



Cultural Stereotypes, Female Identity and Postcolonial India: Re-reading Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

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Abstract

Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* has been criticized by European critics as a portrait of a joyless, 'monster city' called Calcutta and by Indian critics as an artistic failure for its 'out of place' female characters. However, the forms of conservatism and domination have been questioned by postcolonial and feminist theories. These theories teach us to respect difference and heterogeneity as against the sexist and colonist tendency to 'reduce the difference to a single identity. his paper attempts to re-read *Voices in the City* through the lens of postcolonial and feminist theory to explore that Desai's female characters who 'go in the opposite direction' and 'not average' are modern Indian women. They struggle for self-definition by defying the cultural stereotypes rooted in ancient Hindu religious scriptures, mythology, and ancient legal codes. They are reflected in cultural nationalism and socioeconomic spheres of pre- and post-Independence India. As a modern, 'purely subjective' writer Desai is aware of the various cultural, social, and economic impediments faced by her women characters in their quest for identity and self-hood and records meticulously the victimization of Hindu, educated, urban, middle-class women in postcolonial India as well as their various modes of protest against patriarchy and fundamentalism thereby "creating a new feminist ideology in Indian literature written in English" and reconstructing female identity in post-colonial India (Mann, 1995, p.156). The paper also tries to find out the relationship between cultural ethos and gender discrimination in India which serves as a background to the narratives of Desai's female characters.

Keywords: Hindu fundamentalism, cultural ethos, female identity, gender discrimination, patriarchy, victimization.



Gender Equality

Feminist theory and postcolonial theory share a common ground in interrogating structures of domination and addressing the role they play in the network of power,

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knowledge, and canon formation. By depicting women who “go in the opposing direction”, Anita Desai goes against the stereotypical feminine ideal which has its root in Hindu mythology and that manifests itself in cultural imperialism and socioeconomic sectors of both colonial and postcolonial India (Desai, 1992, p.71). In an interview with Dalmia (1979), Desai once remarked: “It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it know what the demands are, what it costs to meet them” (p.13). In fact, despite being a subjective reader, Desai, “nonetheless displays an acute understanding of the social, cultural, and material impediments faced by her female characters in their search for self-fulfillment” (Mann, 1995, p. 156). The first part is devoted to Nirode’s world but the remaining three parts of *Voices in the City* exhibit an overpowering urge and struggle of the three female characters - Amla, Manisha, and their mother, to realize themselves, to establish their own identity. The three women characters are “unable to walk the oft-trodden path which is accepted as the only correct one for the Indian woman” (Nityanandam, 2000, p. 18).

Purpose of the Present Study

This paper attempts to re-read *Voices in the City* through the eyes of the three female characters - Monisha, Amla, and Otima in this novel. They want to restructure their lives. They want “to retrieve from life’s bitter dregs something” that they can call their very own (Kishore, 2002, p.186). In short, they are individuals with needs and desires of their own. Like Jane Austen, Desai works on ‘a piece of ivory’ with which she is completely acquainted. Her women characters are mostly educated, middle-class, and urban. Set in postcolonial India, the novel portrays not only the minute aspects of the victimization of women but also their various modes of protest and resistance against the traditional Hindu morality and cultural ethos which wants to project women either as goddesses or servants and thus, “participate in creating a new feminist ideology in Indian literature written in English” (Mann, 1995, p. 156). The purpose of this present study is also to find out the relationship between cultural ethos and gender discrimination in India which serve as a background to the narratives of Desai’s female characters.

Method

In my study, I have resorted to an interpretative and analytical method. My objective in this paper is a close textual analysis of *Voices in the City* in the light of feminist and post-colonial theories. These theories interrogate the forms of conservatism and domination and teach us to respect difference and heterogeneity as against the sexist and colonist tendency to ‘reduce difference to a single identity. This paper attempts to re-read *Voices in the City* through the lens of postcolonial theory and feminist theory to explore that Desai’s female characters who go against the current are modern Indian women.

