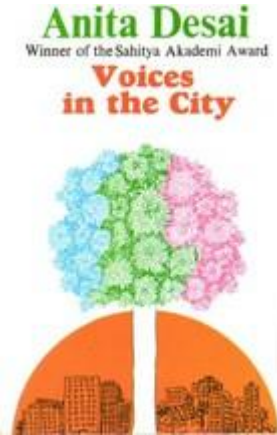


Studying the Quest for Survival in the Protagonist Nirode in
Anita Desai's *Voices in The City*

Dr. Madhu Jindal



Abstract

Voices in the City, as the title suggests, deals with the voice of anger and visions of fear in the city of Calcutta. These voices, attempting to explore by a process of self-denial, the secret of permanent peace and happiness, are engaged, in their separate ways in charting survival strategies of life. They seek happiness on spiritual terms, not material, which in fact, is the sordidness, the brutality, and the sheer dreariness of the physical world. They see through the dark crust of appearance and experience “The horror! the horror!” of everyday life, more acutely than others. The ugly physical reality is something which they cannot accept. The external world is the antagonist which frustrates them at every moment of their lives. The city of Calcutta, which assumes the dimensions of a living character, thwarts their attempts again and again causing them to wilt under the pressure of life. As a matter of fact, they seem to be living in a pressure-cooker.

Keywords: modern, fear, angst, Joshi, survival

Introduction

Nirode, Monisha and Amla, all are young, intense and talented. Their shared quest for the meaning of life is a sensitive and image-filled experience, yet their responses differ because they are unlike one another. Unlike *Cry, the Peacock* which is a suffocating nightmare of the tortured psyche of an intense young woman, *Voices in the City* is a measured, matured attempt of a novelist to present the quest of three young intellectuals. They demand an authentic and pure existence, fed up as they are with a false, falsifying world. The theme of the novel is suggested quite early in the novel by Nirode himself in his conversation with David. He quotes Albert Camus:

In default of inexhaustible happiness eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies, come to an end one day.¹

Nirode's quest is for a destiny that helps him see beyond suffering and happiness. He becomes a rebel against the better judgment of David, who has found his balance and has come to terms with life after his own initial rebellion by running away from his home in Ireland.

Anita Desai's Superb Craftsmanship

Anita Desai's superb craftsmanship lies in her unobtrusive style of narrating the story and creating the atmosphere, leading at once to an orderly composition and a convincing picture of life in contemporary Calcutta. She probes not only the individual consciousness of Nirode but also the social consciousness of a world which is both real and unreal. This fascinating but difficult and complex novel is truly indicative of the direction of modern India's soul. It is interesting to see what Lionel Trilling says about the function of the novel in general. Says he:

The novel is a 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 soul²

It is precisely in this sense that we must study Anita Desai's *Voices of the City* which is a quest for reality, inner as well as outer.

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The Dilemma

The novel has four parts, each dealing mainly with a major character, but Nirode, the protagonist of the novel, remains the dominant character in all the four parts. R.K. Dhawan rightly observes.

Voices in the City sketches the spiritual odyssey of a world weary, lean and hungry-looking journalist named Nirode, doomed to reside in Calcutta the 'city of death' The novel is a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual, who has lost his way in contemporary India.³

Nirode is unique in his feelings and thoughts and seeks absolute freedom. Desai distinguishes between the marsh birds (Dharma and David) and the king kites (Nirode, Monisha and Amla). Dharma and David try to escape the suffocating reality of life, yet they are only "like marsh birds who could not fly long, but hopped along the ground about the water, in the rushes" (p.22). But to Nirode who seeks absolute freedom, "To be a marsh bird was not enough... One must be a king kite wheeling so far away in the blazing empty sky so as to be merely a dot, almost invisible to the urchins who stood below..." (p.72). Unlike David and Dharma, Nirode cannot be satisfied with the clouds, inaccessible to everyone, attainable to every request, tense longing to tear away all the fetters and to be completely alone, isolated and absolutely free even if it means total emptiness and insignificance. Only in the end does he realize that this type of empty life is next to nothing and has no value even to him.

