

## Theme of the Quest for Liberty in Anita Desai's Voices in the City

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Quest for liberty is the most prominent theme in the novels of Anita Desai. Due to its importance in her works, it is bound to find recurrence. The quest for liberty prevails as the dominant theme and all the major characters seem to be struggling for something with which they cannot come in terms with. The society in which they live and cannot go away from it leaves a deep question mark in their minds. They are in quest for liberty from past, present, loneliness death, captivity, social milieu and meaninglessness.

Anita Desai's novels are concerned with the portrayal of the most troubled part of her protagonists' life. The world seems to be 'out of joint', and in their helplessness, they feel like trapped birds. In all her novels there is a striving, on part of the protagonists towards surrender and liberty.

Anita Desai's **Voices in the City** is a very remarkable existential novel that undoubtedly exemplifies what Anita Desai describes quoting Ortega Y Gasset in her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia as "the terror of facing single-headed, the ferocious assaults of existence". (Dalmia 1979) The novel is mainly devoted to the analysis of the dark domains of the psyche of three characters, Nirode Ray, Monisha and Amla. As Lionel Trilling aptly suggests: "The novel is perpetual quest for reality the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul. (Trilling 212)"

In the very opening paragraphs of the novel Arun's desire for liberty is conveyed by comparing him to "a bird poised for flight each feather alert and trained for it." (7) The thematic aim of the novel is "escape,

escape" (11) which Nirode feels in the sound of the funnel.

Nirode, the protagonist is in quest for liberty from the oppressive weight of this "devil city" Calcutta. He finds himself trapped in it with no hope of escape from it. He wants to get liberty from this world of ugly sights and horrible, repugnant smells. The world is unbearable for him for it is poisoned. He envies Arun leaving the city and wants himself to escape this world. "Better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of sense lessens over the world. Better not to live." (18) His craving for liberty and release from his claustrophobic existence in the city is symbolically expressed through the image of kite. Nirode wanted to rise like a "Paper kite with a candle lit inside it."

As a boy he had tried to get rid of this world by running away from home several times. "Caught, run away again and captured one more-regarding it always as temporary arrests, merely a stage in a certain journey" (11).

Nirode yearns for existential liberty. He develops his own value system and wanders in search of possibilities that could provide him with a sense of identity, which he had lost during his journey from childhood to adulthood due to his parents' sense of pride in Arun, his brother and partiality on the part of the parents. He makes various ideological and occupational commitments to get a stable ego identity. The desire to preserve his idealized image torments him and he does not allow him to succeed in his ventures. He says, "Happiness, suffering - I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end." (41)

In his quest for existential liberty, Nirode delinks himself completely from his family. He tells his friend

Sonny: "Look, do me a favour. Don't keep bringing my family in, Sonny boy ... I neither inherited nor do I now borrow a single damn thing from my family". (55)

He desires to liberate himself from that image which has been inherited by him from his family. By denying his past, his family name & claim to property, he tries to assert his existential liberty. He wants to live in "shadow, silence and stillness." (10). He works as an anonymous and shabby clerk in a newspaper. He thinks that "three drinks and a room - a principedom", is enough for him. When he achieves this, he gives up his job and starts editing a literary magazine named Voice. Then he suddenly changes to writing and when he finds it quite difficult to earn his livelihood he opens a bookshop in dirty locality of Calcutta. His shifting over from one project to another, like starting a magazine and writing a play shows that he hated being responsible for anything at all". (72) He displays his desire for absolute freedom in an existential manner when he says: "One must be king kite wheeling so far away in the blazing empty sky as to be merely a dot, almost invisible to urchins who stood below, stones in their fists, ready to be aimed and flung." (71).

In his quest for existential liberty, Nirode rebels against all forms of work under others. It is impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, by his order, at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those autonomous at the top - I loathe their superciliousness, their blindness. (19).

While leaving the job with Patrika, he does not realize the humiliation of having to borrow money from his friends. Borrowing is something less embarrassing than working under any man. His idea of starting his magazine Voice and work freely at his own command satisfies his sense of independent identity. The magazine however does not provide Nirode the desired liberty for it requires communication, contacts and competitiveness all of which he abhors. Like a true existentialist, he keeps experimenting with failure in quest of an abiding identity in life; "I want to move from failure, to failure step by step to rock bottom. I went to explore that depth". (40)

Nirode's search for existential liberty is shown when he prefers to put up with poverty and to live in a room unsuited even for pigeons but declines other's help. Monetary assistance could come from many sources, particularly from his mothers who will open up her coffer for him but he refuses to accept his mother's money. He tells Monisha: "Tell her to go shove it up that old major of hers, all her stinking cheques ... I am done with signing my name believing my name or having a name" (133).

