

## CHAPTER III

### VOICES IN THE CITY

Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* written after two years (1965) offers a moving picture of the life of another Maya named Monisha. Like Maya, Monisha also suffers emptiness within as well as without but unlike Maya, Monisha has stilled her emotions and has trained them to submit. Maya pushes Gautama off the roof so as to protect her world of sensuous abundance but Monisha sets herself afire to reach the case of intense feelings. Anita Desai depicts her awareness and understanding of the social and cultural pattern and values of India. This novel reveals her personality as an uncrowned queen of the emotional world of woman. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar very aptly observes:

In Anita Desai's two novels (*Cry*, *The Peacock* and *Voices in the City*), the inner climate of sensibility that lours or clears of rumbles like thunder suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her fate, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility – the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is all at ease among the barbarians and the Philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists. (Iyengar 464)

Anita Desai appears to have realized the point that her first novel despite its power and poetic appeal, is deficient in the sense of history and the sense of place. *Voices in the City*, is an effort at realizing at once the vertical

and the horizontal planes of reality. This novel fails to effects such a synthesis as only goes to suggest that Anita Desai has to strike a story that will meet requirements of her poetic imagination.

As the title of the novel indicates, Anita Desai's aim is to capture the polyphonic music of the metropolis, Calcutta, which forms the backdrop of the story. Calcutta, the city of noises may be looked upon as a living spirit, a very powerful character in the book. Just as the novels of Charles Dickens and George Eliot are called the epic novels of England, *Voices in the City* may be regarded as an epic on Calcutta.

The title of the novel has made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode, the chief protagonist of the novel or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Desai's skilful handling invests the city with a character Nirode. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid. Discussed in depth by A. V. Krishna Rao who also feels that it is Calcutta which is the hero of the novel and not Nirode:

Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the invisible protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as a force of creating, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali. (A. V. Krishna Rao 175)

The city of Calcutta is the locale for most of the actions of the novel, and serves as a background, and it influences and affects all the major characters in the novel. But the novel itself is primarily a family drama around

which the story revolves. Even the blurb of the novel says that the novel describes the corrosive effects of the city life upon the Indian family. Nirode is also envious of his intense critical observations about the city of Calcutta. He observes:

Calcutta, Calcutta-like the rattle of the reckless train; Calcutta, Calcutta is the very pulse beat in its people's veined wrists. The streets where slaughtered sheep hung beside bright tinsel tassels to adorn black braids, and a syphilitic beggar and his entire syphilitic family comes rolling down on barrows, like the survivors of an atomic blast, then paused to let a procession of beautifully laundered Bangalis in white carry their marigold-decked Durga-or Lakshmi, or Saraswati, of Kali – on their shoulders down to the Ganges, amidst drums and fevered chanting. ...Down below funerals passed by, the bearers of the white, flower-laden stretchers vacant-eyed and smooth-browed as they chanted 'Hari Om, Hari Om'. 'Sweet lily, sweet li-ly,' cried the flower vendor who carried garlands of jasmine and tuberose strung upon a bamboo frame. ... klazon horns honked. Odours of naphtha, gasoline and rotting mangoes, cinders and frangipani, open gutters and temple marigold. Calcutta, Calcutta, prayed its victims, and Calcutta stirred as though in answer, as though it were a living spirit... The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death. (VTC 41-42)

Later in the novel, there is another description of the city. This time it is from the pages in Monisha's diary. She finds living in Calcutta an ordeal and she thinks of Kalimpong. Very nicely she puts it, she finds the city without conscience:

There is no diving underground in so overpopulated a burrow, even the sewers and gutters are chocked, they are also full. Of what? Of grime, darkness, poverty, disease? Is that what I mean – or the metriciousness, the rapacity, the uneasy lassitude of conscience? Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds it s head between it s knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on?... There are no ethics in these houses of trade, any more than there is anything aesthetic in the little plaster idols. ... I see another face of this devil city, a face that broods over the smouldering fire – a dull, vacant, hopeless face. The rickshaw, coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the beggar child with his limbs cut off at the joints,... Two faces – one rapacious, one weary – gaze at me from every direction. (VTC 116-118)

The city is described in much detail, an oppressive city, a dying city but all the same exercising a powerful influence on all the three characters– Nirode, Monisha and Amla. This has been amply clear in the Amla Section of the novel. The city has been described as a monster city "... that this monster city that lived no normal healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality, had captured and enchanted-or disenchanted both her sister and brother." (VTC 150)

Desai spent some years in the early 1960s in Calcutta and seems to have observed the sights and sounds of the city in all their hues and during all the seasons of the year. As a result, Calcutta does not work only as a back drop to the narrative; it plays a vital role in the lives of the characters on the novel. The first glimpse of Calcutta is when Nirode goes to send off his brother Arun at the Howrah Railway Station who is leaving for higher education in England. The Railway Station is a beehive of human activity although both Nirode and Arun look at the apathy of their surroundings:

They could think of nothing else to say and feigned interest, instead, in the marriage party at the neighboring carriage door—the groom in white sharkskin suit, loaded with garlands of great, odorous marigolds looking married and damp, while the bride hid behind a fold in her sequined sari and decorously miffed. Fat jovial men surrounded them shouting obscene jokes and quaking with laughter at them. The women hung back, in a cluster, heart-brokenly for the daughter... They watched the marriage party till the whistle went and the train began its preliminary lurching, as though it were unused to motion and were practicing a bit before the long run. There was an uproar amidst the marriage party, and the bride and groom were lifted upon one thrusting wave of obscenity and congratulation up into their carries. Coolies threw bedding rolls and tiffin carriers and late arrivals into carriages that rolled past them, the tea-vendors held out their shirts to receive the last of the copper coins. The brothers moved a step closer, but could not look each other in the eyes for embarrassment and emotion. (VTC 6)

In its broad outlines, the story revolves round a feudal family of Kalimpong, dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk. There are four children, two sons and two daughters Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. There is a Hamlet (Shakespeare's Hamlet) in *Voices in the City* but there is no Ophelia that is Nirode has absolutely no love affair; his mother's love for his father is only passingly mentioned. Desai has tried to create a situation in the novel parallel to that of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. The story of the novel begins with the departure of Arun to England for higher studies. Nirode leaves for Calcutta to work in a newspaper office as a clerk. His sister Monisha is married to Jiban, a middle-rung officer in a government department living with a large joint-family. The younger sister Amla has received training as a commercial artist in Bombay and comes to Calcutta to join in an advertisement firm with high hopes which end in total disillusionment. The father is no more now and it is suspected that the mother has developed an affair with a retired military officer. Nirode's life is presented in the novel as succession of failures. His discussion with his friend David reveals his attitude to the problem of life:

Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space all you can do is leap off fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningful climbing. I want to descend, quickly. (VTC 40)

The adverse effect of society on Monisha and Amla is strong and it is even stronger on her brother Nirode. As the present thesis is concerned with the predicament of the female protagonists, the whole characteristic features of Nirode is not taken for analysis. However, the character of Nirode cannot be completely ignored. His depression, dejection, longing for affection and love play a very significant role in their contribution to the predicament of Monisha and Amla.

Nirode is a neglected child as his father had shown a partisan attitude towards him. He had earned the displeasure by showing little interest for horse riding and sports. His brother Arun who had taken keen interest in studies and sports and had become the captain of the school cricket team, is the favourite of all the members of his family. His father in his will had set apart a large amount of money to help Arun to pursue his higher studies in London. This has made Nirode jealous of his brother and a victim of inferiority complex.