Results

Hindu Religious Scriptures and Sexist Strategies

In India, "Hindu scriptures and ancient legal codes both deify and circumscribe women. Those who live up to the feminine 'ideal' as encoded there, are considered divine; those who deviate are 'fallen'" (Sengupta, 2004, p.4). In the words of Swami Vivekananda (1900/2021), "The ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and the mother last.... The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood – that marvelous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever-for-giving mother" (p.36, 39). Sita of *Ramayana* who is chaste, selfless and utterly devoted to her husband is still the model of the ideal wife in India. Swami Vivekananda (1900/2021) extols the virtues of Sita and hails the Indian women to be like Sita. In his words, "...the Ramayana has embodied the loftiest Hindu Ideal of a woman in the character of Sita" (p.8). Swami Vivekananda (1900/2021) also believes that a woman's womanhood becomes fulfilled when she becomes a mother: "Wait till she becomes a mother; then she will have the same right. That...is the great mission of woman - to become a mother" (p.41). He also unequivocally states that the mother is the God and it is the duty not only of the son but also his wife to 'worship' the mother: "Whom I worship, why not she?" (Vivekananda, 1900/2021, p.41). In *Manusamhita* (ca. 1250 B.C.E./1920), Manu compares women with the goddess of fortune because she gives birth to children, brings them up, and provides services:

prajanārthaṃ mahābhāgāḥ pūjārhā ḡḥadīptayaḥ |
striyaḥ śriyaśca geheṣu na viśeṣo'sti kaścana || 26 || (Verse 9.26).

Her duty was to serve her husband:

nāsti strīṇāṃ pṛthag yajñō na vrataṃ nāpyupoṣaṇam |
patim śuśrūṣate yena tena svarge mahīyate || 153 || (Manu, ca.1250B.C.E./1920, Verse 5.153.).

But, at the same time, Manu (ca. 1250B.C.E./1920) states that women, deaf, dumb, idiot, foreigners and animals should be avoided during the consultation:

jaḍamūkāndhabadhirāṃ stairagyonān vayo'tigān |
strīmleccavyādhitavyaṅgān mantrakāle'pasārayet || 149 || (Verse 7.149).

Manu (ca. 1250B.C.E./1920) considers them adulterous by nature:

sūkṣmebhyo'pi prasaṅgebhyaḥ striyo rakṣyā viśeṣataḥ |
dvayorhi kulayoḥ śokamāvaheyurarakṣitāḥ || 5 || (Verse 9.5).

He (ca. 1250B.C.E./1920) denies the independence of women as well:

bālye piturvaśe tiṣṭhet pāṇigrāhasya yauvane |
putrāṇāṃ bhartari prete na bhajet strī svatantratām || 146 || (Verse 5. 146)

In the above-mentioned verse, Manu (ca. 1250 B.C.E./1920) very distinctly pointed out that a woman should never have recourse to independence. Modern social structures and legal codes have indeed replaced those ancient codes and structures that subjugated women and they have certainly achieved some of their coveted rights but "the sentiments underlying those codes persist to this day, giving rise to new forms of gender politics" (Sengupta, 2004, p.4).

Postcolonial India and Indian Women

During the nationalist and anti-colonial movements, women's contribution cannot be forgotten but, as Anita Loomba (1988) maintains, the image of the Nation-as-Mother largely turned the freedom they gained from some older orthodoxies into a fresh subjugation (p. 216). In other words, India became decolonized but the Indian women failed to decolonize themselves from Hindu fundamentalism which in new disguises colonized them again. The structures of conservatism after independence are the nation, religion, labour, education, health, and family. These are the structures of modern India within which gender functions today. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakkar (1978) argues that despite urbanization and education, a "formidable consensus on the ideal of woman-hood...still [in the mid-Seventies] governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community" (p.68). In the same vein, Desai in her article, *A Secret Connivance* (1990) corroborates: "one hundred thousand...cults built around the Mother Goddess...fecund figure from whom all good things flow.... make her not merely the ideal mother but the ideal woman – consort, lover, plaything" (p.972). Desai explains Indian women's complicity in their servitude by mentioning illiteracy and material dependence that still make Indian women "connive at" (Desai,1990, p. 973) this mythological idealization.

