

Voices from Cages: Deconstructed Self

(With Reference to Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*)

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ABSTRACT

A woman remains a rootless alienated self whether born in any caste, culture, a rural or urban, sharing the same violation of human rights. One form of slavery that defies dignity and desecrates treasures of womanhood, is prevalent nationally and internationally. Women lead a peripheral existence where life becomes an ordeal which gives the souls thousand bruises even time cannot heal. Anita Desai depicts women who are isolated and dejected whom past fails and present offers no consolation. Violence against women has its genesis in a set of specific social arrangements that simultaneously foster a high prevalence of violence and thwart the development of both individual and collective human potential. This violence may involve an attempt to annihilate the partner's voice and presence, to erode or deconstruct her sense of self and reality and even her faith in humanity. Monisha in *Voices in the city*, is pitted against a cruel, unrelenting and insensitive social environment which betrayed, bartered and then brunt her. Finally she has to make a choice and she decides for herself a dignified death of a barred tiger in the zoo. Though she couldn't have a dignified life but died in a dignified manner. Resolute action and enlightened societal behavior would certainly reverse the path of women like Monisha from complete detachment leading to disaster.

Key Words : Cages, Deconstructed, alienated, peripheral existence, betrayed, detachment.

In the 16th century, the first woman epic poet Chandravati's Sita, in Bengali, pours out her heart to Lakshmana, 'I have no

father/ I have no mother/ I was found at the tip of a plough/ I don't know who my parents are/ or who my brother is / like moss in a stream/ I float from shore to shore...' (Sen, 131)

This song underlines the fundamental insecurity of women and finds the universal woman as the essential orphan. For, a woman grows up as a being without her own identity, a rootless, alienated self. The lives of all women: whether a rural or urban, a Dalit or an upper-caste, a slum dweller or a bungalow dweller, experiencing different cultural environments and positioning, share essentially the same violation of human rights and violence manifested in various forms. She manages to balance awareness of gender rights with outdated cultural expectation.

Though Rabindranath Tagore cast another mythical image of Chitrangada who is symbol of new gender construction. Tagore integrated woman's sexuality and her identity as man's comrade in the sphere outside home. Chitrangada protested against being deified so as to neglect and ignore woman. Chitrangada announced for herself, "I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity, to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you design to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self." (Nehru, 41)

Similarly Jawahar Lal Nehru appreciated Chitrangada's moral strength and physical prowess. He lashed out strongly against the passive acceptance by women over the years, of man-made laws which are intended to shackle and enslave women and treat them as chattels. Nehru was against the view that regarded women as effeminate emasculated, weak and powerless, to be resurrected by strong men. Men had been colonizers while women were colonized.

The gender inequalities are not associated with any particular race which have travelled in space and time from the primordial period to the present day. Helen Cixous rightly says: "If women were to set themselves to transform history, it can safely be said that every aspect of history would be completely altered." (Nair jaya, 60) Since the dawn of civilization, man has been a phenomenal exploiter that always sabotaged woman's rights. Gerda Lerner explains women's predicament:

Women have been left out of history not because of the civil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male centred(sic) terms... We have asked questions of history, which are inappropriate to women. (Showalter, 457-78)

Women, therefore, had to fight for their own rights since no group, no class, community; no country had ever got rid of its disabilities by the generosity of the oppressor. To preserve self and preservation of the race, which are the essential naturalistic fundamentals of all species, man involves in the wanton act of degrading woman at every step.

Woman's existence in the world faces various onslaughts with changing times and shifting situations. The outside male dominated world, which is full of hype and hoopla, affects their inner lives. Women lead a peripheral existence where life becomes an ordeal which gives the souls numerous bruises time cannot heal.

Anita Desai's women too, strive to establish their identity in the society so that they may be seen as right bearing human beings and not as mere objects. She depicts women as hyper-sensitive, introspective who feel utterly isolated and dejected. Past fails to comfort them and the present does not offer any consolation. In one of her inner views, Anita Desai observed, "I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current; it makes no demands, it causes no effects. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great no', who fight the current and struggle against it; they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them." (Dalmia, 13)

Monisha, in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* is a well educated, intellectually gifted and highly motivated individual but trapped in a social milieu she cannot identify with and thus ensures the psychic ordeal. Monisha is different and is not one of those Bengali Women, "who follow five paces behind their men... generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading

dough”. (Desai, 120) She is like a caged animal in her in-laws house. She is a voracious reader, an intellectual with a liking for Kafka, Hopkins and Dostoyevsky. She is dazed and confused and suffers alienation at the hands of her husband and his domineering die hard traditional members of the family.