In the beginning, Nirode is shown working for some newspaper, which he decides to give up because he has reached the limit where it has become "impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, ... at such senseless jobs?" (p.18). What Nirode needs, as he himself says at this point in the novel, is "three drinks a night and a room of my own that's all I ask..." (p.33). The absence of positive faith or a sense of permanent commitment in Nirode makes him drop one thing after another. He starts working on a magazine but does not have high notions or dreams about it; rather he is obsessed with the desire to woo failure after failure in life. He tells his friend David quite early: "I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step

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by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder , all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off-fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly (p.40).

Quest for Meaning

Nirode moves from one failure to another in search of an abiding meaning in life. To fail and start on a new project gives him, in a way , heroic dimensions. The yearning to fail quickly in order to start afresh denotes the process of climbing up. He is engaged in an unequal fight against the social and commercial values of life which the city of Calcutta symbolizes. He is conscious of the fact that the values of the contemporary civilization are hollow, have nothing to quench his thirst for spiritual survival. The magazine plan fails to hold his attention or faith for long. He happily accepts David's view that the magazine is already a failure. He tells him that he wants the magazine to fail because he wants to arrive at the meaning of life through failures. When his friend wish to launch him on a journey to success with the following issue of the magazine, he frankly tells David that he does not want to be caught in the web of the success of the magazine. He even fears that his friends would take away his freedom by thrusting the burden of success on his shoulders:

It seemed to him his friends were forcing upon him a crusade, a career, a way of life and a set of ideas that set upon his shoulders like an iron custodian, grasping and restraining... Be true, they pleaded, be alone. Starve, but do not resign. Succeed-some-how, in some way-succeed in preserving, in surviving. But do not fail, do not fail us (p.71).

The fact that his friends encourage him to succeed in his venture makes him hate them all the more. Now he wants to get rid of all of them by turning his success into failure. For Nirode, happiness lies in something higher than pursuit of worldly and to open a book shop where he will be free from all obligations and dependence on other people. He thinks that his friends are all in

pursuit of wealth and physical pleasure. Their hollowness of purpose in life arouses disgust in Nirode. He believes that a thinking man like him should not desire materialistic happiness:

“Anyone who feels happy deserves to die. If we were all to become- happy... the world would come to a stand still and no one would move another step. How would you like your trains to stop dead once they’ve arrived at some lunatic happy station ? Wouldn’t that be death to you ?” (p.94).

Nirode is in search of the true meaning of life and the play he is writing clearly shows that he is conscious of his loss of identity and reflects his own quest. His overwork, starvation, carelessness about his own self and excessive investment with the play—all these combine to make him ill. What emerges out of this illness is a Nirode who is “a combination of acquiescence and renunciation” (p.131). Even the play which he has written now appears a complete writers vain, people who aspire to ascribe their names to their creations, forgetting that true art is nameless, and belongs to the universe with which the creative artist identifies himself. Like a true existentialist, he continuous his quest for an abiding meaning in life.

Quite like Arjuna, Nirode is a rebel who rejects the world of security and routine. He loathes routine and wonders how one can spend one’s lifetime on “something that does not matter.” 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. Better not to live” (p.18).

