arm and shoulder, their solidity beneath the light, "He did not believe he would ever feel them again. Even if Arun returned, they would never touch again" (6). While Arun was leaving for London, Anita Desai gives us a flash of Indian culture on train that won't be found in Western culture.

Nirode, passing the Howrah Bridge, the traffic made the bridge roar, "like a tunnel of bones and steel" (7). He began to envy Arun, "for his being on the train to London, out of the dark pandemonium in to the openness, crossing the land from east to west, from the murky

Bay of Bengal to the wide Arabian sea, to board Ship and set sail..." (8). Nirode felt a congenital failure. It seems that, the under developed Arjuna of *Cry, The Peacock* gets reborn as Nirode in *Voices in the city*, who seems to be violating the social norms of the well-to-do middleclass society by his very appearance. To his friends Sonny, David, Bose and Jit, he is rude and aggressive because he thinks them to be the members of society which is terribly refined.

Anita Desai describes Calcutta as "the city of coagulated blaze of Light and sound and odors..." (9). Nirode hates the culture of the city, he cries, "unfair, life is unfair" (9). In the darkness of that unfairness he saw Arun's future as an "undimmed brightness..." (10). Even his younger sister Amla, though she has got a job in an advertising firm as a commercial artist, hates the city culture. She met Nirode in Calcutta where she says, "this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?" (153). Nirode also felt sorry for his job in India, that he was anonymous and shabby clerk on a newspaper, calling himself a journalist, who cut out long strips of newspaper and paste and file them. Arun had gone, he would be at a college in London, amongst students in beer halls - "Nirode fought that vision of student life abroad, that splendid vision that so dazzles, those who do not know it" (9).

Towards the end of the novel Arun's mother feels sorry and was afraid because Arun wrote about the nurse, and of her, "chestnut hair," "blue eyes" and her "loyalty and selflessness" (200). Agonized mother says - "Arun's gone from us to his blue eyed nurse Agnes and they'll never come to me as son and daughter. If they come, they will come as strangers" (201). This is the very example of the Western impact upon the young learned Indians who migrated to the west, they strangled in the clutches of the West, never come out again, if it all they come, they come as strangers. Nirode tired stood still at the river's bank, the tide with a slow motion dashing the big ships. Far below, sea voyagers were on tugs and steamers. On one dark deck a group of three Muslim boat-men with white embroidered caps on their heads, knelt, bowed, droning, and beseeching verses from *Holy Quran*. On one side Anita Desai reflects the profanity of nocturnal life on the river of commerce. On the other, a minute island of stillness. This denotes the multifacedness of land that leads to multiculturalism and its conflicts.

The city Calcutta exposes its multiculturalism say, the eastern and western culture to the fullest extent

Calcutta was not merely the bazaar ringed by cinemas, slaughter houses and panbooths, but also the history of those old Georgian houses that lined still gaslit streets, their sweeping marble staircase and deep pillared verandas, their shuttered windows that seemed to enclose and hide their memories of the balls and crinolines and horse drawn carriages of a hundred and two hundred years ago. The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early deaths. (42)

Nirode walked into the Veranda of Dharma whom he would often find eating pan, geese at his knee chattered from the hibiscus and the holy Tulsi plant. Dharma's wife Gita Devi appeared with a glass of water, large, placid and bovine in her red-bordered sari and

kum-kum marked hair. They heard Gita Devi perform her Puja, "They heard her little brass bell tinkling, her large, hoarse conch shell honking ominously, and saw the lights of her diva flicker before an array of brass and flower, vermilion and saffron" (48). All this is the Indian culture keenly observed by the novelist.

II. RESULTS

Nirode and Dharma talked about Bose's paintings who were once asked to decorate a new pigskin travelling kit by an American tourist. Bose never liked and moved out to Barrackpore. "He was born in Calcutta. His house is one of the oldest in Bow Bazaar, it is next to the most fabulous sweet shop in Bengal. He will never be able to tear up his roots and transplant them. He needs the Calcutta earth, the Calcutta air" (58). This is an example of cultural attachment and a disliking towards the Western culture. Nirode and his friend Jit came out of the coffee house walking in a rainy weather. Jit while dropping Nirode in his car remembered the cocktail party and would like to talk on with Nirode, he would not like to desert the bar where he says, "that bar full of bottles and bottles of booze, rich rutting wife, and the hearty clap on your shoulder from your beefy British boss" (60). But Nirode would not sell his soul even if he got the offer. He says, "For so many bottles of booze, I don't know if I wouldn't sell my own stinking soul, if I got the offer" (60). There are many instances of the Occidents going astray in the East like Baumgartner and Chid. David, a friend to Nirode went to Shantiniketan to study Vina, he would, Nirode says, "take to wear rags, open sandals, drink unboiled water, eat native food and the rest of it"(66). Indian music is such when one sat cross legged and will give oneself up to the Indian music. Further he says, "In the end you'll

