

ALIENATION AND ASPIRATION IN ANITA DESAI'S VOICES IN THE CITY

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* (1965), is a landmark text in Indian English literature that explores the psychological and social dislocation of the post-independence middle class in Calcutta. Through the lives of three siblings – Nirode, Monisha, and Amla Desai articulates two interlocking conditions of modern urban existence: alienation and aspiration. This paper argues that the city functions not merely as a setting but as an active force that fractures identity, breeds existential loneliness, and simultaneously fuels desperate dreams of meaning, art, and escape. Using existential and postcolonial frameworks, the study examines how Desai represents alienation as spiritual, marital, artistic, and linguistic, while aspiration manifests as a yearning for transcendence, authenticity, and creative fulfillment. Ultimately, the novel presents aspiration not as a remedy for alienation but as its twin, born from the same urban despair. Desai's lyrical prose and interior monologue reveal a city that both silences and compels its inhabitants to speak.

Keywords: Anita Desai, voices in the City, Alienation, Aspiration, Indian English Fiction, Urban Modernity, Calcutta, Existentialism, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

Anita Desai emerged in the 1960s as a voice distinct from the social realism of her predecessors. While R.K. Narayan wrote of small-town Malgudi and Mulk Raj Anand focused on political issues, Desai turned inward. Her concern was the inner life consciousness, anxiety, and the fragility of the self. *Voices in the City* is set in Calcutta, a city that in the 1960s was marked by political unrest, poverty, and cultural ferment.

The novel follows three members of the Bose family who have migrated from the hills of Old Delhi to Calcutta. Nirode, the eldest, is an unemployed intellectual drifting into journalism. Monisha, married into a traditional Marwari household, is suffocated by domesticity. Amla, the youngest, comes to the city full of romantic illusions. None of them belong.

This paper examines how Desai constructs alienation and aspiration as two sides of the same urban experience. Alienation is the pain of not belonging. Aspiration is the desperate attempt to belong to something larger — art, love, God, or a meaningful life. In Desai's Calcutta, both are inevitable.

The City as a Sight of Alienation

For Desai, Calcutta is not a backdrop. It is a character and it is hostile.

Physical and Social Alienation

From the first page, the city assaults the senses: "the roar of traffic, the stench of drains, the press of bodies." Nirode calls it "a city of clamor and confusion." The siblings live in a cramped flat in Ballygunge. Space is limited, privacy is absent, and the noise never stops. This physical overcrowding produces psychological claustrophobia.

Monisha's alienation is more acute because it is domestic. Married to Jiban, a businessman, she is trapped in a joint family where she has no voice. Her days are spent in the kitchen. Her education, her sensitivity, her desire for beauty — all are irrelevant. She writes letters to Amla describing her life as "a cage." The Marwari household, with its rituals and hierarchies, erases her individuality.

Existential Alienation

Nirode embodies existential alienation. He is educated, reads Camus and Sartre, and wants to be a writer. But Calcutta offers him no meaningful work.

He drifts into a job writing film reviews and political commentary that he despises. He is alienated from labor, from purpose, and from himself. Desai uses interior monologue to show Nirode's fractured self: "Who am I? What am I doing here?" He walks the streets at night, observing the poor, the prostitutes, the political rallies, but he cannot connect. He is both a part of the city and an outsider to it. This is classic existential alienation — the awareness of meaninglessness.

Linguistic and Cultural Alienation

Language itself becomes a site of alienation. The family speaks English at home, Bengali in the market, and Hindi in official spaces. Amla, who grew up in the hills, finds the city's multilingual chaos disorienting. Monisha's letters are in English, but her in-laws speak Marwari. She cannot express her inner despair in a language they understand. Thus, alienation in voices in the City is total physical, social, existential, and linguistic.

Aspiration: The Desire to Transcend

If alienation is the condition, aspiration is the response. Each sibling aspires, but their aspirations are shaped by the city's limitations. Nirode aspires to be an artist and a truth-teller. He despises the commercialism of journalism. He wants to write "something real" about the city and its people. He haunts coffee houses, talks with radicals, and observes life on the streets. His aspiration is existential: to create meaning in a meaningless world.