Discussion

Goddess Kali versus Patriarchy

Hindu mythology is full of female figures idealizing virtues like women's chastity, purity, submission, and sacrifice – "all to the benefit of men", but it also has "a considerable body of cultural imagery that militates against traditional male orthodoxies" (Sengupta, 2004, p.5). In Hindu mythology, Goddess Kali is such a figure and Desai appropriates it in her novel to symbolize the liberated women. "The product of the pre-Aryan age given over to the predominantly female-centered beliefs", Kali presents the most potent counter-discourse to latter-day patriarchal trappings of power and authority and she is not the "murderous cannibal of common perception" (Mann, 1995, p.159, 15.). Liddle and Joshi also believe that the matriarchal myth of Kali "tells the story of women's continuing power and their resistance to male control" (55). Kali has been depicted as an independent woman, not as a consort. Kali annihilates the demon Raktabija and, thus, poses a threat to the male power. She also symbolizes women's sexuality. As Sengupta (2004) reminds us: "...the figure of Kali is an enabling one for women because of the goddess's legendary sexual dominance over Shiva. The image of Dakshina-kali, sitting erotically over Shiva, is a case in point" (p.6).

Nirod: Lost at the Crossroads

In *Voices in the City*, the first part narrates Nirode's life. Through his memory, we come to know his mother's infidelity to her husband but whether this infidelity is true or not, we do not know because in his nihilism he does not think positively of the people, especially of women, he knows. He compares India's servitude under the British Raj

with the Indian woman's "slave" mentality (Desai, 1992, p.81). He has a love-hate relationship with his mother. He suffers from mother fixation and as a result, he has an ambivalent attitude towards his sexually liberated women and his failure in love can be due to his oedipal complex. Nirode's kind of behaviour can also be ascribed to the cultural denigration of Indian women throughout the ages.

Manisha's Story: Bondage and Beyond

In the second part of the novel, in the form of a diary, we find Monisha's story. The diary form highlights the interiority of the female experience in India. From Amla's and their mother's narratives as well, we come to know about her history. Intelligent and self-conscious Monisha's husband was selected by her family which is the norm in Indian culture even today. Amla considers Jiban as a 'boring nonentity' and asks her aunt about his selection for her sensitive sister. From Aunt Lila's narrative we come to know that she visited Jiban's family before anybody else did and reported to Monisha's family that "they were a respectable, middle-class congress family, completely unsuitable to Monisha's taste and inclinations" but Monisha's father "decided...that it was the right family" (Desai, 1992, p.71). Her mother to marry off her daughter, "excused" the match because "it would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a stolid, unimaginative family as that just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance" (Desai, 1992, pp.198,99). Monisha compares the members of her in-law's house with "stagnant well water" which is symbolic of age-old orthodox rules and regulations (Desai, 1992, p.120). She recalls her experience as a new bride in her adopted home which literally symbolizes her colonization in an orthodox Hindu family: "I ...am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother who...while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder...and still harder, till I realize what it means, and go down on my knees to touch her feet...Another pair of feet...More...Feet before faces here."(Desai, 1992, p.109). Harassed both mentally and economically, Monisha represents countless Indian women. A woman's identity in conformist India is made by being one's daughter, wife, or mother but educated, sensitive Monisha craves for an identity of her own, craves for freedom from bondage: "My... duties of serving fresh chapattis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife. If all this were to blow away, what would be left would be very small. Yet, I would be lighter to bear. Nirode is lighter now" (Desai, 1992 p.112). Her desire to escape from such a life is justified because her traditional Indian marriage has curtailed her creativity and freedom. She pines for privacy, a room of her own: "... but less and less there is privacy. Even my own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal, now no longer, is so." (Desai, 1992, p. 115). As noted above, in orthodox Indian society, the utmost goal of a woman's life is to be a mother but Monisha is not able to conceive: "...they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons. I cannot have a child.... My insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid open to their scrutiny" (Desai, 1992, p. 113). Intellectual Monisha who reads Camus wonders over the Indian women who have unknowingly become the vehicle of Patriarchy: "...and I

think of generations of Bengali women hidden the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagwad-Gita* and the *Ramayana* in the dim light of sooty lamps" (Desai, 1992, p.120)."