turn Hindu, you'll discover a guru fasting on some grisly mountain top and become his disciple, dropped in Mission orange. But I must admit I can't see you wandering about with a begging bowl. Perhaps you will be a yogi who never needs to eat" (69). This is how, the Westerners penetrate in to the East. David, a ceramic and clay artist, was chosen by an American philanthropist who wanted to promote Indian Handicraft. A philanthropic view is to promote craft, culture which belongs not only to any one single country but the whole humanity.

Sonny's father with Nirode and his friends arrived at the hotel, Firpos for tea. David accepted the best foreign whisky they were offered but sonny refused not only liquor but even a fresh pot of tea. Sonny's father commented, how Mrs. Das Gupta, a young woman from Oxford played tennis in her Sari. He talked how the musicians and dancers like Mumtaz Begum and Jahanara Begum from Hyderabad entertained in the parties at Babulpur. But the artists now are not like that, they are interested only in going on a foreign tour, they are attracted towards the western culture. Sonny invited his friends to visit his country estate before the fisheries Swamp it completely. Because he says, "some European countries have shown a great interest in our cheap tinned fish. Would you believe it? Soon there'll be no paddy left, and no mahogany and then it won't be Babulpur any longer, you must come and see it before that happen" (82). This is an example of the western attack on the Indian materialistic world too.

Sonny with his friends went to a pond in Babulpur and was reminded of his holidays with sisters Lila and Rina, now married. Sonny thought of them in their English lace dresses shining like fallen flowers which remind the English impact on India and the Indian Culture. Sonny and Nirode came to an old house, Nirode felt nostalgic, thought of his mother on the veranda, "looking out at her view and wondered if still she expected him to come or even write" (86). When Sonny with his friends returned from the fisheries they brought with them the tenant, the sub-divisional officer Raghavan, a tireless worker for 'national integration.' His greatest concern was for the rehabilitation of refugees who poured across the border from Pakistan, and the keeping in check of the communist elements in his unruly and trouble ridden district. This is a very example of Indians acute cultural tendencies and the Indians concern for the national integration and a proof of unity in diversity.

Nirode lost interest in the magazine 'Voice' where he says, "I certainly did not expect to grow up and live amongst cockroaches and edit a stinking useless magazine" (101). Further he says - "I was always certain, I would be a stowaway, a traveller, and live in London or Paris, be a poor and brilliant student there, spend my time drinking absinthe and talking dazzlingly of Hindu philosophy and the Kamasutra" (101). Nirode being the product of no particular educational or cultural inheritance, had contempt towards his own culture, and attracted towards the west, not forgetting his own culture, he is put in complete dilemma.

It is interesting to note that, in Part-II Monisha visits a zoo where culture and multiculturalism is more elaborately seen. Unlike the varied animals and birds in the zoo, she found varied men and women moving in the garden. They were Anglo Indian girls in flowered frocks, Bengali grandfather in a spotless white dhoti and grandmother in a cloud of starched white with their grand children. There were lovers in navy blue and black bush shirts singing 'Zindagi O Zindagi'. It is an example of blended cultures on the Indian Panorama. Monisha talks of Bengali women, walking five spaces behind their men. They wear saris of dullest colour, beige and fawn and off-white, like the female birds in the cages. It is a protective feeling, not the aggressive, as in the women of north. She thinks of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark room spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Ramayan* in the dim light of sooty lamps, lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on 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 shuts in, in the old houses, in the old city.