Nirode's sensitive nature does not allow him to undertake any job which is mechanical and devoid of involvement. Dissatisfied with his newspaper work, Nirode feels, "a work in which no creativity could be manifested" (Ramachandra Rao 88). It is nothing but mechanically cutting and pasting strips of news paper – he resigns his job. With the estrangement from his mechanical newspaper work, he starts a journal of creative writing called "Voice". He refuses to accept his mother's money when he starts an "arty bookshop". He is prepared to put up with poverty and refuses to accept others' help. Narasimhan exactly finds, "the founding and nurturing of individuality, the establishing of individualism." (Narasimhan 22)

Nirode's mother has not allowed the individuality of Nirode to be corroded. He does not like to be patronized by his friends. Jit or Sonny nor does he like to be forced by his friends to take up a career. He refuses to use, "the family name, family money, family honour" (VTC 156). Nirode's belief in this negative attitude is sufficiently deep and he quotes Camus to prove the rightness of his belief,

I have been reading Camus, you know. He says, In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day. (VTC 40)

Nirode is engaged in an unequal fight against the social and commercial values of life which the city of Calcutta symbolizes. He is conscious of the fact that the values of the contemporary society are hollow. He usually despises his father and worships his mother. But after the death of his father, he always pities him and hates his mother because she has been unfaithful to his father by having intimate relation with Major Chadha who lives next door to their house at Kalimpong. In Calcutta, Nirode is dissatisfied with his life, although he calls himself a journalist to keep up his dignity. But his job offers him no opportunity to express his creativity.

Both Arun and Nirode are opposite in their nature. Arun, the favoured bright child in the family, is encouraged by parents and adored by sisters. He aims at becoming a surgeon and a sportsman. He studies in London but Nirode deliberately leads the life of a middle level journalist whose job is to cut out long strips of newspapers and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out



to verify a dull fact in some airless office room. The contrast is striking; Arun and Nirode are as separated as success and failure. Nirode at the age of twenty four, realizes that life is “no actual journey but a nightmare one, in which one is unable to start. The suitcase is never packed, the tickets never purchased, and the ship sails, leaving ensnared in the net of sleep” (VTC 10). Nirode is merely a traveler with no destination.

Nirode wants to live in silence and stillness and tells himself that was exactly what he would always be left with. Once he wants get the principedom with the help of his friends, Sonny and Professor Bose. He gives up his job and thinks about another job. After facing many difficulties and problems, the magazine “voice” gets established. He chucks it up and starts writing, living a life of semistarvation. After that he writes a play which reflects his own feelings. He fears that it is doomed to flop. Later, he opens a book-shop in a low dirty locality. In fact he is a rootless drifter or a rolling stone that gathers no moss. He is obsessed with failure. He lives in the busy world of Calcutta with his friends – Sonny, Jit, Nair, Dharma and David Gunney who all gather to the coffee house, the ‘notorious gathering place of the displaced and dangerous’ ‘literates of Bengali’ to indulge in the intellectual discussions against corruption.

If Maya of *Cry, The Peacock* has a father fixation, Nirode has a mother-fixation. He is jealous of Major Chadha who is carrying on with his mother in Kalimpong. So he is alienated from his mother. That is why he reacts sharply to her letter he receives early in the novel. Later in part III, when he goes to the airport to receive his mother on Monisha’s death, he is so

fascinated by her beauty that he clings to her in a prolonged embrace. Yet, he hates her. He tells Amla that their mother is a manifestation of the goddess Kali. Throughout the novel it appears that Nirode's life is meaningless because he lives without any definite goal in life. He keeps himself busy in changing his goals one after another. This is the reason why he is always obsessed by failure. For him life is nothing-only an empty box.

Nirode feels frustration in his whole life and achieves nothing, only a couple of realizations in the end. This quest of Nirode indicates an intellectual inevitability. On the other hand Nirode's heart craves for his mother's love and affection which alone gives him consolation and makes him free from all those inner sufferings. He knows that Karma of action without the craving of its fruits is the real wisdom that human life may afford. The Gita also teaches this gospel of Karma. Such a philosophy of life makes him bold enough to face the ordeals of life. Life is really a compulsion in which man conceals himself and in his reveries of past reminiscences seeks heavenly pleasure.

By placing her women protagonists Monisha and Amla in the context of a traditional joint-family system in the soulless city of Calcutta, Desai examines their predicament from the psychological angle. Deftly introducing several incidents involving the confrontation between these characters and society, Desai analyses the agony experienced by such victims. An examination of various significant events, that contribute to the plot development, demonstrate how sensitive women are forced to sink into a world of despair and disillusion by unsympathetic people around them.

Generally Anita Desai describes the sad and frustrating aspects of married life, but modern marriage reform is indeed grounded on these two principles – first that the individual's emotional life and subjective choice are of supreme importance for the personality process and secondly his or her social economic and political interests must be considered as imperative as the adjustment of the body to the physical world.

Man – woman love as a central issue of life is treated by the novelist in most of her novels. In part II of *Voices in the City*, the diary-techniques lend tone of immediacy and anguish to Monisha's account of her miserably empty married life. The tragedy of husband-wife alienation, as already delineated in *Cry, the Peacock*, is reenacted here through the Monisha-Jiban tale. Monisha, Nirode's sister is married against her wishes in a middle-class stolid family. She is married to a well off but indifferent husband Jiban. Monisha is tormented by her loneliness. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by 'loneliness and lack of communication'. She is always haunted by a sense of her life dedicated to nothing.

As motherhood is the ultimate objective of the woman, the importance of and craving for children, if male, all the better is feelingly described by the novelist. Desai has explored the psyche of both the childless women, as of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, of Monisha in *Voices in the City*, and also of woman with children, like Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. The interesting thing to note is that Anita Desai has also portrayed the psyche of, "unwomanly" women in the sense that they don't want children. Certainly they are not as "unsexed" as Lady Macbeth was.

Monisha wishes to have peace and silence which she does not get. In her in-laws house, she does not mind the great amount of work she is made to do. But the fact that she is always under the scrutinizing eyes of others, causes her discomfort. It seems to threaten her individuality. The fact that she is childless and is incapable of bearing a baby snatches from her the privacy, even of her own room. In such circumstances when she realizes that her husband Jiban is unable to understand and fulfill her emotional needs, she begins to grow world-weary.

Monisha's unnatural silence and unobtrusiveness only emphasize the distance she has covered from 'reality into realm of colourlessness'. Philosophy is a great fascination for the heroines of Mrs. Desai. It is this philosophical interpretation of sentiments that regulate the pattern they follow. In moments of difficulty, she recites passages from the Bhagavat Gita. She obligates herself with higher objects like the fruits of action, attachment, involvement, wisdom. These contrive to explain substantially her detachment through which the spiritual quest is made towards a greater attainment. Peace is the ultimate wisdom to end all misery – this principle captivates her for the attainment of meditative mind that will enable to land in a visionary secluded world of her own, devoid of all misery.

The crowded city of Calcutta makes her feel tired in mind and she finds the atmosphere uncomfortable. She leans over and shivers at this ugly sight of the city. Even at night, there is no relief. Images of decay and disintegration endow a suffocating sensation to the entire novel. To Monisha, the stars seem pale with tuberculosis. Monstrous vulgarity of everyday life and

the sniveling women and obscene men of the marriage party display spiritual disintegration. Monisha fails to pull herself on amidst this sordidness, the wasteland of civilized humanity.

