CHAPTER-4

Girlhood: Identity
Formation of Womanhood
The life of a girl is shaped and determined by what she experiences in her childhood and however much she tries, it is not easy for her to come out of it. The future woman is determined as a child. Both Desai and Deshpande strongly believe in the influence of childhood on adult life. This chapter will examine how Desai and Deshpande depict the deserted childhood of their protagonists Monisha and Saru in *Voices in the City* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* respectively. If they do not present an actual girl protagonist, they compensate it by a detailed examination of the girlhood of their protagonists who define their adult self through an analysis of their girlhood and various factors that have influenced it. They expose the subtle processes of oppression and gender discrimination with the male oriented family and society. Parents and family atmosphere play a crucial role in framing one’s identity. In this connection Archer and Waterman have said:

Two important concepts are ‘individuation’ (where youth are encouraged to develop their own identity) and ‘connectedness’ (which provides a secure base from which the youth can explore his or her identity) Parents and others can help youth reflect on their identity and achieve a strong and healthy sense of self by facilitating both individuation and connectedness. (Archer & Waterman: 22)

Monisha and Saru both fail to face challenges of womanhood in one way or the other. The reason behind this is their distorted childhood. This chapter will analyse how a girl’s childhood can be the period of her identity formation of womanhood. How childhood experiences can make and mar a girl’s healthy growth.
The dark holds no terrors. The terrors are inside us all the time. We Carry them within us and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them to scratch and maul. (Deshpande: 85)

In the formation of one’s character and value structure childhood plays an important role. Childhood as a significant area of human experience is not given ample emphasis as far as literature is concerned. In Indian English literature also women characters are widely depicted and critics have evaluated them. The girlhood of a woman is a critical part of her identity formation. In literature this period of identity formation of a woman is by and large un-examined and un-explored.

Childhood experiences and atmosphere form one’s personality. The innocent child is like a little plant which is shaped and moulded the way it is nurtured. If it is well nurtured, then it turns into a confident, fearless and healthy grown up human being, but if it is not nurtured well it turns into an immature, fearful character that cannot face the challenges in life. Family plays an important role in a child’s identity development. As Archer and Waterman have said, “Family structure provides an important environment in which identity development occurs.” (20)

In normal circumstances the plenitude of warmth and value given to a male child is denied to the girl child. This bias in children makes the girl child either depressed or rebellious. This negative and destructive treatment towards the girl child makes her later life miserable. A woman’s matured years are determined in her childhood. This discrimination in the society injures the psyche of the girl child and impairs her growth, leaving variously a sense of guilt, rejection and depression. Love is the only basic requirement of children and girls often are deprived of it due to
various family circumstances. It is the family that has to provide the girl child with space and opportunity to grow and develop into healthy adults and hence damaging home conditions, always exert a paralysing effect on the girl child.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading women novelists in India. She depicts Indian women characters in her novels. Deshpande’s protagonists represent the predicament of women in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande states in an interview given to Laxmi Holmstrom:

I am different from other Indian who writes in English, my background is very firmly here. I was never educated abroad. My novels don’t have any Westerners for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives, our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. (qtd. in Barens: 11)

Shashi Deshpande’s novels deal with the women belonging to the Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional environment. They struggle to liberate themselves and seek their self identity and independence. Shashi Deshpande is also the contemporary writer who has given the graphic detail about the girl child and her psychology. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analysing their childhood and the process of upbringing. The crux of all, prevailing problems of women is their subjugation which is always present in the form of silent servitude. Their social conditioning generates slavish attitude which in turn creates compunctions in their psyche when they decide to remould or change it. Since her childhood, the psyche of a girl child is moulded in a particular fashion to inculcate in her all types of feminine qualities. As Simone De Beauvoir has said:
One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychical or economic identity defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product...called feminine. (Beauvoir, 2011: 293)

Shashi Deshpande depicts the plight of married women in almost all her novels. In analysing the predicament of the married woman, Deshpande traces the causes to their very childhood experiences. Deshpande looks very seriously into her protagonist’s psyche and analyse their childhood experiences in the backdrop of their present status in life. By putting emphasis on childhood of her characters, Deshpande reveals her conviction that all of them carry the legacy of their disturbed childhoods in their married lives. Deshpande also seems to suggest that for making a healthy society, girl children need to be given due care and support. Shashi Deshpande is perhaps one of the few Indian English writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist who attempts to define her adult self identity by analysing her growing years. This process helps her realise her family upbringing and socialization in childhood.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals the protagonist Saru’s life, showing how her disturbed childhood has contributed largely to her inability to establish and maintain personal relationships in later life. Saru is in one way or the other victim of childhood grooming and she is an example of how the girl is marginalized and how she ultimately fails because of her childhood grooming and indoctrination. Saru stands for all the girls, who are rejected, alienated and discriminated. Saru is a typical example of a girl to prove that the life of a girl child is formed and determined by what she experiences in childhood and however much she tries, it is not easy to get rid of it. Saru’s later life suggests that if a girl child is not fed with love and care in her
childhood, she fails to gather a sense of belonging and develop a sense of insecurity and fear.

Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is her first published novel and as in the case of her other novels, the protagonist is a woman. Saru is the daughter, with whom the mother never reconciled, especially after the death of her younger brother. Saru defies her mother, goes to a city, studies to become a doctor and marries the man she chooses herself. The protagonist Sarita is a successful lady doctor. The story tells her conflict that she has to face as a doctor and as a wife. During day time she is a popular lady doctor and in the night she is trapped animal in the hands of her husband Manohar, who is an English teacher in a small college. Saru goes back to her father’s house after many years because her marriage had alienated her from her mother all these years. She returns being unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. During the day, there is no evidence in his behaviour to suggest anything that should be a cause for her anxiety. There are only bruises which show that the night has been real. Her inability to find out what was wrong prevents her from doing anything about this problem till she returns to her father’s house. It is here, living with her father and Madhav, the young student who stays with her father that she tries to come to terms with the various events in her life. It is here that all the tortuous introspection goes on. Her stay in her father’s house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with her father, husband, children and her dead mother. This experience changes her perception. She has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives her courage to confront reality.

In this novel Deshpande focuses on the function of family in moulding to a great extent, the psyche and attitudes of an individual towards self, society and life in general. Deshpande examines the role of family in enabling a child, especially a girl
child to ascertain her bond with the society. Through its support system, family provides the child with emotional security, self-esteem and self-worth. In the warm and sympathetic environment of family, the child learns how to establish cordial relations with other members of the family in particular and society in general. If the family does not play its appointed role adequately then it can become the main reason of one’s stunted and unhealthy growth. And in the long run this kind of family atmosphere can cause feelings of loneliness, bewilderment and a sense of insecurity in a person.

Of all the familial relationships, the mother-child relationship is the strongest and the most natural one because mother nurtures the child with her blood and milk. So the impact of mother’s nature and behaviour on the psyche of the child is the strongest one in his/her formative years. In a patriarchal set-up like the one depicted by Deshpande, the role of a mother becomes all the more crucial and pivotal in shaping the personality of a child, especially the girl child. In Indian social set-up a baby-boy is sought after by the mother far more than a baby girl. Giving birth to a girl child fills the mother with a sense of shame which she unconsciously transfers to her daughter. Resultantly, the girl is deprived of the maternal affection which disrupts the harmony, so essential for her healthy growth. She grows with a distorted view of her own self which is presented to her by the mother’s disliking. Such a pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting to societal norms. Deshpande very clearly depicts such psychological distortion through Saru’s example. Saru’s mother, born and brought up in such a society, carries forward this ideology of discrimination against her girl child in the novel. She blatantly discriminates between her son, Dhruva, and daughter, Saru. Through her behaviour, gestures and actions, she
clearly conveys the idea that a son is preferable for her. Some mothers like Saru’s mother consider daughters as unwanted burdens, regard sons as power symbols and perpetuators of the family. Sons are elevated to heights and daughters barely exist. Indian mothers have a stigma towards girl children, but on the other hands, boys are their jewel in the crown. Desire for sons rather than daughters are ingrained in the psyche of the feminine mother. Such a preference is actually a construct of patriarchy.

The novel depicts the trauma of a girl child Saru. Saru is a victim of gender based discrimination. Saru has disastrous childhood experiences which further reduce her later life into a desperate struggle. The cumulative force of discrimination in childhood coupled with the accusations of her mother for her alleged role in the death of her brother and the resultant sense of guilt she has developed, maligned her life and put it on uneven terrain. Saru had a very bad childhood, due to her mother, who symbolises a submissive figure of patriarchy. She follows the rules set by the rigid conventional society to bring up her child. Her mother full of closed minded conservative norms, has inculcated a moral bound to prefer a son to daughter. Saru at a very young age is made to realise that as a girl she is inferior to her brother Dhruva in all respects. Saru cannot tolerate the preference which her mother gives to her brother, Dhruva simply because he is a boy. She recalls that there was,

Always a pooja on Dhruva’s birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening... My birthdays were almost the same but there was no pooja (Deshpande: 168-169)

Saru finds her mother’s inclination towards her brother Dhruva and a nonchalant attitude towards her, very humiliating because they are nullifying her existence as a human being in the family. Dhruva dies by drowning in water. Saru’s
mother never forgives her daughter for being alive even after her brother has drowned and Saru cannot forget the traumatizing effect of her mother’s hysterical outburst.

