



Urban Alienation and Identity Crisis in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

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Abstract: In *Voices in the City*, Calcutta is more than a backdrop — it works almost like a character in its own right, pressing down on the people who live in it and slowly reshaping who they are. Anita Desai uses the lives of three siblings to trace what city life does to the psyche in a India just emerging from colonial rule. Nirode drifts further from the world around him and from himself, until he's left in a kind of frozen, over-thought detachment. Monisha, married into a rigid, tradition-bound household, is quietly suffocating — her silence isn't peace; it's entrapment. Amla is the exception: instead of being worn down by the city, she pushes back against it, trying to carve out a life and identity that belong to her alone. Read together, the three stories build a subtle but sharp portrait of what alienation, gender, and the search for identity look like under the strain of a society changing faster than its people can adjust. This paper looks closely at the urban alienation and identity crisis running through *Voices in the City*.

Keywords Anita Desai; *Voices in the City*, urban alienation, identity crisis, postcolonialism; gender.

Introduction

Anita Desai holds a distinctive place among Indian writers in English, and not because her novels are built around dramatic public events. What she's interested in is quieter and harder to pin down — what happens inside a person when the world around them simply won't make room for who they are. She was born on 24 June 1937 in Mussoorie, into a family that took reading and ideas seriously, where the inner life wasn't treated as something trivial. You can feel that upbringing in her fiction. Novel after novel, she keeps circling back to the same terrain: a self coming apart under pressure, the burden of cultural expectation, and a very specific kind of loneliness that comes from feeling out of step with the life you're actually living.

Voices in the City sits right in the middle of that concern. The Calcutta of the novel — a city still finding its footing after colonial rule — isn't just where the story happens; it's an active pressure bearing down on everyone in it, and most of the characters have almost nothing to push back with.

The streets are crowded and loud, but somehow the people moving through them feel completely invisible. That gap is what Desai keeps returning to: the noise of the city on one side, and on the other, a hollowness sitting right at the centre of the people trying to survive in it.

This paper focuses on Monisha and Nirode, since it's really their separate struggles with alienation and identity that give the novel its emotional weight. Desai uses these two — whose lives look almost nothing alike — to show how isolation, disconnection, and inner conflict take root under the strain of urban life. On the surface, Monisha's confined domestic world and Nirode's restless intellectual drifting couldn't seem more different. But they end up in the same place: neither can hold onto anything like a stable sense of self once the postcolonial city has made its demands of them. Following their slow unravelling, Desai lands on something uncomfortable — that a city capable of offering real opportunity and material advancement can, at the very same time, quietly erode a person's peace of mind.



Narration

Voices in the City (1965), Desai's second novel, stands as one of her most probing examinations of what modern urban life asks of the people who must inhabit it. This is not the Calcutta of nationalist memory or colonial romance; Desai's city is one where entrenched social hierarchies have outlasted modernization, where new circumstances have merely given old miseries a fresh setting, and where individuals, cut loose from both community and certainty, are mostly left to fend for themselves.

The novel centres on three siblings — a brother and two sisters — but it is Nirode that the narrative keeps returning to, the one who pulls the other lives into his orbit, whether they consent to it or not. As Tripathi observes, "his character forms the hinge of the plot, with most of the incidents and the people around him existing, in some measure, in relation to him" (33). What drives Nirode is not ambition in any conventional sense but something more restless and harder to satisfy — a refusal to be swallowed by a city moving too fast and demanding too little of the soul in exchange.

He cannot bear the newspaper job. Not because it is difficult but because it asks him to disappear into it — to produce copy in which, as he puts it, "there is never an I" (Desai 32). For Nirode, that erasure is intolerable. The self is the only thing worth writing about, the only thing worth anything at all, and a job that systematically excludes it feels less like employment and more like slow suffocation. So he leaves. He throws himself instead into editing a literary magazine, *Voice*, convinced that here, finally, is a form that might hold what he needs to say. But commitment, for Nirode, has a short half-life. When the magazine stops feeling like salvation, he abandons that too — and moves on, looking for the next thing that might, at last, be enough.

Nirode does not settle down anywhere. He moves through jobs the way he moves through people — quickly, and with a rising contempt for whatever he has just walked away from. Calcutta piles up around him, yet he will not let himself belong to it, and that refusal hardens, over time, into something closer to compulsion than choice. Even

his mother is not spared. He calls her "that she-cannibal" (Desai, 103) — a phrase that carries more than irritation, that suggests he experiences her, as he experiences most things, as something trying to consume what little of himself he has managed to keep intact.

He gives up the family name. He gives up the inheritance, the social position, the material scaffolding that might have held him upright in a city that measures a man by exactly these things. He chooses to live with very little, not because he finds poverty noble, but because he has come to distrust comfort. What remains, after everything is surrendered, is not clarity but aloneness. Nirode does not arrive at this willingly. Slowly and without much peace, he comes to see aloneness as "the sole natural condition" worth inhabiting (Desai 24). It is difficult to know whether this belief grows out of conviction or whether it is all that remains once every other possibility has fallen away.