Desai reveals that a true picture of the feminine world, against which Monisha reacts as:

Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (VTC 120)

The female birds in the cages remind of the unpleasant lot of the bereaved femininity. Like the caged monkeys, these unfortunate creatures state the callousness of treatment thrown at the female world. The symbolic expression of the peacock is in display again. If in *Cry, the Peacock*, the elevated colourful feathers speak of Maya's infatuation with life, the bleeding, scarlet doves in *Voices in the City* retell unspeakable abyss of misery to which women are forced to. Bird images are now and then, used as mechanism of identification with women. The doves stigma finely transformed to the women, once again enforces the scorching effect of harsh treatment. As unlike the doves, the women bleeding through a life of suffering, they live, eat and at times are forced to sing.

Monisha has incapacity to bear a child, incommunication with her husband and the suspicion of her in-laws, who condemn her as a thief, cause to oblige her to choose between death and mean existence. It is Monisha's diary

which serves as her only reliable means of existence, of communication in atmosphere of distrust, envy, ignorance and lack of privacy. In addition to the diary, Monisha finds that Nirode is the only other medium for communicating her feelings and ideas. Neither her husband nor her in laws try to sympathize with Monisha. She fails to adjust herself in her husband's joint family. Her heart is always thirsty of love. That is why she longs for her mother's love and seeks her brother's sympathetic company.

In this world, the relation between husband and wife is very delicate and it is based on the better understanding between the two. Having tragically failed to win either the affection of her mother-in-law or the love and companionship of her husband, Monisha is very sensitive to the oppressive domestic environment that she is repelled by the mechanical recitation of the Sanskrit lessons by Nikhil. His sermon gives her some relief like the rain water. Jiban is the prisoner of a conventional culture in which a woman's most important roles – child bearing, cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children - are under the authority of a stern mother-in-law.

The elders of Monisha's family are addicted to the feet before faces syndrome. Monisha has to touch their feet all the time and she hates it. She also cannot stand the noise, the sights and the smells of the large household where she is consigned to an iron-barred rooms upstairs. She reveals, "Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows-other bars." (VTC 109)

Apart from doing her household chores, Monisha is treated indifferently by everyone since she cannot bear a child; her fallopian tubes are blocked. She is filled with distaste when other talks of her organs and the

reasons of not having a child. On hearing the talk of the childless Monisha, She herself consoles, “I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to scrutiny.” (VTC 113)

Monisha’s ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility, and the stress of living in a joint-family with an insensitive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. Monisha is the victim of the crippling life within a joint-family. Monisha’s diary clearly pictures the trauma experienced by her when she finds herself in the midst of unsympathetic relatives. An educated girl with a refined sensibility, Monisha’s expectations of happy life are shattered to pieces when her father marries her to Jiban against her will. Her grievances in joint family are rightly expressed by Shakti Batra:

Monisha feels totally neglected, isolated and lonely even in a bustling, joint-family in crowded Calcutta. No one seems to understand her feelings or her needs. On the one hand, she longs for privacy and on the other, she is lonely in the midst of her husband’s family. Jiban, her husband, pays her hardly any attention and her sister-in-law fail to understand why she prefers books to sarees. (Batra 112)

Talking with her tongue in cheek, Monisha’s aunt tells Amla that Jiban is “completely unsuitable to Monisha’s taste and inclinations. So your father decided he was the right man, that was a right family” (VTC 199). Thus a highly sensitive and imaginative girl is married to Jiban. Monisha’s suffering

begins on the first day of her marriage. As it is the custom in Bengali families, the newly married couple is expected to prostrate at the feet of elders and get their blessings. During the marriage reception, Jiban surreptitiously pushes Monisha to bow to his mother. Monisha goes down on her knees to touch her mother-in-law's feet to take her blessings. Her mother-in-law, while placing her hand on her head in blessing, pushes a little harder than Monisha thinks is necessary. Monisha feels humiliated when she is also forced to fall at countless feet of others.

Monisha was often haunted by meaningless monotony of sound. She thinks of Nirode in her old dreams, he must be sitting somewhere in a corner of the family. All her past memories are scattered here and there like leaves in autumn season. She has to face and strain herself against her own disposition. Her face was a mask of sadness due to mal-adjustment between her and Jiban. Life is a challenge to one's instinct for self-improvement. It seems that her married life has been the life of discontentment, life of mal-adjustment. Her purpose of life is only to breathe but breathing alone is no life, it is worse than death.

The similar idea is expressed by Anita Desai in her famous and fascinating novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita is fully tired on human life - full of passion, hypocrisy and dishonesty. She has a strong desire to go to Manori to escape from that worthless and meaningless life, so that, she may lead her life full of satisfaction and happiness. Monisha's psyche is further bruised when she finds that she cannot have privacy even in her bedroom. A stream of visitors' barge into her bedroom with a volley of



uncomfortable questions, reeking of sadistic curiosity, they open her wardrobe, count her sarees and discuss her books. Helpless in the midst of such dominating relatives Monisha longs for solitude. She thinks, “only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and the nieces, and the nephews.” (VTC 115)

Monisha fills her wardrobe with books instead of clothes trying to find some time to read them. In the joint-family, she has no time to devote to her intellectual pursuits as her world revolves around the axis of domestic life. Her days are crowded with innumerable little duties like serving fresh chappathis to the uncles and listening to her mother-in-law as she tells her the many ways of cooking fish that pin her down to the household.

No sensitive woman will tolerate her physical deformity discussed by others right in her presence. Monisha’s defect in the fallopian tube has resulted in her sterility. This biological deformity is inhumanly discussed by her relatives. Monisha suffers in silence when they talk of her as if she were a log of wood. She is isolated and she is not even invited to take part in the conversation which concerns her. Meena opines that:

Monisha is treated like a servant who has to confine herself only to the chores of the kitchen. The psyche of a sensitive woman like Monisha is unable to bear the vulgar exposure of what is sacred and secretive. Monisha’s physical inability to become a mother and the derisive attitude of her family members lead her to suffer from inferiority complex. (Shirwadkar 64)

The relatives of Monisha's husband spare no occasion to wound her feelings. Even a slight and unconscious negligence on the part of Monisha draws cynical responses and severe criticisms from them. For example, when Monisha gets into the carriage with her brother Nirode, accidentally her saree lifts a little exposing her legs, this is purely accidental and Monisha herself notices it only when her family members watch silently from the window. She hears them say that if Jiban had been there, he would not have allowed her to go.

Monisha longs for a chance to get away from the members of her family. She goes to attend a concert so that she can be away at least for a short while. The moment she leaves the house, her in-laws begin to indulge in their usual practice of laughing at her. She becomes highly emotional and concludes that it is extremely dangerous and that this kind of cynical attitude is too humiliating to be borne. She is "caught back and rebuffed, at the last and most urgent moment. Utter humiliation and desolation" (VTC 122). In the traditional Indian joint-family system, the daughter-in-law is always treated as an outsider. She is not encouraged to involve herself in family affairs. She is not permitted to do anything on her own. She is not even allowed to have access to her own husband's money. For instance, when Nirode falls ill and is hospitalized, Monisha takes some money from Jiban's purse to meet the hospital bills. She does this taking it for granted that she has the right to use his money. She receives the shock of her life when her husband's relatives accuse her of theft. This aggravates her sense of alienation and she silently reacts. Jiban's relatives who are in no way equal to her, regard her as meaner than they. Such treatment meted out to her makes her feel that she is alone there, "a little beyond and below everyone else in exile." (VTC 136)

Monisha's contemplation, over the traditional and patient "Bengali women who follow five paces behind their man" (VTC 120) is a fine piece of criticism on the treatment of women in general in Indian society. Women are treated like caged birds and are expected to wear saris of dull colours. Generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of dimly lighted rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and chanting verses from *The Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Ramayana* have been wasting their life waiting on men who are self-centered, indifferent, hungry, demanding and critical.