A sense of emotional insecurity creeps early into Monisha's psyche. Her father choosing Jiban as her life partner demonstrates the tyrannical authority of the father in the male-dominated society but also gives scope to the suspicion if fathers “unconsciously spite their daughters who were unavailable to them?”(198) Monisha's marriage which should have been the beginning of matrimonial bliss and harmony ironically becomes the beginning of her gradual disintegration leading unto death.

Monisha's predicament is that she is forced to a servile existence within the rigid confines of traditional Hindu joint family. Jiban quotes from Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore who are women liberation champions but never put their ideals into practice . Amla , Monisha's younger sister , wonders ,” How it was that Monisha had been married to this boring , non- entity , this blind moralist ”. (198) Anita Desai endeavours to unravel the miasma of society's expectations from individuals , sandwiched between desires and denials on one hand and reticence and rhapsody on the other .

Through her bedroom windows ,through its bars , other bars and other walls are also visible which tell about Monisha's restricted existence . Her individuality is steadily smothered as she finds herself powerless to take even the smallest decisions about her life. (Kalidasan, 118) Monisha is ‘allowed’ to do one thing while she is ‘not allowed ‘to do other things. Neither is ‘permitted ‘ to accompany her sister Amla.

Monisha's yearning to devote her time to scholarly pursuits are smashed. For “intellectuality in women is deemed as a direct betrayal of their fundamental feminine nature”, observes Shanta (Krishanaswamy 251). As a result her psyche is completely bruised and battered . In so many walls of Calcutta house of Monisha , her very freedom is at stake . Sunita Rao says that if a woman is left alone to herself , “it is exemption from the oppression of patriarchal societies”. (Roy, 48) Monisha longs for few moments of privacy

and freedom which she is offered here and there but such life is “only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain , never to arrive at a solution ? Only a conundrum “C is that , then , life ?”(124-125) Monisha knows and understands ultimately that her survival lies in acceptance of defeat . Hers is a “choice between death and mean existence , and that surely is not a difficult choice”.(122)

Violence against women has its genesis in a set of specific social arrangements that simultaneously foster a high prevalence of violence and thwart the development of both individual and collective human potential . This violence may involve an attempt to annihilate the partner's voice and presence , to erode or deconstruct her sense of self and reality and even her faith in humanity . Such violence is legitimized in customs and traditions of societal set up . These are threat to women's liberty , freedom and dignity in the family and outside . Charlotte Bunch asserts that:

“violence against women is not only personal or cultural ,it is profoundly political . It results from the structural relationship of power , domination and privilege between men and women in society . Violence against women is central to maintaining these political relations at home , at work , and in all spheres Further , the assumption that states are not responsible for most violations of women's rights ignores the fact that such abuses , although committed perhaps by private citizens , are often condoned or sanctioned by states ... The most insidious myth about women's rights is that they are trivial or secondary to the concerns of life and death . Nothing could be farther from the truth : sexism kills . There is increasing documentation of the many ways in which being female is life threateningIt constitutes a deadly denial of women's rights to life and liberty on a large scale throughout the world .” (Charlotte, 3-5)

Monisha , is pitted against a cruel , unrelenting and insensitive social environment which betrayed , bartered and then brunt her.

As Shanta Krishanaswami says, "her (Monisha) marriage is the excruciating, destructive and negative of all social institutions that trap and torture her isolated, sensitive psyche." (Krishnaswamy, 250) Monisha's perception that "she is different from them all" proves to be disastrous for her.

Monisha's life appears "traceless, meaningless, uninvolved" (139) and hence a "non-existence". She like Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach" is forced to say:

...for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain...

Monisha knows instinctively that for her "aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring" (24). She perhaps expresses Beauvoir's powerful feelings:

"Women must judge and be critical, She cannot remain a mere docile echo...what she is able to agree within her husband's way of thinking she should agree only through an independent act of judgement...she cannot borrow from another her own reasons for existing". (Beauvoir, 208)

Finally she has to make a choice and she decides for herself a dignified death of a barred tiger in the zoo. Though she couldn't have a dignified life but died in a dignified manner.

Conventional sociological practices have tended to marginalize women and render invisible. Though social transformation followed by resolute action and enlightened societal behavior would certainly reverse the path of women like Monisha from complete detachment leading to disaster, to arrival and involvement. As Leo Kanowitz points out:

"Rules of law that treat of the sexes per se inevitably produce far reaching effects upon social, psychological and economic aspects of male "C

female relations ...When men and women are prevented from recognizing one another's essential humanity by sexual prejudices nourished by legal as well as social institutions, society as a whole remains less than it could otherwise become ." (Nagendra, 136)

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