Long before the city gets to Nirode, the damage has already begun at home. His alienation does not originate on Calcutta's streets — it has older roots, quieter ones, buried in childhood and in the particular wound of a father who looked at his son and found him wanting. When Nirode falls from the horse, his father does not reach down to help him up. He turns instead toward Arun — the brother who excels, who wins at sports, who passes examinations — and the lesson Nirode takes from that moment is one he never quite unlearns. The father's will only confirms what the silence already said: Arun's future is worth investing in. Nirode's is not. (Desai, 8)

That early diminishment does not fade. It follows him — into his friendships, into his work, into the way he holds himself against a city that seems to reward exactly the qualities he was told he lacked. The inferiority complex that took shape in childhood becomes, in adulthood, a kind of open wound that urban life keeps pressing on. As Bande notes, it is the fear of personal inadequacy that pushes Nirode toward extremes — first into outlaw posturing, then into the self-imposed exile of the ill-tempered hermit (76). Neither role resolves anything. They are performances of superiority that only a deeply insecure man needs to give. And so Nirode remains where he has always been — caught between the self he cannot



accept and the identity he cannot quite reach.

A further psychological complexity that deepens Nirode's alienation is what may be understood, in Freudian terms, as an Oedipal attachment to his mother. Following his father's death, Nirode's feelings toward her shift into something more consuming — a desire, conscious or otherwise, to assume the position his father once occupied. He does not grieve the father so much as move into the space the father leaves behind. His mother, in this configuration, becomes not simply a parent but the primary object of his emotional world.

It is precisely this attachment that makes her relationship with Major Chadha so destabilizing for him. What might otherwise register as a mother's private life becomes, for Nirode, a form of displacement he cannot absorb. Rather than confronting his feelings, he distances himself from her, alienating the person who has occupied such an important place in his mind and heart. He responds with jealousy and withdraws from her entirely — yet the withdrawal does not sever the bond. His mother continues to exert a powerful and largely unconscious influence over him, and despite the resentment he feels toward her, he is repeatedly drawn back to her companionship. She remains the most dominant figure in his inner life — the one whose approval he cannot stop seeking, whose absence he cannot fill, and whose hold on him he is neither willing to acknowledge nor able to escape.

Nirode's psychological condition does not stay where it begins. The Oedipal fixation rooted in his relationship with his mother quietly works its way into every connection he tries to form afterward — friendships, brief intimacies, the people he gravitates toward and then pushes away. Patania makes the point directly: this maternal bond leaves him unable to commit to anyone else, and so he drifts, moving from person to person with the same result each time — emptiness, disconnection, the faint sense that something necessary is always just out of reach (122). It is into this condition that Calcutta enters — not as a solution but as a space that requires nothing he is incapable of giving. The city's indifference suits him, its scale absorbs him, and its refusal to ask anything of its inhabitants allows him to keep drifting without consequence. The Oedipal wound, then, is not only a private psychological matter —

it determines how Nirode stands in relation to the entire world around him, leaving him as a figure who occupies urban space without ever truly inhabiting it. As Harish Raizada states, "The one single factor which damages and destabilizes Nirode's personality most is his mother fixation" (38).

If Nirode's alienation is something he adopts as a way of life, Monisha's is something she simply has to endure. What was supposed to be a fulfilling marriage gradually becomes a source of loneliness, leaving her disconnected not only from those around her but also from herself. Her isolation is not the result of a deliberate rejection of the world; it grows quietly from the circumstances of her life. She does not suffer in public spaces or professional corridors. She suffers in the kitchen, in the silence of her home, in the particular loneliness of living beside someone who fails to see or understand her. Her estrangement has no manifesto, no philosophy to sustain it. It simply accumulates, day after day, until loneliness becomes the defining condition of her existence.

Desai's broader argument seems to be that modernity altered the external shape of women's lives without necessarily loosening the deeper expectations placed on them. Patriarchal control simply relocated itself into the private sphere, governing the routines and silences of married life. Through Monisha, Desai gives a face to that cost — not as an abstract theory, but as the slow wearing-away of a woman's identity and emotional wellbeing.

Monisha's experience of alienation looks nothing like Nirode's. Where he deliberately pulls away from the world around him, her isolation grows out of a marriage emptied of feeling and a domestic routine that leaves her little room to breathe. Her difficulty is not one of navigating a career or a public role; it is the narrowness of the domestic world she is confined to that wears her down. Her story becomes, in effect, a portrait of how easily a woman's sense of self can be worn away in silence. Desai uses her to demonstrate that even a supposedly modern urban setting does little to loosen the grip of family and social expectation on women's lives.

Jiban's patriarchal attitude leaves no space for closeness between them. Monisha gets little



warmth, little understanding, and over time, little reason to expect either. With no one in the house who truly sees her, she turns to her diary out of sheer need. There, she is neither corrected nor silenced. She writes what she cannot say aloud — her loneliness, her desperation, her hunger for a connection that never comes. But the diary changes nothing outside its covers. She writes, and the walls stay where they are. Her suffering finds words but not witnesses, and the domestic world that diminishes her goes on undisturbed. And yet she keeps writing — because it is the only place she is allowed to be fully herself. That fragile space is what she has. Then comes her surrender to Nirode's existentialist thinking, and even that is taken from her. She does not find philosophy liberating. It pulls her deeper into abstraction, further from the small, specific self she had been quietly trying to hold onto — until even the longing for connection begins to feel distant, like something that once belonged to her but no longer does.