There has been constant and continuous bickering between the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law notably in Indian society. Mothers-in-law always expect their daughters-in-law to be obedient, submissive and subservient. They like to get all the household duties done only by the wives of their sons with little concern for their feelings, emotions and physical conditions. Disobedience in any form either to mothers-in-law or to sisters-in-law will lead to problems in life. The society in which Monisha lives is in no way different from this unwritten code. Monisha is expected to be amenable to all the actions of her relatives. Apart from household works she is often "Summoned" by her mother-in-law to massage her legs. Containing her feelings, Monisha always obeys the commands of her mother-in-law as she likes to be free from problems. Even husbands in most cases want their wives to be cooperative to their family members. Unmindful of her feelings, Jiban advises Monisha to "be a little friendly ... That is all they ask of you- a little friendliness." (VTC 118)

Very much concerned about Monisha, her sister Amla desires to reach out to Monisha to break through her isolation and wants to spend sometimes with her. But her expectations are shattered. Amla is not allowed to go to Monisha's room but is directed to her mother-in-law's presence. This is the predicament of daughters-in-law in the joint-family. Jain rightly says, "...a system which traps and then destroys Monisha, a system which denies freedom and privacy, and encourages invasion." (Jain 74)

When Amla and Monisha meet together, their old associations are refreshed as the drowsy leaves in autumn are refreshed by the sweet showers of April. They recollect motherly affection and love which was a blessing from heaven to them. Monisha leads a frustrated life but motherly affection infuses a spirit in her to sustain her life. For Indian girl, it is necessary to lead a married life. She should not spend her life independently in any profession. Nirode puts many questions to her – 'Has your mother spoken to you of marriage? Will you not worry? How do you get to work everyday? Sugar-coated pills of satire are unbearable and poisonous shafts of irony and sarcasm are hard to trouble. On the other hand, Jit, an other friend of Nirode is much ravished by her bewitching beauty and invites them to party. But Nirode's sharp vision knows Jit's amorous motive. He utters angrily, "Is this a party" and Jit answers him, "No, No, I only wanted to see brother and sister together." (VTC 171)

Subjected to such humiliations and ill treatment, Monisha feels entrapped and withdraws herself into a shell. She is filled with a sense of loneliness and feels unloved. Her forced state of isolation and sense of

overpowering dejection dry up the emotional springs within her heart. Fear creeps into her troubled mind and the lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of others sicken her. These fears sweep upon her in great waves smothering all vestiges of reason and drive her to the point of no return.

Added to the humiliations heaped upon her by her husband's relatives is her observation of the poverty rampant in the "devil city of Calcutta" (VTC 117). The rickshaw coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the lame beggar child, the refugee who litters the platforms of Sealdah Station with his excrement and offspring share the fate of weariness and hopelessness of life. She is disheartened by the deceptive quiet crowds, the hidden violence, the anger which reveals itself in murder and crime all over the city. The cutting of the beggars' arms by their kidnappers or masters, "the hurling of ink bottles in the West Bengal State Assembly, oaths and insults at the meetings of Calcutta Corporations, examination students tearing up their questions paper and going on strikes and burning trams make Monisha sick of the passive but distressed, deceptive society in Calcutta." (VTC 118)

Monisha's miserable life is empty from within and without. She is married to Jiban and her relationship with him is marked "only by loneliness" because of the carelessness of Jiban, or say their misunderstanding. It has been said in the very beginning that she is very sensitive and an emotional lady. Though many people out of sheer emotion, leave their home and then regret, Monisha tries to search for a real meaning of her life but at the end, she feels frustration. She thinks that her life is meaningless and there is nothing to hold on. She tries,

... to pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettiness of our mean existence . . . is that right? To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes in at all? What force of will does it require to shed, as I believe my mother has, at least to an extent, shed, the unnecessary, the diverting, and live the clean, husked irreducible life? If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life can not be lived . . . a life dedicate to nothing. . . that this husk is a protection from death. Ay yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely, is not a different choice. (VTC 121-122)

Thus true meaning of life lies in good understanding and relationship. It has rightly been observed by Swami Rama that:

... the path of a human being is not the path that a lover travels all by himself. If one really wants to understand in one sentence what life means, it is that life means relationship. Without relationship, life has no significance at all. The closest relationship in the world is between husband and wife and next is the relationship between parent and child. (Rama 3)

Monisha is a will-less, helpless and passive woman. Married into a self-possessed, middle class family and to a prosaically dull husband, she is unable to adjust to her surroundings. She phlegmatically refuses to identify herself with her husband's family. Monisha, like Nirode, wants to be free from the clutches of her family. Jasbir writes, "She finds it difficult to free herself of her appurtenances and duties." (Jain 24)

Monisha has an academic bend of mind and reads the books like Kafka's and Dostoyevsky's. But her husband's family is apathetic to this, and she is kept busy in the slave work of a house-wife; she is tired of the crowds and lack of conscience in the city, indirectly in her husband's family. So she becomes secretive and silent. Her incapability to procreate, and her stealing money for Nirode's medicines alienate her from the family. Out of compassion and loathing, she is forced to accept the latter. She, like Nirode, has a higher brain and finds life only a conundrum "Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only conundrum-is that, then life?" (VTC 124-125)

Monisha is an extraordinary young woman who reads Kafka and Camus. She enjoys listening to sitar music for hours. She fails to understand the taboos of the age old Indian Hindu tradition and reveals herself in minute details in her diary. She does not have any religious faith and wallows always in her confused despair. She has self-knowledge and realizes her life as "traceless, meaningless, uninvolved" amounting to non-existence (VTC. 140). She is so sensitive to the taxing and stifling domestic environment. Monisha

feels that she is different from all. As Usha Bande observes: “The refrain ‘I am different from them all’ reverberating through *Cry, the Peacock* also echoes throughout Monisha’s diary. It spells disaster for both.” (Bande 60)

Monisha’s body goes on withering and shrinking everyday. She utters,

I grow smaller every day, shrink and lose more and more of my weight, my appurtenances, the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of this world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet.  
(VTC 139)

There is an emotional gulf between herself and all the world. She has self-knowledge and realizes her life as traceless, meaningless and uninvolved: “I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved-does this not amount to non-existence, please?”(VTC 140)

Monisha does not have a harmonious relationship with her husband Jiban. There is a lack of emotional involvement on the part of Jiban and little communication exists between Monisha and Jiban. She gets opportunity neither to be near Jiban nor to share her joys and sorrows with him. This is mainly due to the influence of the conventional society which expects a wife to engage herself always in household duties. Usha Pathania exactly notes, “The diametrically opposed cultural backgrounds of the couple also come in the way of mutual understanding and mental affinity.”( Pathania 26)



Jiban is the product of and stands for a conventional culture. He has seen women spending their lives like birds in cages without any sense of identity. He treats his wife Monisha as an outsider. He gives prime importance to his bond with his mother. When Monisha is accused of theft by her mother-in-law, Jiban also becomes a part to their collective allegations. This callous behavior of Jiban betrays a lack of trust between husband and wife and Monisha does not feel at ease in her husband's home.

Monisha, being sensitive, loves privacy and loneliness. She is forced to live in the joint-family of her husband where every one is indifferent to Monisha. She is always surrounded by his family members and feels tormented. She longs for love and understanding. The absence of the element of love in the her husband's family makes her feel bitter.