III. DISCUSSION

Aunt Lila's car drives Monisha down to a street so different from the one's she saw, where past and present merge to form an unchanging sameness of trade, the joint family, disease and poverty - they have always been that way and are thus still. She saw history lingering, the street, squares looked as screened by royal palms. The shutters, windows, and lacy balconies made them look like houses in a once fashionable resort somewhere in Europe, grown very old and deserted long ago to the vicissitudes of shoot-black rain and plaster-peeling sun. They suggested strange happenings behind their shutters, but parties to which ladies in crinolines are driven up in grand carriages by drivers wearing turbans, ladies who waltz and polka and flutter fans of lace and sandal wood. Parties of people who lived long ago and died long ago, leaving behind only a few brass gongs and ivory elephants to descendants on grey British farms.

Nirode, a completely defeated, insignificant journalist was hospitalized and diagnosed as "Starvation combined with heat exhaustion" (126). He began to chat about mother, just after father's death. Monisha says, "of mother when we were all very small and she would play Chinese checkers with us on the bright mats, and put us to sleep with stories from Mahabharat" (127). Monisha pleaded with him to accept defeat, if he accepts he would survive. She refers to the incident in Mahabharat where Arjuna converses with the Lord, where he is asking for the sign of a man of steady wisdom and trying to know what is the perfection? What is the peace? Amla, Monisha's sister too, migrates to the city Calcutta, in search of job. The city excited her while she drove through "Dalhousie Square with all its red ginger-bread houses, their domes and cupolas and pigeons" (142), she drove into Ballygunge and saw its weather beaten old mansions and palm trees, kept thinking of John Company and Sir Thoman Roe at Jehangir's court, a blend of two cultures in India.

In part-III a flash of gender consciousness, gender conflict, a male, female and cultural conflict, splashes out when Amla arrives at Calcutta. Aunt Lila, who did not like men, when asked about Nirode she said, "He is a dark horse - I don't know anything about him" (143). Further, she says, "our country belongs to its men" (143). But it won't, always be so, not when there are girls like Amla and Rita. Amla and Monisha wondered at Aunt's absurd bob. They wonder what she gained by this futile gesture of emancipation. The aunt is of the chopped opinion that Amla and Monisha have the fun in their lives but the aunt's young days were not pleasantful, she said, "you belong to such a uniquely free generation and that is something very new in our country. At last we have won our freedom and you can do as you choose?"(145).

Monisha collecting her belongings gets up without saying anything. Amla followed Monisha, halted at the Bronze Statue in the corner, it was "Shiva and Parvati locked together in an upright embrace that pulsed with so grand a desire, so rich a satisfaction that soon the girls, too looked away from that inscrutable smile on Shiva's face and the taut buttocks of Parvati who had turned her back on the world as she pressed upon her consort her purpose and her delight, inexplicable to both the girls" (147). Anita Desai explicitly depicts the scene which is deeply rooted and connected to the Indian culture. Amla and Monisha could not understand what the scene means? Because they were not in tune with the ancient culture, they were attracted towards the Western, the city culture,

where religious concepts were neglected. All this is an evidence of Multiculturalism and its effects on the metropolitan cities in India especially after Independence.

Multiculturalism, in India can be found, more explicitly, when Dharma asked Amla that her cheekbones are almost like Mangolian. Amla believes that it is the power of the Himalayas. Moreover, her mother was part Nepalese. Her grandfather married twice - first a Bengali woman and after her death, he married a Nepalese who was Amla's grandmother. The Nepali grandmother was from bourgeois tradesman's family - traded with Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet. So, the cheekbones Amla inherited she says - "My mother has her mother's high colouring and cheekbones. I think my sister and I have inherited the latter" (205). This shows how the physique also is culturally transmitted from generation to generation; it is the cultural impact upon the generations. It is like "admitting a broth of mountain air in to their closed house" (205). Nirode, Monisha and Amla, the trio migrated to Calcutta from Kalimpong, lived indifferently like alienated. Nirode's alienation from their yearning mother was so vivid that he was not ready to accept any monetary help from her. He called her, "that old she cannibal," even he identified her with goddess kali, the goddess of death. Anita Desai has depicted the mother-children alienation the new emergent the impact of West on India.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Anita Desai has contributed significantly to the literary world in general and to the Indian writing in English in particular, by investing her works with a multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought and which is therefore considered a very important literary characteristic by most critics and thinkers. She had delineated in her novels the problem and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of changing society, revealing the varying mental states, psychic reverberations, inner motives, and existential pursuits of man. She also deals with the predicament of man and his social, cultural, and moral dilemmas. She excels particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by a humiliation, sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation.

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