Manisha: In Search of Wholeness

Monisha juxtaposes her "pain of bearing secrets, the frequent miscarriages and stillbirths" with Nirode's "failure as a writer" thereby showing the difference between educated men and women in society" (Desai, 1992, p.131). Even after Independence, a man's identity is created by his work whereas a woman's identity is created by being one's mother. She can never be completely herself. Despite all these facts, Monisha tries to be a typical Indian wife but the charge of theft brought by her mother-in-law destroys all her efforts to adjust herself to the family. She was not financially independent. At the same time, "a culture that idealizes the wife as her husband's *ardhangini* simultaneously denies her equal rights to his income!" (Sengupta, 2004, p.7). Jiban does not defend her because like hundreds and hundreds of Indian men, he 'worships' his mother/God, and God is infallible. Monisha became a dutiful daughter by conforming to the age-old practice of arranged marriage and trying to be a submissive wife and daughter-in-law but "the family here and their surrounding tell me such a life cannot be lived – a life dedicated to nothing - that this husk is a protection from death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that, surely, is not a difficult choice" (Desai, 1992, p.121). Thus, Monisha chooses death over life.

Monisha, the Rebel

Monisha is "a victim of Hindu familial ideology and patriarchal oppression" as well as "a victor, transcending the reaches of patriarchy in her 'madness' and death" (Mann, 1995, p. 165). She fails to internalize the values of her in-laws. She fails to become like the other Indian women who spend their lives waiting on "men self-centered 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" (Desai, 1992, p.120). She tries to practice non-attachment and reads the Bhagwat Gita: "I would have thought him capable of precisely that action without regard for the fruit of action which the Gita tells us is the finest wisdom of all... 'Castaway involvement'. I plead with him silently.... In pleading with him, exactly to what extent am I trying to persuade myself?" (Desai, 1992, p.124). She fails to accept Lord Krishna's words. In other words, Hindu Scripture fails to console her, fails to light her path. On another level, her suicide "may be viewed as her protest against the slow social killing of a woman. Monisha's raw act of defiance runs counter to the patriarchal imperative to uphold the imperfect institutions of marriage and family as sacred" (Sengupta, 2004, p.8).

Amla's Story: Disintegration versus Stability

In the third part of *Voices in the City*, we come to know about the story of Amla, the third sibling who arrives in Kolkata to pursue her career. Unlike Nirode and Monisha, she is determined to succeed, and "she seems neither burdened by an oppressive past nor desirous of a retreat to solitude" (Afzal-Khan, 1993, p.71). Rather she goes to parties to establish a clientele for herself in her professional world of advertising. She is an economically independent woman but very soon, she feels the 'rot' setting in - overnight, without warning" (Desai, 1992, p. 175). Nirode takes Amla to Dharma, a reclusive artist. They meet several times and Amla falls in love with Dharma: "Amla's love, knowing no possibility of manifestation, became one uncontrollable desire to communicate" (Desai, 1992, p.193). But she is betrayed by Dharma. He manipulates her for his benefit. As Mann puts it: "Where Jiban quells Monisha's early ardor with impassiveness, Dharma's treatment is even more reprehensible" (Desai, 1992, p.67). He exploits her love and uses her beauty and freshness to perfect his art and does not hesitate to throw her in favor of other models when she is no longer useful to him. In this way, her quest for identity seems to end in disillusionment but she "displays a resilience that still helps her shape her own life." Monisha's death changes her viewpoint about life and there is a hint at the end of the novel that she will begin anew as an illustrator of children's stories, thus signaling an optimistic response to life: "She knew that she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and sane people...because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin" (Desai, 1992, p.248).