The institution of marriage is to be blamed for the conjugal unhappiness of Monisha. Monisha's marriage is an arranged one and as Monisha and Jiban in the joint-family fail to get a chance to understand each other, the seemingly benevolent institution like arranged marriage becomes the cause of the restlessness of Monisha. As Santha Krishnaswamy says:

Her marriage is the excruciating, destructive and negative of all social institutions that trap and torture her isolated, sensitive psyche... Monisha lives in a society where any deviation from the cult of traditional womanhood is judged to be a violation of this morality of mental health. (Krishnasamy 250-251)

Monisha's consciousness is bruised by the expectations, insinuations and the sarcastic remarks of her in-laws. Her inability to bear a child also troubles her. Apart from "this haunting burbling" (VTC 112) life of the nauseating crowd of Calcutta city, "the eye-for-eye rapacity, of money, greed and money ruthlessness" (VTC 112) the inhuman living conditions also torture her very much. She feels isolated and lonely and wants to be free from this despicable clutch. "The stubborn insistence upon retaining one's identity complicates one's (emotional) life and brings awkwardness into the relationships" (Krishnasamy 41). This pits the uncompromising individual against the unrelenting society.

Desai points out that Monisha, whose life has no attachments, no enthusiasm, no inspiration, no charm and no desire to live in this meaningless world because it is hard to live in Rome and to fight with Pope. So away from Calcutta, a city of noises and voices, she runs in search of peace and calm. Many questions creep up in her mind such as – on what ground those emotions rained their fire on the worship of the goddess Kali. Now Monisha decides to sacrifice her life on the altar of Kali who alone may give her peace of mind. She forgets each and every incident of her past life and begins to think in a new way. "Is there really anyone who lies awake all night waiting for love, for a lover?" (VTC 239)

In all these questions she finds herself ignorant, like a dead flower, an empty glass of wine because she has lived her life without a touch of love, or hate or warmth or herself. Jiban's heart was dry and unconscious at Monisha's

craving for love. But he realizes what he has done. Monisha has fought her battle alone. She was no longer a woman but a magnificent portrait, a figure calm and pale.

Monisha is a victim of societal ill-treatment. It is effectively brought out by the novelist. All the events that involve Monisha are narrated from Monisha's point of view. By presenting Monisha's plight in first person narration, Anita Desai identifies herself with her protagonist. This adds to the authenticity of the delineation of Monisha's character. Monisha's pathetic life is rendered in her own words. Her diary unfolds her inner turmoil in a powerful manner, enabling the reader to look deep into her psyche. Placed in an unenviable and pitiable situation, Monisha slips deeper and deeper into the ravines of depression never to surface at all. The joint-family system as represented by Jiban's relatives is only a microcosm of the malignant society that is bent upon taming those who like to be different from the majority. Being the sensitive woman that she is, Monisha is unable to make any compromises or stand the onslaught of such an oppressive and uncaring society. She possesses neither the will power nor the psychic composure to defend herself against the expectations and demands of a tradition-bound and unsympathetic joint-family. This results in her neurosis and drives her to suicide.

The tradition – bound society in the monstrous city of Calcutta stamping its ugly feet on the tender-hearted innocent souls not only drives sensitive Monisha to death but also shatters the hopes, dreams and aspirations of her buoyant and individualistic younger sister Amla. Amla comes to

Calcutta from Bombay to become a successful commercial artist. She is determined to enjoy the city, her new job and independence. She even expresses with self-conscious buoyance: “Calcutta doesn’t oppress me in the least . . . it excites me” (VTC 142). But soon she begins to feel the oppressive atmosphere. The harshness of the city destroys ‘her eager, adolescent enthusiasm’ (VTC 173) transforms it into cynicism. In the hot summer heat she often regrets having come here she asks herself the question, “Why ever did I come to Calcutta? Why didn’t I stay away, in Bombay, or go home to Kalimpong?” (VTC 176-177)

Amla is shocked to see her brother Nirode and her sister Monisha who have become victims of the ruthless society. She is disillusioned to see the depressed and corroded psyche of her brother and her sister. She perceives,

... that this monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlet, stealthy and odorous of mortality, had captured and enchanted—or disenchanted—both her sister and brother.” (VTC 150)

Being a liberated and intelligent woman. She loves independence and wants to be individualistic. She is distressed by the joint-family system prevailing in the Indian society and the marriage in such a family where the independence of a woman is totally curtailed. She does not want to be imprisoned by such an ensnaring social institution. She wants “something greater than pleasure alone, or the security of marriage alone, something more rare, more responsible.” (VTC 145)

Amla aspires for a higher plane of life. She attempts to master all fears and apprehensions of life, so as to give meaning to it. Her self-confidence and the gay spirit with which she lands in Calcutta show her capacity to enjoy life. But her experiences of the hollow city life frustrate her and it is rightly said by Jasbir Jain: "... frightened not only of the future, of the unknown outside her, but also of the unknown within her." (Jain 80)

In bitter moments Amla admits that it is a horrible city of hypocrites where one cannot be oneself. In this showy and pretentious world people hide their real intentions, motives and faces. As is the society so should her actions be and she decides to hide everything including her paintings. She tells Nirode that she has to keep things secret in the horrible city where people hide such things, cover up their weakness and protect their fragility.

Optimistic Amla, tingling with life and vivacity at the advent of her career in the city is no guarantee against its firm grip that has turned Monisha, a ghost, some 'unknown and dread entity'. Amla mistakes Monisha as a 'lifeless statue' confronting dry, hard 'flagstones' of reality. Dissatisfied spirits around sighing and complaining, warn her of the slow mortality of all the fine things. Gradually growing exhaustion starts paralyzing all the sprouting seeds of hope and the thrill of entering the big city.

Under the great pressure and pull of the changing current, the established values and all the fine discretion between high and low, right or wrong start freezing. Lassitude has overcome her and the younger ones, like a fever and later on captivates all the vitality and zest of creative talent. The city has robbed off her art, of her ambition, of the career of a designer. She grows

more and more aware of the stifled cry of agitation, of utter dismay of her own voice, of Monisha's and of similar thousands of women. Increasing morbidity reflects mounting social transition in which the characters are mere puppets. The novelist presents Amla's feeling;

She felt herself being torn, torn with excruciating slowness and without an-aesthesia, from the Amla of a day, an after-noon ago. Miraculously, there was no blood, only the broken nerves hanging there, exposed to the clammy air, like cut telegraph wires, glinting in moonlight. (VTC 186-187)

Amla tries to prepare herself to what is happening around her but is unsuccessful. Dancing with Jit on a Saturday night she catches her breath with fear at the great pressure of Calcutta's night life. Later when she perceives the impact of her presence on Dharma's Painting "she felt afraid now, longed to struggle away from any responsibility." (VTC 208)

Amla's futile efforts at evoking response from both Monisha and Nirode coupled with her unimpressive, routine, pedestrian professional activity drive her to feel lonely and helpless in Calcutta. She also feels the emptiness of her life. Her parents, her brothers and sister have not filled up the empty spaces of her life. As love is not forthcoming from within her family, Amla turns to others in her need for love. She looks outwards in order to make friends. She needs touch, contact and living people around her, not mere shadows or ghosts. Thus young, independent, and spirited Amla falls a prey to her passions and becomes emotionally attached to Dharma, a married

man. But when she learns about Dharma's cruelty to his daughter, she loses some of her respect for him. She is disappointed by Dharma's self-centered and cynical existence.

In spite of her living in the midst of a hostile, inhuman and materialistic society, Amla does not prefer to end her life as Monisha has done. Rather, she decides to fight the forces she considers evil till the end. Monisha's death has a salutary effect on her.