He does not strive for liberty in the manner of a healthy individual. He says, "I want to lash out on my own now whether I sink or swim."

Nirode seeks liberty from social milieu. He himself knows that he is a man for whom "aloneness alone - the treasure worth treasuring" (26) even if it makes him feel at times like a leper "diseased with the loneliest disease of all." (61) Nirode abhors routine for it connects one with the day-to-day life. He wonders how can one spend one's lifetime on "something that does not matter" for him. For him: "It is better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. "Batter not to live". (18)

Nirode rejects his past, his upbringing and the wealth of his family, everything that may tie him with some kind of routine. He rejects intimacy and wants to be free in his private world. He closes himself in his world and moves away from the outside world. He reduces his needs to the barest minimum thus rebelling against pattern of routine.

In order to assert liberty from social milieu & reality, Nirode frees himself from all wishes, ambitions, emotional ties and effort for achievement. He nurtures the negative impulse to run away from day-to-day life. For him, the whistle and the hooter of the train symbolize "escape, escape"

Nirode is envious not only of Arun but of all those who follow a routine. The thought of being one with the office going crowd repels him: 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 - roots 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 & powerful. (10)

In order to assert liberty from routine he resigns from his job with the Patrika. He ignores the future implications of being unemployed. The fear of starvation is insignificant against his urge to be free of all routine. Withdrawal is an important solution Nirode adopts to get liberty from routine. He creates for himself dead silence. Dr. Radhakrishnan thinks that these silent hours give us time in which ... “we strive to free ourselves from the suffocating routine from masks and mummeries of existence.” (Radhakrishnan 57)

Anita Desai depicts Monisha’s plight more forcefully and closely relates it to the women who are like trapped birds in the cages. Monisha also seeks liberty from noisy & crowded “devil city” Calcutta. Its overpopulation suffocates her and she wants a lovely place, where she may take refuge. She longs for release from the disgusting and cacophonous welter of voices in the monstrous city. Monisha is so sensitive to the oppressive noisiness of city that she is even repelled by the monotonous recitation of the Sanskrit lessons by Nikhil. The recitation that filters through the barred windows drives her mad and even the slightest pause in ‘maniac recitation gives her some relief but she feels: “There is no escape from it. It surrounds the entire house. I lie on my bed and resign myself to it.” (113)

Monisha hates the rapacity of the city of Calcutta and feels nostalgic about her mother’s place Kalimpong. Anita Desai associates birds with freedom, which they enjoy in the flight to heaven, and in contrast presents her characters shackled by the chains of life to be lived in family, in the city, in the society.

Like Nirode, Monisha also yearns for liberty from duties, routine and responsibilities. In order to achieve liberty from social milieu, she retreats behind the barred windows, which instead of helping her in securing liberty makes her condition worse. In the house crowded with aunts, uncles and relative, she craves for liberty. She does all the domestic chores

like cutting the vegetables, serving food and brushing the children’s hair. All this she does unwillingly for she wants to create her own inner world in which she was given some tasks which she could do alone in privacy according to her own instinct. She wants to be “away from the aunts and uncles the cousins and nieces and nephew”, for she feels, “Alone I could work better and I should feel more whole”. (115) Monisha chooses withdrawal as a strategy for survival in the uncongenial atmosphere of Jiban’s family.

She gets no pleasure in the routine of household job. She feels misfit among her in-laws. Monisha yearns an escape from worldly involvement. Her sense of “me” has become so strong that she cannot reach out to others.