Amla's "Compromise"

Thus, Amla's response to life is not rebellious as compared to Monisha's stance but it is a balanced response so far as living is concerned. Desai was of the view that "if one is alive in this world, one cannot survive without compromise....it is for heroes and martyrs to say 'the great Yes' or 'the great No' ...most of us have not the courage to say either yes or no. we say... "All right then, if I must..." (Ram, 1977, p. 98). But 'compromise' does not mean annihilation or losing one's self to any kind of external pressure because Amla's choice will involve her in a new struggle. In 1988, Desai opined that Indian women "have a life presented to them and they have to make the best of it." She further argues that they must rebel by way of "exercising whatever control they can within those parameters" (Bliss, 1988, p.524). She calls the Indian women to change the system by remaining within the system. By highlighting implicitly that the Hindu mythology and *Puranas* only make women fatalistic, Desai, through the character of Amla advocates to resist patriarchal domination by devising new strategies which would help them survive and to create 'a room of one's own'. Desai believes that in our country resistance and self-assurance are the two key words to help Indian women create their own identity and realize their full potential long repressed by parochial hegemony and gender roles which have their roots in Hindu religious books and socio-cultural fabric of India.

Otima, the Iconoclast

Both Monisha and Amla resist patriarchal domination in their ways but it is their mother, Otima, who is much more radical than her two educated, intelligent daughters. As Sengupta writes: "Otima is an iconoclast in her conception of womanhood. In a culture that once celebrated Sati and still appreciates...a life of austerity for widows, she feels free at the death of her husband and carries on with Major Chadha. In a country, which idealizes the mother...she rejects her children" (Sengupta, 2004, p. 9).

Otima as Kali

During the course of the novel, Otima has been identified with the image of Kali in more than one way. Kali is Shakti, or primal energy. She is *svatantra*, independent, her existence contingent upon nothing extraneous to herself (Mookerjee, 1988, p.9). According to Ajit Mookerjee, Kali will annihilate the patriarchal universe to reveal the truth of things and restore to us the divine feminine long lost (p.9). Otima has been associated with Kali several times in the narratives but the direct identification between Kali and Otima has been made by the main male character of the novel, Nirode, and therefore "a representative of the masculine principle Otima-Kali threatens" (Mann, 1995, p. 168). To Nirode, she is "night and day, light and dark. She is not merely good; she is not merely evil – she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached, she is everything from which we will always be detached.... She is the world and she is Maya" (Desai, 1995, p.29). To Nirode, she is the giver as well as the taker of life but in the words of Amla: "Mother...that is all" (Desai, 1992, p. 253). Thus, Otima not only turns down the age-old conception of motherhood and widowhood but also presents a new identity for a woman who is the decision-maker of her own life. Otima projects that a mother is a human being with all her complexities and contradictions, not a God who is infallible. Otima deconstructs the image of a self-sacrificing mother and submissive wife thereby challenging the patriarchal 'underpinnings' of Indian society. "In her portrayal of Otima as Kali," as Sengupta (2004) says, "Desai overturns the ideal representation of the Indian woman as a self-effacing being" (p.9).

Calcutta, the City of Kali

The City of Calcutta has been described as a 'monster city' (Desai, 1992, p.150). It is also the place where women are oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal social order. It is also the place where people come to form their own identity. It is also a city of protest and revolutionary ideas – 'cholera, cholbena!' (Desai, 1992, p.118). It is a "city of Kali" also (Desai, 1992, p. 137). The novel ends with a procession celebrating the goddess and this ending reinforces this image by fusing their mother with Kali. The procession also signifies the emergence of a new Indian woman who like the Goddess is an autonomous being, not dependent on anybody to find her happiness, bold enough to deconstruct all those stereotypes which do not grant her the status of a human being.

Conclusion

Thus, as the title of the novel suggests, there are so many voices in the city. The voices of the three self-conscious women can be interpreted as three different modes of resistance to patriarchal colonization. Thus, though India became independent by decolonizing herself from the bondage of the British Raj in 1947, Indian women are still struggling to decolonize themselves from the slavery of Hindu fundamentalism to forge their own identity. Indian patriarchy and gender discrimination have their roots in the Hindu religious scriptures and socio-cultural ethos of India and Desai hints that women's liberation in India can also find its root in Hindu scripture in the image of the archetypal goddess Kali.

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