It has pointed out the way for her and she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin. (VTC 248)

Monisha is highly imaginative whereas Amla is realistic. As a modern young woman Amla knows pretty well that it is quite necessary to be realistic in this fast – paced world. She is a talented, beautiful and intelligent girl known for her “exceptionally sharp sensitivity”( Pathak 27). She loves independence and seeks a job which satisfies her will. She takes part in social entertainments, and many try to court her but without any result.

Amla prefers to be a creative artist. Her profession, an amalgamation of commerce and art, defeats the very sense of creativity and beauty. As the juxtaposition of the aestheticism and materialism negates communication at the deeper planes of consciousness, Amla displays her aesthetic bend of mind by turning from commercial art to pure art. Optimism and pessimism, joy and sorrow work side by side in the character of Amla. Even while

moving happily and optimistically towards life, she feels a “giant exhaustion growing and swelling inside her, of a feeling of sick apprehension and despair” (VTC 149). Later at a party, the “atmosphere of underlit reality, of incomplete life” (VTC 167) overpower her.

Two conflicting emotions shatter Amla as she is fascinated by the pleasures of Calcutta life but is nauseated by its rottenness. The city has lost its beauty and freshness. She feels helpless in Calcutta but does not seek any solution as her sister Monisha does. Amla is the least affected of the three by the corrosive effects of city life. While Nirode and Monisha are very much in the city, trying to be absorbed and involved. Amla remains only as an observer. “Amla idealizes herself as a superior being.” (Bande 130)

Unlike Nirode who is morbid and Monisha who is destructive, She fights her way through life. She is conscious of the “cold, frosty love of power” (VTC 109) which she inherits from her mother. As Usha Bande opines: “She secretly embarks upon a search for glory in order to get the satisfaction of experiencing herself as her grandiose self.” (Bande 130)

Amla is deeply attached to her brother Nirode and sister Monisha. She feels depressed on seeing the frustrated and dejected life of her brother and sister. She seeks a loving companion to assuage her shattered feelings. Her artistic taste naturally draws her towards Dharma, an artist. Her interest in Dharma and his paintings grow into an emotional attachment and she falls in love with him. Her relationship with Dharma gives a renewed vision and she reorients herself. Modelling for him makes her “translucent with joy and



overflowing with a sense of love and reward” (VTC 210). But her love for Dharma does not last long when she comes to know of his indifferent and inhuman attitude towards his daughter. She is discouraged by Dharma’s self-centered and cynical attitude to life in general and women in particular and parts company with him.

Amla is also caught in the mire of a mindless society. Even though she is young, individualistic and strong-willed, she is not able to overcome the devilish influence of the society. She is disappointed and disillusioned but at last she partly regains her will after realizing the sordid reality at the death of her sister Monisha. The agony in Amla’s mind springs from her inability to flow with the general current of society. She uncompromisingly takes a strong stance and refuses to accept the cruel dictates of society to which average commonalty submit themselves uncomplainingly.

Although Amla’s lot is no better than Monisha’s, her predicament is altogether different. Amla is in disillusionment with and resignation to the harsh realities of life. She is more balanced than Monisha in her attitude to life. No doubt, she is yet another disappointed woman who occupies the endless pages of Anita Desai’s fiction, but she grows in maturity in her repeated encounter with an unaccommodative society. If the joint-family system is the manifestation of this relentless society in Monisha’s case, it is symbolized by Calcutta in Amla’s life. A city devoid of peace, candor, cleanliness, true camaraderie and genuine love, the Calcutta of *Voices in the City* is an indifferent society personified. To drive home this point, the

novelist resorts to the recurrent use of predator image while applying the prey image for her wounded protagonists. As examined earlier, it is from Amla's angle the predicament of the two victims of this monster city is mostly narrated. Amla herself is a prey and as such she is aware of the incessant conflict between the individual and society.

Amla Strives to escape from the boredom and insecurity of Calcutta by attending cocktail parties, dinners, and dances, But this flamboyant life style fails to satisfy her quest for values as she is basically an introvert. Her next attempt to escape the environmental hostility ends her up in the modeling profession but only in vain. Again, her unrequited love for Dharma is no refuge either. Therefore, the choice becomes very clear to Amla:

...either she loses her identity and merges with the multitude or she braves the odds and gets annihilated in the process like Monisha. She makes her choice albeit sadly – she 'digs her heels in, aware of what she is missing, despising herself for compromising, grappling with the powerful reality of the senselessness and negative quality of life. (Krishnaswamy 253)

According to Amla, love is not passion, lust or satisfaction of body. It is hunger that demands food for heart and is never appeased. It goes on burning in the heart like fire, only its smoke is visible and so it is eternal. It never burns for other's right, it may be felt by lovers alone. It is sacred and holy as the soul is. Amla's inner trauma is well brought out by Usha Bande when she says,

...psychologically, Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. Her ambitious pursuit drags her through various psychic situations till finally she establishes a contact with her real self and achieve equanimity. (Usha 129)

Though Monisha, Nirode and Amla share some common characteristic traits, Amla is a little different from the other two. Unlike them she is portrayed , “as a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle” (Usha 129). The dominance of the love of freedom in Nirode, Monisha and Amla is the direct inheritance from their mother. Their mother is a beautiful rich woman who loves to settle in an elegant home in Darjeeling. She is a more complex figure. She is a self-centered woman who does not think of her children’s welfare and she tries to break away from them. She wields her power over everybody in her house. She writes ‘soulless’ but poetic letters to her children. None of her children associates her with “mothering succor or nurturance.” ( Krishnaswamy 259)

Amla Ray is affected, like Nirode, by the character of her mother-her search for freedom and independence. Nirode has inherited it from his mother without knowing it. Like Nirode, she is in possession of a spirit. She works for independence and a job. She gets the job. She wants to be presented to society by Nirode which he does not like. She introduces herself to society, on her own, and dances and mixes with men seeking, also, if possible a love partner. Most of the people try to court her but without any result. They perceive a destructive trait in the Ray family. She finds partial fulfillment of love with

Dharma only. She changes a little bit but fails to attain the higher aims of life. At the end of the novel she is shown working for profits with Bose, the professor. She has an egotistical, self-indulgent liberalistic vein in her. The city depresses her too and she feels aged by no less than ten years. But somehow she manages to remain intact.

The mother of the trio, an escapist soul, is a shadowy figure. Long before, she is away among the hills in Kalimpong in a 'steel container', a 'thick glass cubicle', and has lived in it all her life without a touch of love or hate or warmth. The novelist makes her stand for the women who have utterly failed and taken voluntary retirement. She is mystically kept in the background. Her secluded but over-powering self has prompted Nirode to identify her with Goddess Kali.

Another very dominant character in the novel is that of Mother who has typical face as her mother was of Nepali origin. Impact of Mother's face is to be seen among her children who also inherit from her love of liberty and a certain self-engrossed egotistical nature. She is very correctly defined by their father as a "butterfly that sat vibrating on her flower" (VTC 207). She is indulgent to joys of life and hence she is described by Nirode as a she cannibal. In the pursuit of pleasures she has totally forgotten her husband. She is most beautiful, polished and balanced woman ever known but she is an escapist living away from her children and not discharging her duty of a mother. But her sudden elevation into Kali, the goddess of Bengal embodying good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, the manifest and the unmanifest is

purely dreamlike and fantastical. Perhaps the authoress did not know how to end the novel and the picture of Mother as universal mother saved her from the impasse.

