

CHAPTER III

STORIES OF ARTISTS

Anita Desai creates the world of artists in her two stories, like in her novel Voices in the City. She writes about the predicaments of various artists and tries to show different meandering ways that the artists of different temperaments take. She also shows the treatment of the artists in society.

All artists are blessed with great power of imagination. Through their vision and imagination, they create new world and are also capable of creating anything that can never be seen in reality. Anita Desai creates her main characters as artists in the stories and shows the artist a way out of his dilemma, that between aesthetic and materialistic values, where the artist must aim at the former, thoughnot neglecting the latter.

There are two stories whose central figures are artists. Both the painter in "Sale" and the tanpura player in "The Accompanist" are unusual artists. Anita Desai finds something unique about them inspite of the fact that both artists go unappreciated and neglected. The painter in "Sale" is an inspired artist who creates original pictures but whose pictures are not sold. The accompanist plays a second-fiddle so to say to the great musician, a classical **vocalist** Ustad. In this sense both artists painter and accompanist remain in the background. But a moment comes in their lives when they are suddenly awoken to search their identity and both find their identity in playing their separate roles faithfully and stead-fastly.

The first story is "Sale". It is very close to a character sketch. The main character is artist. This story aspires to be a serious story. Anita Desai wants us to feel pathos and irony of life. The story aims to stir our emotions and evoke our sympathies.

The story takes place in a city and deals with middle class urban life. The artist who belongs to a fisherman's family, lives in a slum house. He is compelled to sell paintings in order to support his wife and child. The setting and an evening atmosphere is beautifully described by Anita Desai as follows:

... at the deep, smoke ridden twilight wound around the ill lit slum, the smoking heaps of dung-fires and the dark figures that sit and stand in it hopelessly like fog-horns, crouch shells begin to blow as tired house wives summon up their flagging spirits for the always comforting ritual of evening prayers .¹

In the midst of such atmosphere the artist paints beautiful pictures. He is a man with an unusual vision. He is an inspired painter. Through his power of imagination creates beautiful paintings of flowers, birds and landscapes. He wants to sell these paintings in order to maintain his family. But his expectation of selling the paintings is not satisfied. Because, the three visitors who come to buy his paintings only praise his creation but never buy any picture. They admire his skill and encourage him for painting. The customers who praise his power of imagination with great exaggeration are mere hypocrites belonging to the upper class.

The artist has painted many pictures but they are all scattered in the room like:

One on the floor with a bundle of rags and some cigarette stubs on it, another is on a shelf with clay toys and calenders before it and others have drifted off the wooden divan into corners of rooms, peering out from under old news papers and dirty clothes .²

These scattered paintings attract the customers so much that they appear to them very natural and real. The painter has painted the birds without seeing them. He creates them only with the help of his imagination. About this he says to the customers, "No, no, it is not real. I am a city man, I know nothing about birds".³

This is ironical because the artist who lives in the city has no access to Nature. This suggests how man, even an artist, is deprived off of his relationship with Nature. He is obliged to paint art by his imagination rather than his living contact with Nature. It also throws light on his artistic skill and shows his creative genius. Living in a slum area, he is not able to see the beautiful Nature which inspires the artists at all times. But the paradox is that he paints the unseen birds, flowers and fishing boats with nets as real as in nature. His customers look at him with disbelief, but the artist clarifies their doubts by showing how he paints:

'I see a tram — and that is my mountain. I see a letter-box and that is my tree. Listen! Do you hear my birds?' He raises his hands and, with its gesture, ushers in the evening voices of children uttering those cries and calls peculiar to the time of parting, the time of relinquishing their games, before they enter their homes and disappear into sleep — voices filled with an ecstasy of knowledge, of sensation drawn to an apex, brought on by the realization of imminent departure and farewell: voices panicky with love, with lament, with fear and sacrifice .⁴

This minute and detailed description shows that the artist is blessed with a great power imagination. He may be described as a genius. He seems to have had no training and he is an inspired sort of an artist.

His artistic skill makes the customers to call him a "magician". His magician-like power can create anything out of something. He does not "sign" his pictures; nor does he bother about his fame. He wants his paintings to be sold because he needs money for sustenance, but he is no way inspired by materialist's needs or demands. He cannot even estimate the price of his creation. So, in that sense he is interested in his creation for their own sake and not for name and fame.

On the other hand, his customers have no sense of appreciation of art. Their idea of art is very conventional. They want to buy ^{copies of its objects in} the nature. Their aesthetic need is satisfied only in recognition of the objects depicted in the pictures. They are not happy if they fail to identify anything in the artist's creation. They are rich and have lot of money but hardly any understanding of what art is. In addition, they have the arrogance of their wealth. And so the great works created by the artist will remain unsold and the rich are not able to buy any work really worthwhile in art.

