



Physical Violence in Anita Desai's Novels

Priyanka Rai

Dept. of English, DDU University, Gorakhpur (U.P.) India

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Abstract: *Violence against women has been recognized by the international community as the most fundamental violation of women's human right. The United Nations General Assembly adopting the declaration on the 'Elimination of Violence against Women' had affirmed that, "violence against women constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and impairs or nullifies their enjoyment of those rights and freedom" and expressed its concern about the long standing failure to protect and promote those rights and freedoms in the case of women. Recommendation 19 of the committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women defines gender based violence as "a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedom on the basis of equality with men (Unifem, 2005, 28).*

Key Words: violence, community, fundamental violation, human right, elimination of violence.

Basically violence against women can be divided in two categories, keeping in mind the context of Desai's novels:

1. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the

community, including rape, sexual abuse, harassment and related violence and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence related to exploitation (Goel, 2006, 5-6).

Anita Desai doesn't claim to be a feminist and yet she clearly portrays the various forms of violence and gender prejudices against women practiced routinely in Indian society or anywhere in the world. Undeniably violence is there in life and as a part of life it must be observed by the artists but without segregation from the other aspects. Anita Desai portrays violence with an effect of an all-out assault on the senses, geared to bring to the surface and expose all the passions and instincts hidden within men's archetypal viscera by incorporating them in performance. The implication of such a strategy, like the theatre of cruelty, is not necessarily the infliction of pain-beatings, torture, and mangling of human bodies, although this may be used to create the required impact. Violence implies rather, an intensity and severity of emotional attack which is

calculated to drain the ulcer of man's repressed animal desire and instincts — the aggression, the lust, hates and sadistic impulses which even Artaud believed to be held in suppuration beneath the mark of civilised behavior (Seth, 1993, 9). Anita Desai has done it beautifully and has dealt with it in its proper proportion. She does have in her cognizance the brutal effect of violence on the tender psyche of women and also the recurrent humiliation and tough ordeal through which a woman, particularly of the middle class, has to undergo. There is no heavy bloodshed and carnage, no unbearable physical battering but as often in the Indian domestic scenario the covert potential of violence lies. Even the slightest stimulation, not necessarily by the weaker sex, sometimes by the disappointment of man himself, causes its manifestation and it lays down its overt spectacle. Ann Duffy in a thought provoking article, "The Feminist Challenge: Knowing and Ending The Violence" rightly states "The lives of almost all women, regardless of class, caste, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or disability have been distorted by violence and the expectation of violence.... Violence permeates their life experience and sense of self (Duffy, 1995, 152)". Duffy further asserts "Research indicates that



regardless of the form of violence, it has a dramatic impact on the target and leads sometimes to attempted suicide, often to withdrawal from a work situation and frequently to significant psychological effects such as depression, self-blame and anxiety (Duffy, 164)".

Anita Desai's novels give expression to the long smothered wail of hurt psyche. Anita Desai has tried to understand intimately the predicament of female character. Her novels are tales of blunted human relationships. The fate of Desai's protagonists, Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul is similar. She finds lack of freedom for women as they lead a life in confinement. Women are not treated equally with men and discriminatory attitude is adopted towards them. Male controls and determines a female's destiny and freedom often with direct physical subjugation. Such instances profusely teem in *Voices In The City* and *Clear Light Of The Day*. In *Voices In The City* (1965), Monisha is an intelligent girl but deprived of freedom like Maya. She is always worried and unhappy. She yearns for her freedom like again Maya and wants to assert her individuality. So she has to face the hostile attitude of her father, brother and her mother-in-law. Aunt Lila remarks: "our country belongs to men (*Voices ... 149*)". This remark evidently reveals the traditional status of woman and male dominance in Indian society. The novel gives a contestation regarding the central protagonist. But the novel itself is primarily a family drama around which the story revolves. Even the blurb of the novel says that the novel describes the corrosive effects of the city life upon the Indian family. The whole novel is divided in the four sections---- Nirode', 'Monisha', 'Amla', and 'Mother'. This chapter divisions tells us that inspite of the important role played by the city of Calcutta, the novel is more concerned with the characters. The novel presents a squalid picture of a Bengali family in a state of disintegration. The novel is a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of a young intellectual who pours out his frustration on his mother and wife. It is an illustration of what Anita Desai called in an interview with Yashodhra Dalmia, "the terror of

facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence (Dalmia, 1979, 13)". Out of the four chapters the second seems to be more important as it is written in the first person, while the remaining three are in third person. The second part deals with Monisha and her diary. Monisha is married to Jiban who is a middle-rung officer in the government department with a large joint family. This is a typical middle class family. Monisha is tormented equally by her husband and by her loneliness. She has not been capacitated for bearing a child, her in communication with her unmoved husband and the suspicion of her in-laws who condemn her as a thief oblige her to choose between death and mean existence. Like Maya she is a victim of ill - matched marriage. The overcrowded family members of the house make her uneasy even though she has a room of her own. The tendency to exploit daughter-in-law is exposed with ironical pointedness as Monisha is "summoned to massage her (mother-in-law's) legs, for the aunts are all worn out. I go and massage them (*Voices ... 139*)". A pathetic example of the inhuman treatment is meted out to her when she is accused of having stolen money in the house and her husband, Jiban, instead of tracing out the truth takes for granted that she has committed the theft thereby falsifying her position and thrusting guilt upon her. The consequence of the mental torture, she is subjected to, are movingly described in her diary. She has lost contact with the outside world because of her confinement in the house, but contact through letters which somehow have not been interrupted: "I am still allowed letters." The pathetic condition in which she experiences a diminishing of her personality is summed up in these words on receipt of a letter from her sister:

Here's Amla. She is coming to Calcutta, to work. Amla in Calcutta. I wonder what she is like now, my little sister. Oh not little now--- with all her talents, her career, her confidence (*Voices 139*) of my weight, my appurtenances, the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eye of the world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet (*Voices ... 139*).

Through Monisha, Anita Desai

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has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman who is suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of her in-laws' house. She is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. She appears to have been transplanted in wrong soil. Because of her intellectual nature she does not take interest in religion even though she reads the Bhagvad Gita. Her agony seems to speak out for herself:

If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair. There is nothing I can give myself to, so I must stay (Voices ...173)

Monisha's plight depicts not only her individual state but also the state of so many daughters-in-law who become jailbirds in the houses of their husbands. Even husbands fail to understand them and to communicate with them because of their father's and mother's domination. Monisha has represented typical social situation of so many young brides in India who having no capacity to bear the endless tormenting, provocative and pinching behaviour of the husband's family members, consequently end up as in cases of suicide, bride burning or self-immolation. In Indian context Monisha's death is of a great social significance. Keats too was troubled by such fever and fret of life, the burden of mortality and was sick of the world "where youth grows pale, specter thin and dies; where beauty can't keep her lustrous eyes." The life of a woman like Monisha in the given circumstances is never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death. Her impending death by suicide is poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death that comes later in the novel. She yearns for eternal darkness beyond sleep because even sleep can have nightmares. She feels herself totally submerged in darkness, she doesn't want even the stars to which she has referred in the context of what separates her from Jiban's family:

Leave me to gather the stars, frosty and distant and cool. Leave me to gather and then to reject them. Queenly. have only the darkness. Only the dark spaces between the stars, for they are the only thing

on the earth that can comfort me, rub a balm into my wounds, into my throbbing heads and bring this coolness, this stillness, this interval of peace (Voices ... 189).

This behavioural incongruity of Monisha is a subsequence of violence perpetrated against her. David Mc Reynolds remarks: "The individual is never able to understand that he is an important part of some meaningful whole. Our hearts ache with loneliness but we do not know how to talk with one another (David, 1960, 204)." Norman Mailer, one of the major exponents of the Beat Generation writers, castigated Totalitarianism in all fields and exhorted Americans to "accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society; to exist without roots, to get out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self (Mailer, 1964-65,271)."

Monisha is oppressed by a sense of perturbation./ In the privacy of her room she was harassed and oppressed by frightful nuisance that recurred itself like the motif of nightmare from which there appeared no escape. She was also harassed by the "damp pressure of critical attention": sister-in-law across her bed discussing her ovaries and tubes. The deficiency of privacy makes her insane. It is a disturbing and disconsoling picture, wherever you turn, in whichever direction you go, there is no escape in Anita Desai's work. There is no escape from lack of solitude. It is a life of eternal suffering, a life hedged in by an enclosed space which permits no options. Anita Desai is not a feminist, but since she is a woman, she has completely probed the interior of Monisha far better than that of Nirode.

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