The mother's illicit relationship with Major Chadha makes an impact on the minds of Nirode and Amla. Nirode calls her an "old she-cannibal" (VTC 103). She is devoid of the motherly affection and care which a society expects and is natural to a mother. When Nirode and Amla long for love and affection at the time of Monisha's death, she turns a blind eye toward them.

Among other women, aunt Lila is more optimistic in out-look. Her vocation and busy life speak of solidarity that is miserably lacking in Monisha or Amla. She propagates physical freedom, women emancipation from bondage to men in every form. Her hatred for self-denunciation and philosophical observations make it obscure to understand Monisha, Nirode and at times Amla. Her self-satisfaction, as per her contribution to freedom as well as her immediate wants and whims have led her to opine against the timidity of the younger generation in petty affairs.

In the existential drama of Nirode, Monisha and Amla the minor characters in *Voices in the City* also contribute their share. Among them, Dharma is bestowed with mystic qualities which are heightened by his hermit-like life outside the city. He views Calcutta as a dead city on account of his personal tragedy and the elopement of his daughter. His sensitive and serious nature, unperturbed by the currents of life, is eminently suited to his artistic career. He influences Amla and she feels happy that in his art a powerful

revolution has taken place. His influence makes her feel that her real self, eclipsed so far by her pride, tries to emerge. Dharma becomes ‘the magic helper to prop her and guide her through life.’ (Usha 135)

Another very weighty character in the novel is Dharma, the painter whose early paintings were surrealistic. His reduced things to insects and moths-perhaps he thought all men were animal like. It was caused by his daughter’s falling in love with her first cousin-an incident that revolted him. Amla’s spirit, love or liberty, a sense of romantic aspiration and beauty and the desire for higher life must have touched his dazed soul. Therefore, the revolution in his painting, he is a mysterious painter and thought reader of his models. So, all girls hold him in great esteem. He is the only one that changes and becomes a round character.

Dharma is responsible in giving a new impetus to Amla, whereas Jiban, the callous and indifferent husband of Monisha, is responsible for her despair and loneliness. Jiban is a conventional Bengali husband who wants his wife to be submissive to the dictates of his family. He never understands her feelings, emotions and predicament. He believes in male domination and allows no freedom to his wife. He wants her to be his dependant. “His formal, stolid, unfeeling personality is the cause of his alienation from Monisha” (Goel 61). Anita Desai makes use of narrative and linguistic devices to delineate her themes in her novels. The images and symbols are the most prominent among the devices she employs. These devices “evoke the required atmosphere. Provide deep insight into characters.” (Goel 54)

*Voices in the City* is abundant with such images and symbols which project the shattered consciousness of the protagonists. They are literal, metaphorical and at times symbolical. They are implicit as well as explicit in their meanings. Anita Desai wants to remind her readers of the dominance of the society and the city over the life of the individuals. Calcutta is presented as one of the dominant images in *Voices in the City*. The understanding of the novel lies in our understanding of Calcutta. Calcutta is depicted as a trap from which no character escapes. *Voices in the City* presents the imprisoned life of Nirode, Monisha and Amla. “The City imagery is not an auxiliary ornament in Anita Desai....It is a powerful adversary in *Voices in the City*.” (Inamdar 145-146)

Calcutta is, in symbolic terms, an ugly, ghastly monster city in whose grip there are three helpless souls – Nirode, Monisha and Calcutta is a “devil city” (VTC 117), the “unrelenting city” (VTC 236). Amla also intensely feels the monstrosity of Calcutta. She regrets for having come from Bombay to the monster city where there is no possibility of normal and healthy life. She also complains to Nirode that this city conspires against all who like to enjoy it. These remarks of Monisha and Amla add a fictional veracity to the use of prey and predator image. Desai is obsessed by this imagery with a view to crystallizing her tragic vision of life. This image occurs in the race-course scene in which a horse falls on the ground injured and a group of birds swoops down to feast on it. This monster city kills one prey Monisha but it leaves the other two preys Nirode and Amla – badly shattered. Thus this prey and predator image acquires a new dimension of horror.

Another imagery that suggests the two selves of Monisha is that of the criss-cross bars and the windows. Physically, Monisha is trapped behind the bars and windows. But psychologically, her real self is locked behind the barred demands and pressures of her glorified self. This image becomes clearer in the last scene when she toils to establish a rapport with her exiled real self. When charged of theft, “Monisha’s glorified self suffers, her image receives a shattering blow.” (Usha 66)

Anita Desai depicts the city as a snare from which none of her characters is able to escape. *Voices in the City* draws the caged life of Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The city with its “dark pandemonium” (VTC 9), “brutal noises”, and “demonic voice”, adopts the role of a “living spirit” (VTC 44). “It frustrates the aims of the protagonist like a powerful adversary.” (Inamdar 145)

Kalimpong is another dominant image in the novel. A beautiful mountain resort with fine flowers, fruits, gardens and nature’s bliss, it is Nirode’s mother’s ‘ivory tower’. As she enjoys life ceaselessly there it becomes the symbol of a happy place. Its serene, lovely and peaceful atmosphere is an antithesis to the dreary and oppressive conditions of Calcutta. Monisha and Amla always long for the happy life in Kalimpong.

The novel also consists of a few different images like those of the river, the bird and the kite which illustrate a kind of release or freedom. Nirode, Monisha and Amla long for their escape from the oppression of the city. Nirode’s craving for freedom from the claustrophobic city is expressed



through the following image. One must be a king kite wheeling so far way In the blazing empty sky as to be merely a dot. Almost invisible to the urchins who stood below, stones in their fists, ready to be aimed and flung. (VTC 72)

Anita Desai presents images of darkness which form a major part of colour imagery in this novel. The image of darkness is skillfully portrayed. It denotes not only the loneliness and frustrations of Monisha's shattered heart but also her inner struggle against and surrender to the formidable forces of life. "I'll have only the darkness. Only the dark spaces between the stars... This, this empty darkness, has not so much as a dream. It is one unlit waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs." (VTC 138)

In *Voices in the City* the imagery of music and flowers renders the alienated relationship of Nirode's parents. While Nirode's mother sits with her head bowed and eyes closed in pleasure listening to the shehanai music, his father falls asleep with "his head drooping forward and his mouth open and wet" (VTC 206) which breeds "terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes" (VTC 207). When his mother is busy in her garden, his father sits against his cushions, "idle and contented . . . in his malice" (VTC 207). Such images eloquently bring out the alienated relationship of the husband and wife.

Anita Desai uses images not only to project the alienation but also to indicate the evolution of a character. The changing relationship of Amla and Dharma is eloquently expressed through the images of painting. Amla finds at her first meeting that Dharma has been painting "little spiders", "terrible webs", "endless railway tracks", "gigantically magnified etiolated leaves", "silver of barks" which reflect Dharma's obsession with dry, complicated and

meaningless existence. Amla's relationship brings about a revolutionary change in his view of life. "His brush worked quickly in long, rich strokes of vermillion and ochre, scarlet and fresh pink." (VTC 208)

Another striking image in the novel is that of Goddess Kali. While watching the street singer, Monisha is reminded of the Eternal Mother, the Earth Mother. In her vision the street singer merges with the Eternal Mother: "Her pounding arms, the great prominent ridge of her collar bone beneath the glistening skin. . . the face was that of the Eternal Mother, the Earth Mother" (VTC 236-237). Monisha, shrinking away, feels certain that a glance of the enormous and brilliant black eyes of the street singer would dissolve and disintegrate her into a meaningless shadow.