The artist appears to be a real artist who does not care for his name and fame even when his customers praise him with much exaggeration. He is not proud and boastful about his talent. The same quality is found in Nirode, the artist in her novel Voices in the City. Like him, Nirode too creates things without bearing his name.

The artist who is forced to sell his pictures to maintain his family tries to prove himself as an artist. He is ready paint any picture that his customers demand. He can paint the pictures in all sizes "big, small, medium" at any time. But the customers who come to him simply admire his talent and encourage him with false promises. They are merely hypocrites who are insensitive towards the helpless condition of the artist. They have

a very little understanding of the artist's situation. The customer's callous reaction of laughing at him is his "haste, his trembling shrill excitement" produces the intense moment in the narration.

Towards the end, the artist agrees to paint a picture of a particular type which the customers demand. And he asks them for an advance to which his customers react as follows:

*Listen, when you bring the picture, I will give you some thing, even if I don't want it, I will give you something in advance....*⁵

This shows how inconsiderate and insensitive they are towards the situation of the artist. It shows how they honour the great artist whom they call "magician". The helpless condition of the artist is really very touching and it evokes our sympathy. He exemplifies the difficulties of surviving in a competitive and insensitive environment. But unlike Anita Desai's other artists, this artist is not an escapist. In spite of his wretched condition, he accepts reality. This nature of the artist really make us feel pity and sympathy. Regarding this pathetic situation of the artist Evelyn Varady says:

*The foreign reader should be able to identify with... the artists' desperation and feel the pathos in their plight .*⁶

Anita Desai highlights the irony in the situation. The juxtaposition between the artist and his customers emphasises the tradition dichotomy between art and life, between imagination and reality. The artist's paintings are most imaginative but he needs to be realistic in order to survive, where

as the customers who are most realistic are prepared to buy, but they are stubbornly unimaginative and insensitive about art. The dichotomy remains intact.

The second story which deals with the artist's character is "The Accompanist". This story is rather a long one with a series of events which happen in the life of an artist. The artist in this story is a musician. Like the artist in "Sale", he too has no name. But the title of the story indicates that he is the accompanist. The title is named after the main character who is an accompanist of the great musician Ustad Rahim Khan.

Anita Desai uses the device of first -person narration which makes the story realistic in tone. The story can be divided into two parts, one dealing with the accompanist's present life and, second his past childhood and boyhood life. He tells us about his family, father, mother which it seems a sort of biography of the main character. Anita Desai also uses the technique of "flash back" in the narration. She replies to a question about the use of flash backs and interior monologues in order to build up a situation or explore it. She says:

It is depth which is interesting, deliving deeper and deeper in a character or scene rather than going round about it .⁷

This device she uses in narrating the story of the accompanist. "The Accompanist" is a story of a man's intense loyalty to his master. It deals with the experiences of the main character and throws light on the relationship between the master and his disciple. It is more about his master than about himself. It is an account of what happens to an artist

when his childhood friends tease him. The incident which he narrates raises the problem of self-identity, which he finds difficult to cope with. The whole narrative is constructed to depict the artist's character. The accompanist tells us about his childhood and boyhood life and emphasizes on the turning point which comes in his life making look like a silly young boy, the disciple of the great musician Ustad Rahim Khan.

Anita Desai deals with middle class urban life. The accompanist belongs to a traditional musician's family, which lives in tall, narrow house in the lane that had belonged for generations to the makers of musical instruments in the city. His father Mishraji, who was a maker of musical instruments, played many of them with talent in a concert hall where Ustad Rahim Khan used to play.

The story begins with the details about the relationship between his Master and him. He tells us how ^{he} becomes his master's disciple. He meets his Master on the day when he takes the tanpura from his father, who has made it with love as well as a deep knowledge of music, to the great concert hall and finds the famous Ustad whom his father respected so much that he sends his son with this precaution:

Don't mention the matter of payment . . . he is doing us an honour by ordering a tanpura from us .⁸

This shows his father's regard and respect to the **great** Ustad and also throws light on his master's character. At a first sight the appearance of his Master impresses him. He appears to him as follows:

... his fingers were the fingers of a god, absolutely in control of his instrument and I knew nothing but perfection could come of such a relationship between a musician and

*his instrument... I could see his face beneath the long locks of hair, and the face too, was that of a god: it was large, perhaps heavy about the jaws, but balanced by a wide forehead and with blazing black eyes that were widely spaced. His nostrils and his mouth too, were large, royal, but intelligent, controlled.*⁹

The noble appearance of his master impresses him a lot. He goes near the centre of the gathering, of the stage and presents the tanpura to the great Ustad. His master takes it with much happiness and asks him to play the tanpura, as his tanpura player has not come. That is how he becomes the tanpura player to his famous Master. Music becomes his sole aim of life. He has no other ambitions except to provide the "discreet background web of sound to his master's ragas".