Saru was deprived of all the rights of a child after the death of Dhruva. Mourning envelops the family and Saru’s existence was not noticed. The reminiscence of her girlhood reminds Saru of her fifteenth birthday, which was special to her as she received a pair of earrings as a gift from her friend Smita. Saru feels a sense of superiority and importance. However, Saru resented the gift given to her by her mother. She became aware that the gift was to give her a flamboyant appearance as a young girl and was not a gesture of love. She remembers:

So that was it, it was not for me, not to please and make me happy, but because I should, as a growing girl, have these things to wear... I don’t want them. I don’t want to eat. I don’t want anything. (Deshpande: 171)

The psychic unbalance stems from the unresolved love – hate relationship between mother and daughter. While tracing the conflicts of her female characters, Deshpande has also explored that sometimes mothers themselves create conflicts in the lives of their daughters. To understand the mother - daughter relationship in Deshpande’s novels, it would be appropriate to note what Simone De Beauvoir writes in her chapter on mother. She says:

Some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world…vexed at having produced woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: ‘You Shall Be
Woman.’ She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double; and she also tends to inflict upon her the disadvantages from which she has suffered. (Beauvoir-533)

The mother at time imposes on the girl child exactly her own fate. Sometimes the mother, on the contrary, forbids the child to resemble her. Beauvoir says that the real conflict arises when the girl grows older and when she wishes to establish her independence from her mother. According to Beauvoir:

This seems to the mother a mark of hateful ingratitude, she tries obstinately to checkmate the girl’s will to escape; she cannot bear to have her double become ‘an other’. The pleasure of feeling absolutely superior, which men feel in regard to women- can be enjoyed by woman only in regard to her children, especially her daughters; she feels frustrated if she has to renounce her privilege, her authority. (534)

Saru, as a child was also deprived of the communication with her father. She could not develop a lasting emotional bond with him. This is evident from the fact that the reader hardly hears her in conversation with her father, while Dhruba has long conversations with him. Like any other child she too makes every effort to draw the attention of her father towards her but to no avail. Every time it is her brother Dhruba, who becomes the focus of love and attention of her father, instead of her. That is clear from the way her father used to take Dhruba out for a ride, leaving her at home. He would make Dhruba sit on the bar of the cycle conveying Saru a message that, “Daughters are their mother’s business.” (Deshpande: 105) This plunges into her tender mind the painful feeling that she is unloved and unacknowledged. Saru feels
that she is no one’s business. Saru feels very bitter and says, “My mother had nothing for me, either whose business was I then?” (Deshpande: 105)

Even her mother does not care for her. Instead, she makes her feel more neglected and unloved. Saru’s life is choked by her mother’s routine criticism and fault finding. For the mother who bore puberty as a pain and shame inflict the same impression on their daughters and the daughters struggle conformity like a disease. That is something shameful, this growing up and girl children are made to feel ashamed of themselves even in the presence of one’s own fathers. When Saru’s mother points out looking at her that she is growing up there is something unpleasant in the way she looks at her. Saru is made to feel an ugly girl. As Sarita says:

I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so. I can remember her saying me dispassionately, saying...You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that. (Deshpande: 61)

The strained relationship between Saru and her parents and stifling home environment has its own detrimental effects on the tender psyche of Saru. Being a young girl she yearns for recognition but all the means of proper channelization of energy are repressed. This repression finds an outlet in violent moods. This pernicious home environment of hatred and hostility sows the seeds of rebellion within her. This rebellion manifests itself when she even as a child of tender age begins to harbour thoughts of Dhruva’s death and because of this unconscious desire she is held back from going to his rescue and he dies by drowning in the pond. Even when she is accused by her mother of murdering her brother, she does not deny the charge. As Premila Paul observes:
When the mother accuses her of murder she speaks out Saru’s intentions and not the deed. Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfilment. (Paul: 64)

This incident is clearly indicative of sibling jealousy which no doubt arises out of mother’s blatant favouritism. Saru’s mother’s obvious preference for her brother creates a sense of alienation within her and precipitates a sense of aloofness and insecurity. It also develops a sense of destroying the lives of her near ones. It makes her think:

My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed her manhood. (Deshpande: 217)

This statement suggests a study in guilt consciousness. Saru is an unwanted child and her brother’s death makes her all the more unwanted. She is at perpetual war with her mother who can never forgive her for being alive when her brother is dead. Growing up in this environment of hatred and hostility, she nurtures seeds of rebellion within her. She has many psychological knots woven into her personality and is ingrained with a fear of rejection. This discrimination leads Saru to rebelliousness, hatred and sense of guilt. Saru rebels against her mother and openly rejects any connection with her. On attaining womanhood, she was most worried about her periods not because of the inconvenience, but because it puts her in the same class as her mother. Saru’s rejection of the mother is very pronounced in the novel. “If you are a woman, I don’t want to be one.” (Deshpande: 63) This is made worse by various kinds of inhabitations imposed on the girl child in patriarchal societies. As she grows,
the natural thing, her femininity is made to feel something guilty and faulty. A sense of shame is installed in her for her physical growth. Saru’s mother advises her to be careful in her behaviour as a grown up girl. She should be careful of her dress in the presence of any male, even if it is her father. This acute self consciousness of her femininity created by her mother and exacerbated by the patriarchal milieu around her causes feelings of disgust for her womanhood.