But Nirode feels just the opposite. She is not the Earth Mother, she is Kali, the Goddess, who is distant and ruthless and is licking her lips at the sacrifice. Nirode compares his mother with Goddess Kali. He feels that his mother has watched the sacrifice of Monisha and is unperturbed. He comments on his mother's reaction at the death of Monisha: "See how still and controlled her lips and hands are, because she has at last seized and mastered death, she has become Kali" (VTC 255). As Jasbir Jain says, "these two aspects of womanhood are paralleled by the two aspects of life – withdrawal and involvement. And to a large extent these two are represented by the garden and the City." (Jain 81)

The employment of a large number of images like the structure and the narrative techniques are adopted by the novelist in this novel. The epithets and the language used in the novel direct the reader to the focal point of

understanding: the entrapment of the protagonists in the materially dominated and traditionally bound society in Calcutta and the suffocating atmosphere of a hostile joint-family.

Most of the other characters in the novel are types. Sonny is a rich landlord's son with extravagant habits and shallow understanding. Arun is an obedient son till he marries an American wife. Jit Nair is a successful businessman but a failure as a husband. Bose earns both money and wisdom from old books. Jiban is a cipher as a man, he never understands his wife. But the redeeming feature of all is that they are friendly and helpful to Nirode.

There are flat characters too in the novel and they do not develop or change; if there is any growth, it is negligible. Action of the plot does not grow from conflict of character. But character-painting is achieved by the observations of the novelist and the comments made by characters. Some of the comments are very revealing.

Thus Desai has made the people inhabiting the novel speak in character. The dialogue brings out the individual differences of speech and character very well. The anguish, the irritations, the bitterness, the jealousies of the people are well expressed in their ironical, sarcastic, pungent dialogue. The novelist's mastery of language, spoken as well as written, is established. The language and the style are elastic and dynamic and can cope with all situations of subtle expression.

Occasionally, the language and style become experimental; grammatical structure is temporarily suspended and the impression created is that of telegraphic language with hardly any subordination or coordination:

Eyeless angels, odourless lilies, bloated doves with their beaks missing. Rickshaws drawn up to their flanks, coconut shells and vermillion *pan-spittle* strewn on their out skirts. The soft night weighing down, murmurous, uncalm. Nirode's unrest, his unformed designs heaving through it like some lost unhappy bat. (VTC 17)

A close study of the novel *Voices in the City* reveals the dark realms of the psyche of the protagonists – Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The conventional family and society, the dominating social values, the mores, restrictions, conventions and customs of the joint family system act as a trap to the protagonists and they try to escape from it. Monisha escapes into the world of death. Nirode leads a lifeless existence and Amla, deciding to fight till the end, adapts herself to the situation.

Anita Desai subjects the psyche of her female protagonists to microscopic scrutiny. Assisted by her poetic diction and powerful imagery, she examines the agony of a sensitive bruised mind in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered. The characters of Monisha and Amla are representative of many young women who are trapped in society. They are the mouth-pieces of Anita Desai in projection of her point of view that the existing social ills are the causes of disintegration in the family life and disillusionment in the personal lives of modern Indian women. By graphically

portraying the mental agony of two women protagonists trapped in unsympathetic surroundings in *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai emerges as a sincere champion of women's causes. She establishes that the gulf in interpersonal relationship involving a sensitive individual and an uncompromising larger whole like the joint-family system or life in the city, always results in bitterness and disillusionment for the individual concerned. According to her, "the remedy for the predicament of women like Monisha and Amla is not in individual therapy but rather in social reconstruction." (Krishnaswamy 250)

The effect of this tragedy makes one's emotions purified and one begins to believe that passions of life lead to frustration and chaos in the mind and heart. But a sense of sacrifice of all these passions alone may yield one to the mental peace and satisfaction. In real human life particularly in the hectic fury of city life, no peace of mind is restored because the starved passion of life is never perceived by those who have no time to stand and stare. They have more important material achievement and prosperity alone can afford all mental peace and hunger of heart. But it is a sorry state of affairs that they forget the fact that only money alone can not give what heart and mind craves.

That is why, both Monisha and Amla could not achieve mental peace which goddess Kali could give them through complete devotion without an hypocrisy or outward show. Here Anita Desai points out that in this world of hypocritical devotion, people make a show of their sacrifice and love in order to be spiritual or Godly in their outlook but they don't know the reality of these emotions.

In this novel again the message of *The Gita* has been taken for its central theme but it is dealt with in a different manner. There are outward contrasts between Maya, the heroine of *Cry, The Peacock* and Monisha. Monisha is like Maya, highly sensitive and lovely lady against the middle-class philistinism. She feels 'Whole' only when she is alone and her sensitive soul fails, like a flower, to stay on the twig against the wind of hatred. Amla seeks fulfillments through love. But the death of Monisha gives her a glimpse of 'What lay on the other side of this dark, uncompromising margin,' Maya's life is an abundance of feelings but Monisha has stilled her emotions. The unhappy Maya pushes Gautama off the roof in order to protect her world of sensuousness, while Monisha sets fire to herself in order to reach the core of intense feeling. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha is not the central character. It is Nirode who is the main protagonist. He is a "Congenital failure and his search for freedom is an existential search. He, like Arjun, of the earlier novel, is a rebel and rejects and world of security and routine." (Jain 24)

*Voices in the City* examines the predicament of two sensitive women, Monisha and Amla, in the context of an indifferent and sometimes even hostile society. As the products of an unhappy home, they find themselves trapped in the city of Calcutta which fails to offer them any solace. Monisha is bullied and ignored in her husband Jiban's home in Calcutta. The traditional joint-family system, which is nothing but a manifestation of the traditional Indian society, is responsible for Monisha's anguish and suicide. Teased constantly by the members of her husband's family, branded a thief, denied

the privileges that are due to her and treated like a puppet by her husband himself, Monisha becomes a neurotic and immolates herself. It is a reckless attempt to free her from the clutches of a mindless society.

Amla is equally sensitive and conscious of her role and place in society. She comes to Calcutta with the hope of becoming a career woman. But she is forced to run from pillar to post in search of a vocation and identity. She meets with little success in her attempts and is given a raw deal by Dharma, the painter. Amla reacts silently to the sufferings of Monisha and that of her brother Nirode, both victims of society like herself. But unlike Monisha, she pulls herself together and gathers the poise and courage to brave the odds of life. A mute sufferer, she adapts herself to the demands of society.

Thus *Voices in the City* has the most crowded gallery of human portraits in Anita Desai's novels. Monisha and Jiban are the unhappy married partners. Nirode Ray is endowed with extra-ordinary intellectual and artistic talents but suffering from Hamletian jealousy of his mother and major Chadha, the first case of sexual promiscuity. Amla is the amateur artist acquisitive of love and happiness, related to Dharma for a time and then relinquishing him. Nirode's mother is the female self-seeking giant figure. Dharma, with his self-inflicted exile, is a memorable surrealistic artist reading straight into the heart and minds of his models. David is a practical artist working for principles and meaning. Sonny and his out-dated landlord father figure are used to reflect on the state of pre-freedom feudal India.

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In spite of clumsiness in spiritual crisis of the characters, Desai has emphasized the monotonous cryptic bargains of a feminine mind. Of all these women characters, Monisha, like Maya, (*Cry, the Peacock*), is a victim of the situation that drains out the last drop of life in her, stands out. Though she is uncommunicative, her suicide is a confession of failure. She embodies the negation of the concept that women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out of it. All their joy and ambition are channeled that way, while they go parched themselves. The end of the quest is at last clear. Monisha's reaction is violent, but it upholds that death is more welcome than a mean, subhuman existence.