

Gender Discrimination in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

RAGHUNATH PRASAD KACHHWAY

Abstract. In the second half of the twentieth century, Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das came forward in support of oppressed married women. In their works these writers primarily raised their voices against the various ways in which the married women were discriminated against Indian society. The basic idea that formed the basis of their resistance against male chauvinism in Indian society emanated from a movement that was born in the west-feminism. Feminism, in simple words, is a collective call for the freedom of women in the male dominated world. Meanwhile, Indian women writers have understood with the passage of time that the world of Indian women is different from the world of the women in Europe and United States. Among women writers of English, Anita Desai has a distinguished place. She has imaginative power and keen observation. She has studied the female psyche deeply. Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* is a novel of struggle for freedom of women. In the novel, Monisha does not get due respect from her family members and this negligence brings about her frustration. The present paper focuses on gender discrimination in *Voices in the City*.

Keywords : Feminism; Indian women; gender discrimination; freedom.

The world has undergone a sea change. These changes may be social, political, economic or cultural. With these global changes, new problems are also emerging, affecting various aspects of life. Among them, one aspect relates to married women - the marginalization of married women in private and public spheres. Gender discrimination, which mostly deals with the discrimination faced by women on the basis of their gender, is one of the most burning problems of the society. In fact, women had to lead their lives under the guidance of men for a long time. They have been tolerating their husband's callousness for ages. The fact is that in ancient times, this problem remained by and large unnoticed. But today much attention is being paid to the discrimination against women.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das came forward in support of the oppressed married women. In their works, these writers primarily raised their voices against the various ways in which the married women were discriminated against in Indian society. The basic idea that formed the basis of their resistance against male chauvinism in Indian society emanated from a movement that was born in the west – feminism. Feminism, in simple words, is a collective call for the freedom of women in the male dominated world. Meanwhile, Indian women writers have understood with the passage of time that the world of Indian women is different from the world of the women in Europe and United States. They are wrestling with a different kind of patriarchy – a patriarchy that worships women and see them as

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inferior creatures at the same time. In her seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty has raised her concerns about the way the movement called Feminism, controlled mainly by western academia, has homogenized the diversity of oppressions faced by women in different parts of the world, as a set of problem faced by women in the west :

The relationship between “Woman” - a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)-and “women”- real, material subjects of their collective histories is one of the central questions, the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. (Mohanty, 334)

Among women writers of English, Anita Desai has a distinguished place. She has imaginative power and keen observation. She has studied the female psyche deeply. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha does not get due respect from her family members and this negligence brings about her frustration. The present paper focuses on gender discrimination in *Voices in the City*.

Voices in the City is the story of a feudal family living in Kalimpong. The family is dominated by a lady, because her husband is a drunkard. She has four children, two sons and two daughters – Arun, Nirod, Monisha and Amla. The story starts with the departure of Arun, who is going to England for higher studies. Nirod works as a simple clerk in a newspaper office in Calcutta. Monisha is married to Jiban who belongs to a traditional Bengali family. Jiban himself is a service man in the government department. Amla has got training in commercial art in Bombay. Now she has returned to Calcutta in order to join an advertisement firm. Her father is not in this world. Her mother leads a lonely life, for all the children are out of Kalimpong. She has got the company of Mr. Chaddha who is a retired Major. He is her neighbour. She has an illicit relation with him. Nirod is dead against his mother. His life in Calcutta is pitiable. He is a congenital failure. Amla has a short lived affair with Dharma who is a married artist. Monisha does not feel satisfied with her husband. She always feels lonely, because she is sterile. Thus her ill matched husband, loneliness and sterility, all lead to depression and ultimately, she commits suicide by self-immolation. Her dead body is cremated after her mother comes to Calcutta from Kalimpong.