Nirode is unable to accept the falseness of human existence. He is leading a life of complete bareness and wants to escape, though to nowhere in special. He is unable to pursue a regular career because he has realized the hollowness of all jobs. His is a quest where there should be no absurdity and falsity. Life, to him, is meaningless, is absurd like the journey of Sisyphus. The magazine voice is a voice in the wilderness, failing to build any contact between him and the world. It is a force and he frankly admits his failure. “Where was the will to get up, select another ladder, and begin the journey of absurdity all over again?... Nothing existed but this void in which all things appeared equally insignificant, equally worthless” (p.63). Like

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Maya, Nirode rejects both faith and the need for faith surviving only through doubt and questioning. He is troubled by question, like. “What for do I exist in the world? What is the ultimate reality of life?” For him, all worldly pursuits amount to bare, nothingness: “Happiness, suffering—I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end” (p.140). He is unable to dispel the ignorance in his mind, and naturally, continues to live in a state of confusion as regard the destination of life. In his present situation, however, Nirode is acting as an escapist and defeatist. Lacking the will and courage to live life in its fullness, he turns an eternal drifter. Asha Kanwar says in this context:

Nirode is on a restless, unending but futile quest, and wants to understand his identity. But his quest is thwarted by his own nature and predicament. What is still worse is that, being the product of no particular educational or cultural inheritance, he has to face his dilemma all by himself.⁴

The underlying reason of all this disillusionment and negativism of Nirode is that he is too sensitive to accept his mother’s infidelity towards his father. His shattered love for his mother, with whom he earlier identified himself, has created the crisis in his life. He seems to be avenging himself on his mother’s sin of living with Major Chaddha in Kalimpong. He starts hating the society where a wife can live happily by betraying her husband. Harish Raizada analyses the reasons of Nirode’s withdrawal thus:

Alienated from his mother, Nirode turns rootless. He loses his faith in life and develops an attitude of ‘complete negation’, he passes one failure after another and treats it as a creed of his life. 5

Nirode fails to find any sustenance in life. No human relationship, no vocation, links him to the act of living. He refuses to take any help from his mother. He even wants to shed his home, because it lends him false identity. He is filled with the sense of the world’s worthlessness. The world and its multifarious activities offer no inspiration to him, and he reduces himself to a shadow, a cipher, sensing his life as one frustration after another. He even resists any financial help from his mother and decided to fight his battle all alone. He likes to live in anonymity, and acquires his own kind of detachment: It could not, after all, make any

difference to him whether he lived amongst men serene and reasonable and gentle, or men who fought like crows over every carcass. In his state of purely detached acceptance of “world not worth realizing, nothing could matter enough to trouble him” (p.185).

However, this is not the last stage of Nirode’s development. He discovers a new meaning of life in Monisha’s suicide. He turns into a person who can divert the energies of his self to enlarge its perceptiveness. He confesses to Amla that it was a mistake on his part to try to pursue failure after failure to reach the bottom because “You cannot descend to such complete darkness, such complete isolation, all exposed” (p.184)

Conclusion

Nirode is the central character of the novel who is at the verge of losing his essential humanity. However, in the process of the life experience, he regains his human capacity to sympathies with Amla and aunt Lila in their suffering. In these moments of interpersonal empathy and tenderness, he reaches out of them, shares their feelings and is filled with tenderness for the world. He is filled in an immense care of the world. He reaches out, again and again, to touch Amla’s cold hands. He presses them in hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other’s flesh, other’s pain, longs to make them his own, which till now has been agonizingly neglected. In his eyes, Monisha is a martyr who has met a splendid death. Her death gives him a glimpse of the secret of life and of death. He feels elevated to an unimaginably high vantage point where he could see the “whole fantastic design of life and death, of incarnation followed by reincarnation, of unconsciousness turning into consciousness of sleep followed by waking” (p.249). However, this experience does not liberate Nirode. His ecstasy and relief soon vanish at the prospect of once again meeting his mother and being caught in a trap of “communion, relationship, joy and responsibility” (p.250). Nirode’s chaotic state of mind indicates the terror of the dark unknown: Death. He tells Amla that he has been sentenced to death. “I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach death, Kali... while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute, and also closer and closer to my death” (p.256). Nirode recognizes the duality of knowledge and ignorance, reality and illusion, good and evil, life and death. He has, no doubt, turned cynical superficially, but essentially he is

a quester who wants to make his own conclusion. He falls into a fit of despair only to come out with a clearer vision of life.

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