The city offers Monisha nothing. No relief, no anonymity, no accidental beauty that might loosen the tightness in her chest for even an afternoon. Where another kind of space — open, unhurried — might have given her somewhere to breathe, the urban environment only presses closer: its noise, its walls, its relentless routine folding over her until there is very little room left. Her entrapment is not incidental to the city. The city is part of what makes it complete.

Her tragic end, then, is not simply a personal unraveling. It is what happens when a life is organized entirely around conformity — when stability is demanded of a woman whose inner world is fracturing, and no one thinks to ask why. Desai is precise about this cruelty. Monisha does not collapse dramatically. She disappears by degrees, in a city that mistakes her silence for contentment and her endurance for strength. What is being indicted here is not one marriage or one household but an urban culture — and a postcolonial modernity — that built its idea of progress without once consulting the women living inside it.

Monisha's story ends in tragedy, yet Desai does not conclude the novel on a note of despair. Instead, she shifts the focus to the possibility of resilience and self-discovery through the

experiences of the other characters. Amla lives inside that same indifferent city and breathes the same emptiness, and yet some part of her refuses to be fully swallowed by it. The two sisters, in the end, face nearly identical circumstances; what separates them is simply how each one bears it. Monisha withdraws further and further into herself until there is nothing left, while Amla, worn down and unsure as she is, keeps going. Desai does not seem particularly interested in accounting for that difference — she is content to lay it in front of the reader without explanation. Endurance, in this novel, looks less like a product of inner strength or self-knowledge and more like a kind of stubbornness that resists any tidy explanation. With Amla, the novel shifts its focus from the tragic loss of Monisha to the quieter yet enduring struggle of living on in the aftermath. Rather than emphasizing dramatic events, Desai explores the everyday effort of continuing to exist despite grief, uncertainty, and emotional isolation. Of all the characters in the novel, Amla is perhaps the most grounded. While Nirode's restlessness and Dharma's presence influence her in different ways, she never lets either define who she is. Like the others, she feels the weight of the city and its demands, but she neither rebels against it nor simply gives in. Instead, she moves through its complexities with a quiet strength, trying to make sense of her place within it without losing herself. Unlike Nirode, who withdraws, and Monisha, whose struggle ends in death, Amla chooses to go on living. Her survival is not heroic or triumphant; it is simply her quiet way of enduring pain and uncertainty. Her resilience comes less from any particular toughness than from an ability to watch and take stock of her surroundings without letting them completely absorb her. She keeps enough emotional distance to protect who she is, without ever cutting herself off from the people and city around her. She isn't working toward any final resolution of her identity — she's simply working to keep it intact for another day. What Amla shows is that the city's damage does not fall evenly on everyone it touches; it tests her just as it tests her siblings, but she meets that test with staying power rather than surrender. It is this steadiness — measured, not rigid — that spares her from the fate that overtakes the people around her.

Conclusion:



Voices in the City traces three different ways in which individuals respond to the pressures of urban life and the gradual loss of selfhood in postcolonial India. Nirode turns away from the city in search of himself, but that turning away only pulls him further into conflict and despair. Monisha bears a heavier burden. The silence that patriarchy and domestic life impose on her does not simply limit her; it hollows her out until nothing remains. Amla faces the same city, the same weight, yet she does not collapse under it. She is worn by it, certainly, but she holds.

What seems to hold Desai's attention above all is this contrast among the three. Urban alienation, in her telling, is not a single, uniform experience — how much a person loses depends on what they bring into the city with them: their temperament, their social standing, and the particular limits gender places on their lives. Calcutta, then, is more than a setting for these events; it actively presses in on its inhabitants, isolates them, and pulls them apart. Yet the novel does not end in total defeat. Through Amla, Desai suggests that a person's sense of self, however battered, can still hold — and that this fragile persistence, as much as the alienation itself, is what the novel is ultimately about.

Taken together, the three siblings map out the different psychological costs that urban existence can extract. Nirode tries to define himself by standing apart from everything the city

represents, only to find himself trapped inside the very contradictions that stance creates. Monisha never had that option to begin with — domesticity and patriarchal silence close in on her by degrees, taking not just her happiness but, eventually, her self. Amla is not spared the same pressure, but what marks her out is not immunity so much as the manner in which she absorbs the blow: how much damage the city does to any one person, Desai implies, depends on what they carry into it and what their gender and circumstances demand of them in return. Kolkata is no passive backdrop here — it presses, isolates, and wears people down as a matter of course. Even so, the novel refuses to end in total hopelessness. Amla is proof that the city cannot claim everything from a person, and it is this narrow margin of endurance, as much as its unflinching portrait of alienation, that gives Voices in the City its lasting power.

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