Anita Desai makes use of "flash back" to narrate the accompanist's background. The accompanist recollects his past memories of childhood life and tell us how there was a time when other things "existed on earth" for him. His father who recognized his talent has carved out a role for him and begins to train his son from the early age of four. His father expected him to be the great Ustad one day. But as a child the accompanist used to escape to play gulli-danda and kho and to play marbles.

The accompanist also recollects the memories of his mother who used to make sweets like halwa and jelebis and he used to steal his brother's and sister's share and for that get crushed by the "whole family". And later, when he grows little older, the cinema attracted him and he used to see four, five, as many as six shows a week. But when he begins to play tanpura to his Ustad, everything disappears and he feels like this:

But all fell away from me, all disappeared in the shadows, on the side, when I met my Ustad and began to play for him. He took the place of my mother's sweet halwa, the cinema heroines, the street beauties, marbles and stolen money, all the pleasures and riches I had so far contrived to extract from the hard stones of existence in my father's house in the music lane. I did not need such toys any more, such toys and dreams. I had found my purpose in life and by following it without hesitation and without holding back any part of myself, I found such satisfaction that I no longer wished for anything else.¹⁰

This shows the tremendous influence of his Master on him which alters his life completely and devotion becomes the sole aim of his life. He devotes his whole life to music. He gets married with a girl whom his mother chooses but the family for him and even for his Ustad takes second place. Looking back on his life, he sums up as follows:

I am thirty years old now and my Ustad has begun to turn grey... we have travelled all over India and played in every city, at every season. It is his life and mine. We share this life, this music, this following... I have stayed with him not wishing for anything else, anything more.¹¹

This passage demonstrates that the relationship between the two has grown over the years. Now he is not tempted by silly things and petty jealousies. He just sits down behind his master, on the bare floor, and play for him the notes he needs for the construction of the ragas. His master neither turns to him nor talks to him, but he never expects it from his master. It is enough for him just to conceal behind his master and play the ragas, running his fingers over the three strings of his tanpura again

and again. Thus, he confesses that he is just the accompanist of his master without having solo passage to play. But he is satisfied with this. He never thinks of his name and fame. He is not even proud of being the tanpura player to the great Ustad.

But then the crisis comes in his life which for the first time puts him into the dilemma about self-identity. That is the incident which takes place in a tea-shop in the company of his childhood friends. For the first time, his calm has been destroyed, his devotion shaken when his childhood friends tease him and talk ill of his achievements which highlight his potentialities and make him feel assaulted:

I felt as if they were climbing on top of me, choking me, grabbing me by my hair and dragging me down. Their words were blows, the idea they were throwing at me an assault.

I felt beaten, destroyed, and with my last bit of strength shook them off and, pushing aside the table and cups and plates, ran out of the tea-shop.... It was afternoon, there were crowds on the street, dust and smoke blotted out the natural light of day. I saw everything as vile, as debased, as something amoral and ugly, and pushed it aside, pushed through as I ran.¹²

This shows the emotional turmoil of the accompanist and makes him talk to himself asking many questions to oneself about his self-identity and self-importance. For a moment he feels sense of loss for not being at the centre of the stage. But then he remembers that fateful evening

when he had walked with the tanpura to the Ustad who had chosen him to accompany him. These memories are so vivid that make him realize his true-self of being an accompanist to the great Ustad. The story ends with the sentence uttered by the accompanist.

"Does a mortal refuse God?"¹³ This leads him to the realization, acceptance, contentment restoring confidence and the same devotion to his master.

The first-person narration, flash-back device and the use of some native words make the story very authentic and real. The Indian words such as tanpura, sitar, sarod, vina which are concerned with the musical instruments, Raga-Dipak, Raga-Desh, Malhar, Megh etc. concerned with the music, the names of the sweets like halwa, jelebis, the names of plays such as gulli-danda, kho and other Indian words like Mohalla, Kurta, Baiyya contribute to the description which is authentic in the narration.

The two artists are revealed to be very close to break their sense and venture out to do something different and achieve a new identity. The painter in "Sale" is advised by his customers to do a painting according to their specification. In other words the painter should paint a "snow-scape" keeping before him some model of actual snow-fall. The painter refuses to do this and sticks by his own way of creating art and leaving his own life. And thus denying himself the prospect of building a new identity as an artist.

The tanpura player in "The Accompanist" is jolted into realization by his friends that he is making a fool of himself by playing a sub-ordinate

role to his Ustad. He is made aware of the possibility of starting a new career as a musician on his own, independent of the Ustad but he also refers to do that. He prefers to remain what he is to his Ustad.

Anita Desai seems to emphasize that the artist who chooses for himself a particular role model must never be allowed and tempted to deviate from this. The particular identity he possess is his destiny and any deviation from this identity is behaving out of character which will disintegrate eventually.