In this novel, there are so many women characters, but Anita Desai has tried to reveal her feminist attitude towards women through the character of Monisha. The condition of Monisha is comparable to that of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, as she has no issue. She is also sensitive and a victim of ill matched marriage. Maya feels lonely in her family, for there is none except her husband. But Monisha wants privacy which is not possible. The reason is that it is a joint family, and therefore, the house remains over-crowded. This kind of situation makes

her uncomfortable. In one sense, she has her own room, but in other sense, she has not, because not even a single one takes care of Monisha's privacy. Rather without hesitation, all her sisters-in-law lie on her bed, and they start discussing Monisha's sarees, jewellery and her fallopian tubes. Their talk brings a kind of disappointment in the mind of Monisha, because sterility is a curse for a married woman.

Actually Monisha is a well-read lady and she has brought her personal library to her husband's house. She wants to pass her time by going through the books. Therefore, she wants privacy. This idea reflects in the following lines:

Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more whole. But less and less there is privacy. Even my own room is, which they regard at first as still bridal, now no longer is so (the tubes are blocked, it is no good), and sisters-in-law lie across four-poster, discussing my ovaries and theirs. Kalyani Di throws open my wardrobe in order to inspect my sarees... and sees my books. The whole wardrobe full of books. To my perplexity... (*Voices in the City*, 115-116)

So far as Monisha's relation with her husband is concerned, she is not satisfied with him. His character is similar to that of Gautam in *Cry, The Peacock*. He has no time for his wife. He always remains busy with his job. He never pays attention to the feelings of his wife. He never shares his feelings with her. He is completely under the influence of his family. When some of his money is found missing from his pocket, he does not feel like asking his wife about it, he suspects she has stolen it. Thus we see that Monisha is not pleased either with her husband or with her family members. Thus she finds herself transplanted in an infertile soil. Further Monisha is an intellectual woman. She has no faith in religion though she reads *Bhagavat Gita*. If she had a faith in it, her monotony would have lessened, but it is not so. Her feelings regarding this get a vivid expression in these lines:

If I had religious faith, I could easily have renounced all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived – a life dedicated to nothing – that his husk is protection from death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely, is not a difficult choice. (121)

The plight of Monisha is similar to that of Maya of *Cry, The Peacock* who is caged like a peacock, crying to come out. Likewise, she is imprisoned in the iron barred room. She cannot raise the voice. She cannot see the sights, "Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows – other bars" (109).

In fact, Monisha suffers from claustrophobia which is quite opposite to her nature. She has led her life in an open atmosphere in the hills of Kalimpong, and here she is leading a stifled life within the four walls. She herself says, "I long to thrust my head out of window – and cannot, the bars are closely set – and scream stop" (110). Here she is reminded of the mocking smile of Nirode at the time of her marriage to Jiban. When he comes to her, he says, "You are in this small, shrunken shell." She does not know what to say to him:

I see his great black eyes alone reach out towards
to me, with something of the old mockery, the old
sympathy, and curiosity that alarms me, for it seems
to sense in my condition something that he
understands instinctively and profoundly (110-111).

Thus we may say that the life of women like Monisha in the above-mentioned situation cannot be harmonious, and therefore, she commits suicide by setting fire to herself. In this novel, Anita Desai has thrown light on the death of Monisha's interest in life prior to her real death. Actually Monisha feels so much disgusted with her life that she craves eternal darkness beyond sleep, for even sleep may have nightmares. She finds herself completely plunged into the darkness. Therefore, she does not like the stars which she has referred to in the context of what makes her stand apart from the family of her husband. In this connection, she says:

Leave me to gather the stars, frosty and distant and
cool. Leave me together and then to reject them.
Queenly, I'll have only the darkness. Only the
darkness spaces between the stars, for they are the
only thing on the earth that can comfort me this
costless, this stillness, this interval of peace... (137)

To sum up, we may say that *Voices in the City* is a novel of struggle for freedom of women. Women should not be discriminated in the society in the name of female. They should be given their due share in all the fields whether they are social, political or economic so that they can develop themselves to the full and may achieve a respectable place in the family and the society.

Raghunath Prasad Kachhway

University Professor, P. G. Department of English
Nalanda College, Bihar Sharif, Patliputra University, Patna

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