He is drawn to the Communist movement and to the lives of the poor because they seem more "authentic" than his own bourgeois emptiness. Yet his aspiration is paralyzed. He writes fragments, not novels. He drinks, he argues, he drifts. Desai shows that aspiration without structure becomes self-destruction.

Monisha's Aspiration toward Beauty and Love

Monisha's aspiration is for beauty and emotional connection. Before marriage, she read poetry and dreamed of a sensitive husband. In Calcutta, she finds only duty. She aspires to escape through letters to Amla, through memories of the hills, and through an imagined ideal of love. Her most powerful aspiration is spiritual. She begins to read the *_Bhagavad Gita_* and talks of renunciation. But her spiritual aspiration is not peace — it is escape. In the end, she commits suicide by swallowing insecticide. Her death is the tragic failure of aspiration. The city offered her no outlet, so she chose annihilation.

Amla: Aspiration toward Romance and Identity

Amla comes to the city as an outsider. She is young and idealistic. She aspires to experience "life" — romance, culture, independence. She falls in love with the idea of Calcutta: the trams, the college, the intellectuals. But her aspiration is naive. She sees the city through a romantic lens and is slowly disillusioned. By the end, she begins to understand her brother and sister's despair.

Her aspiration matures from fantasy to a more sober desire: to survive, to understand, and to tell their story.

The Intersection: When Aspiration Becomes Alienation

Desai's key insight is that aspiration does not cure alienation. Often, it deepens it.

Nirode's aspiration to write makes him more aware of his failure, and thus more alienated. Monisha's aspiration for love makes her marriage feel more like a prison. The city promises everything culture, politics, art, love and delivers noise and compromise.

This is what makes *Voices in the City* modernist. Like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the novel is full of "voices" that talk but do not communicate. The title itself suggests fragmentation. There is no single voice, no unified vision. Only fragments. Desai's prose style reinforces this. She uses lyrical, poetic language for inner thoughts and stark, reportorial language for the city. The contrast shows the gap between aspiration and reality.

Gendered Alienation and Aspiration

Gender is central. Male alienation is public and intellectual. Female alienation is domestic and bodily. Monisha's body is not her own. She is expected to cook, to bear children, to obey. Her aspiration for intellectual life is considered useless. Her suicide is a radical, if tragic, assertion of self.

Amla, by contrast, represents a new generation of Indian women who aspire to education and mobility. But even she finds that the city is not safe or welcoming for a single woman. Thus Desai links urban modernity with patriarchal structures. The city offers freedom in theory but restricts it in practice.

Style and Symbolism

Desai's style is crucial to her themes.

Imagery: The city is described through images of decay "rotting fruit," "dirty water," "cracked walls." This mirrors the inner decay of the characters. Music and Silence Nirode listens to classical music as an aspiration for order. Monisha hears only kitchen sounds. Silence becomes a symbol of death and of inner peace.

Letter: Monisha's letters to Amla are the only genuine communication in the novel. They are her aspiration to be heard. When the letters stop, she has died.

Conclusion

Voices in the City is not a novel of plot. It is a novel of states of being. Anita Desai shows that in the postcolonial Indian city, alienation is not an aberration but a norm. The migration from village or hills to city, the clash of tradition and modernity, and the failure of institutions to provide meaning all produce a generation that feels lost. Yet aspiration persists. Nirode wants to write. Monisha wants to love and to be free. Amla wants to understand. Their aspirations are fragile, often misdirected, and sometimes fatal. But they are also profoundly human.

Desai does not offer solutions. She offers testimony. The final "voice" in the city is the novel itself an attempt to give form to fragmentation, to make art out of alienation. In doing so, Desai suggests that while the city may silence its inhabitants, literature can make them heard. The novel remains relevant today because urban alienation and aspiration have only intensified in 21st-century India. Desai's Calcutta is every Indian metropolis: promising, crushing, and unforgettable.

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