In order to assert liberty from worldly involvement Monisha adopts a strategy to escape into the past. She often remembers her stay with Jiban, at the last place of posting away from the city and the family: The solitude of the jingle there, the aqueous shadows of bamboo groves and the earth laid with green fallen leaves Jiban away on tour, I alone with myself, no visitor at all. (116)

Monisha is in quest for liberty from reality for it seems to her tragic because she finds her experiences uncertain. She avoids any participation in the activities of the real world. She implores: “Allow us just this to-stand back, apart in the shadows, and watch the fire and the flames, the sacrifices that are flung into it, the celebrating, and the mourning and permit us-not to take part”. (136)

She feels trapped in the over populated house of Jiban where ‘moist palms, putrid breaths and harsh voices’ press down on her. She wants to get liberty from this captivity, but she finds no route of escape. Inside the four walls of house she feels, “locked in a steel container,” “a thick glass cubicle,” (like Beckett’s hero in the unnamable living) in which she lives without any “touch of love or warmth” from her in-laws. She says: “I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me.” (237) As this awareness dawns on her she feels like a trapped bird and seeks liberty from her captivity.

Monisha feels imprisoned in Jiban's house because even for Jiban, it is difficult to understand Monisha's plight because he has seen women spending their lives like birds in the cages: "Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent & 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 house, in the old city". (120)

Monisha thinks about the Bengali women who work for centuries inside the "barred windows". She feels like a trapped bird and wonders how can she "live, eat, work, sing bleeding through life"?

Whenever Monisha wants to liberate herself from the house of her husband, she feels the bars of the window of her room imprisoning her. Quite often she cries out her wish: "I long to thrust my head out of the window - and cannot, the bars are closely set- and scream: 'Stop!' (110)

These bars signify her fear of having very little chances for liberty from captivity. To her, street singers and even drummer look like "caged animal" as they too had the same proud but defeated look of the "caged tiger". Life seems to her "waste" for it is enclosed in a "locked container". In her struggle for liberation from a trap situation, death seems to be the only way out. She is weary of living in a crowd, which appears peaceful from outside, but violent inside. Monisha grows restive to seek release from her captivity. She would prefer an end with the dignity of the tiger. Be it in the cage of her in -laws' house, it certainly would not be "melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth". (121) Like a maniac, she hurries out of her "stale room, filled with sounds of outer people's emotions" (239) and commits suicide.

Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and seeks liberty from every obstacle caused by city Calcutta. A liberated and intellectual woman, Amla wants, "something greater than pleasure". Indeed her quest is to get liberty from all fears and anxieties of life. She seeks liberty from welter of personal relations and emotional isolation. She regards art as the only way through which she can get liberty.

Dharma is a different kind of artist. Like Nirode, he too feels uneasy in the human world due to its rules and restrictions. He too seeks liberty from this world. To secure liberty he withdraws from it. But Dharma's withdrawal is not like of Nirode's, who withdraws from this world in bitterness. Dharma withdraws from human world to create a new world of his own. He takes refuge in the remoteness of a walled garden and its green life without completely serving his relation with the city and its life.

In some respect, Dharma for Anita Desai appears to be an ideal artist who does not believe in complete escape from society but who creates his own world of "animated nature to which to escape". (5)

Dharma also desires for liberty from the "devil city" Calcutta because for him it is a poisoned and dead city. Being an artist, he is concerned with life; dead and decaying objects have no meaning for him. He cannot completely divorce the human world, but when he feels wounded and disillusioned by it, he finds relief in Nature.

When Amla begins to model for him, he decides to move back from the nature to human being.

David too, is in quest for liberty from this world. But instead of hating people he maintains a distance from them. In order to assert liberty from this world he escapes to the "sights and scenes flowing past like a bright river stained with colour-and the knowledge that in another minute he would be elsewhere and, in another hour, far, far, beyond". (43) He does not like the world for it is too small to satisfy his wander-lust.

Anita Desai's chief concern seems to be the quest for liberty, which her characters crave for. She has successfully portrayed this aspect in *Voices in the City*. The quest for liberty prevails as the recurring theme because nearly all the characters yearn for liberty from bondages. There is no plan, no place, nothing to keep them at peace. Their main concern is the persistent search for liberty. The men and women in her novel are hunted by the desire to attain liberty from the ordinary routine of duties, family responsibilities and social obligations. They search for full liberty within their given condition and situation Monisha, Nirode, fail to accept their

limitations. They are always in search of a more authentic existence than what is provided to them. They say the great "No". When the characters cannot relate to the reality of their circumstances, they

employ indirect methods or compensatory behaviours to escape from it. Almost all the major or minor characters around whom the story of novel revolves yearn for liberty.

### References

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