

# The ‘Mother’ in Anita Desai’s *Voices In The City* – A Spiritual Evaluation

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## Abstract

*Voices In The City* (1965) is the second novel of Anita Desai. It is a story of – Monisha, Nirode and Amla; three siblings who are caught in the crosscurrents of India’s social transition. It also includes their brother Arun. The ‘city’ depicted here is contemporary Calcutta; where the author spent a considerable time in the early 1960s. Among this middle class Ray family, the author creates an unforgettable story as the siblings struggle with isolation, freedom and search for a meaning in life while residing in the city of Calcutta. A figure in *Voices in the City* is Otima – the ‘mother’ of the four Ray children. Anita Desai portrays her in the novel as Mother Kali – the goddess of Death. Simultaneously this Spiritual divinity also represents the women of India symbolising ‘life’. She is both ‘the preserver’ and ‘the destroyer’; preserver of the very life-force and violent destroyer of the evil.

**Keywords:** spiritual, mother, Kali, good, evil, preserver, destroyer.

## Introduction

The mother – Otima is a shadowy figure in *Voices in the City*. Despite this, her presence is felt throughout the novel. She takes care of her children and tends to all their needs but still fails to become a mother figure for them. Nirode is of the opinion that his mother is having an illicit affair with Major Chadha. Hence he loathes her. His hatred for his mother and Major Chadha is expressed in the following words while perusing her letter, “how unashamedly she wrote

that hideous name, so like a cooking pot full of yellow food or a rag of dirty underwear. How helpful was this Chaddha, providing her with male company and admiration.” (*Voices*, 37-38) Similarly while talking with Amla, Nirode says: “Ask her about the love that makes her perch on her mountain top, waiting so patiently and surely for retirement and tedium and the last wormy twisting of lust to send Major Chadha-Chadha! – into her open arms.” (*Voices*, 188) On the other hand Nirode’s sister Amla considers her mother a clean and an extremely delightful woman.

The great tragedy of her daughter Monisha’s suicide inflicts immense pain on her. She comes down to Calcutta from the hills. However, she rejects the approach of her children and openly expresses that she no longer needs them. In the words of the narrator, “She was no longer a woman thwarted, but a magnificent portrait, a figure, calm and pale, in a great tragedy.” (*Voices*, 249)

Anita Desai makes use of the mind boggling character of Otima as the image of the city, Calcutta. The ‘mother’ has been epitomised as Goddess Kali in the novel. While returning from the airport along with his mother Nirode imagines:

“...on that day twilight fell early... As they drove through it, he saw lights flower out of the dirt and shadows, as if people lit diyas in honour of her. She was their goddess, unseen, but instinctively acknowledged by dwellers of huts and tenements along the great streets of Calcutta.” (*Voices*, 250)

Diyas are lit on the occasion of Diwali – the Hindu festival of lights. It is celebrated in the honour of Goddess Kali. Nirode tells us that the residents of Calcutta are quick to recognise the Kali within his mother. And as darkness approached, the city dwellers switched on their lights. These blinking lights

resembled the diyas and Nirode felt that the people welcomed his mother to the city just like Goddess Kali is welcomed on the night of Diwali.

While on a walk with Amla, Nirode tells her of his vision regarding their mother. He says:

She is Kali, the goddess and the demon are one... Mother, mother – Kali is the mother of Bengal, she is the mother of us all... She is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest – and all that is unmanifest... She is not merely good, she is not merely evil – she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance... She is reality and illusion, she is the world and she is maya. Don't you see, in her face, in her beauty, Amla, don't you see the amalgamation of death and life? Isn't it perfect and inevitable that she should pour blood into our veins when we are born and drain it from us when we die? (*Voices*, 252-53)

Nirode feels that his mother is Goddess Kali personified. Mother Kali symbolises demise and obliteration in Occidental philosophy. As per Hindu spiritual belief Goddess Kali appears to defeat the evil forces and destroy the wrongdoers. His mother's death-like stillness makes Nirode feel that she is in a way 'satisfied with' Monisha's suicide. Here a reference can be drawn to the practice of a live offering to Goddess Kali in India. It is believed that the blood offered will quench the Goddess's thirst and she will transform herself from a destroyer to a calm, kind motherly figure.

Nirode is now enlightened. He observes the Supreme Deity – the one who is beyond change and beyond birth and death; residing within his mother. It is a powerful vision indeed. He visualises her as both the consciousness and the unconsciousness. The 'mother' transcends both good and evil, knowledge and

ignorance, reality and illusion. She spiritually symbolises both birth and death. She is Kali – the Destroyer, when she assumes a fierce and violent form and destroys the wrong practitioners and tears down the patriarchal principles and evil forces of the society. But when she assumes the form of a compassionate mother she gives birth, nourishes her kids, preserves and protects them. She always looks after her children as is evident in the final lines of *Voices in the City*, “Then they saw a white figure step out on to the upper veranda, stand silently at the rail and watch them” (*Voices*, 254). She is then Kali – the Preserver.

### **Conclusion**

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “God is Spirit, is infinite; man is Spirit and, therefore, infinite, and the Infinite alone can worship the Infinite.” (Vivekananda, *I Am the Universal*) According to Vivekananda, a spirit is infinite. Hence it has neither a beginning nor an end. Its existence is eternal. Both God and human beings are spirits. A limited individual cannot fathom the Limitless; as a result he is unable to worship Him. Only the Everlasting can truly recognise the Ever-present. He believes that each one of us is also infinite. And with the Supreme Being also an infinite; it is appropriate and possible that only an infinite can truly understand and admire the Spiritual Infinite. Within each one of us, the Divine manifests itself as the soul or the spirit.

Nirode envisions his mother as Kali, and this in turns helps him in resolving his conflicts. Here the last two lines of the poem *The Soul's Prayer* by Sarojini Naidu assume great significance. “Life is a prism of My light, / And Death the shadow of My face.” (Naidu, lines 27-28) In this poem the poetess in her childhood innocence requests the Almighty to reveal to her the secret of the mystery of life and death. Replying to her query the All-Powerful Spiritual One tells her that He is the master of both life and death. Every being of this earth

dissolves into Him after its demise and it is from Him that life issues forth. So, God personifies 'life' as well as 'death'.

### **References**

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