This hatred for her female identity is aggravated further when she learns that she is nothing but a burden, a liability to be dispensed with by her parents. This tends to undermine her sense of self as a human being, reducing her to a mere object to be given to someone else without her consent. Her mother repeatedly reminded Saru of the worthlessness of her sex, in her childhood. This could be behind her determination to achieve something in life to prove to her mother that she was, after all worthwhile.

Saru’s behaviour is determined by a large number of tensions resulting from the incidents occurred in her early life. Saru begins to express her feeling through resentment against her mother. Saru joins a medical college and later on marries Manu out of rebellion because her mother opposes the idea. In this connection Simone De Beauvoir has said:

Rebellion is even more violent in the frequent cases when the mother has lost her prestige. She appears as the one who waits, endures, complains, cries and makes scenes...Her daughter wants to take after her. She dedicates a cult to women who have escaped feminine servitude: actresses, writers and professors; she gives herself enthusiastically to sports and to studies; she...tries to compete with boys. (Beauvoir, 2011: 320)
In Deshpande’s novels mother and mother figures are not the matriarchs to be glorified but the suffocative and authoritative figures to be disdained. Hence, the insecurity of impressionable years manifests itself into the wrong choice of partners and sometimes landing her into unwanted situations. Saru deliberately indulges all her life into those acts which emerge her mother and in moving against the flow, drains herself emotionally and physically. The root of gender differentiation in our society is unfathomable and Saru’s mother is no exception. Deepsheekha Kotwal has rightly commented:

Curiously Deshpande’s women not only rebel against male domination but furiously satirize their mothers and grandmothers who had not taught them to articulate their desires and needs. (Kotwal: 38-39)

It is clear that these actions have been instigated by strong impulses of the reaction of her normal natural being. They have been taken to hurt her mother by trying to become what her mother never wished her to be. This is in a way more an effort to reject the mother than to assert her own genuine will and choice. Even the crucial decision of marriage with Manohar reflects the same forces at work in her behaviour. As Barche says:

Against her parents’ wishes Saru married a boy from lower caste. Her marriage to Manu is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values her mother adhered to. She married to attain the autonomy of the self and to the secure love lost in parental home. (Barche: 87)
Saru later on in a mood of retrospection and honest confession admits, “If you hadn’t fought me so bitterly, if you hadn’t been so against him perhaps I would never have married him.” (Deshpande: 96)

It clearly hints at the fact that she is driven to marry Manu more by the reaction and sadist rebellion against her mother than anything else. The desire of revolt empowers her to such an extent that she takes the decision of marrying Manu even when he is not economically independent and both of them are students. The more vehemently her parents oppose the idea, the more determined she becomes. Saru begins to express her feeling through acts of defiance which spring from her resentment against her mother. The more she asserts herself in her acts of defiance, the wider grows the gulf between her and her mother. It is this irresistible urge to retaliate by wounding her mother’s feelings as she says:

There was a pain in my chest, my throat ached, intolerably, there was a bugging in my ears, a blur in front of my eyes, I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, make her suffer. (Deshpande: 142)

She also dreams of her mother being dead. She tells her, “Yesterday night, I dreamt you died I saw your body burning.” (Deshpande: 143) This also shows her growing tendency to settle scores with her mother and draws a sadistic pleasure out of her mother’s discomfiture. Saru is obsessed with what the mother said and did to her that it ruins the whole of her life even as a wife. It is evident from the way the mother predicted about the marriage, “I know all these ‘Love marriages’. It’s love for few days then quarrels all the time. Don’t come crying to us then.” (Deshpande: 69) She cannot forget her mother’s words, “You won’t be happy...I know you won’t.” (Deshpande: 98)
Because of this negative predication by her mother, she silently suffers in her unhappy marriage. She does not turn to her parents for support, only to prove her mother wrong and to vindicate her decision of marriage.

Saru meets Manu in college. She is attracted towards him during her college days. He is senior by a few days and quite popular in the college. He is a famous writer and a poet of promise with some poems already published in magazine. She feels privileged because Manu makes her his companion. The initial years of her marriage are quite blissful as Manu seems to be her saviour, who rescues her from her insecure existence in her maternal home. As Prasanna Sree says:

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. She resents the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. (qtd. in Dr. Kavya:62)

Saru at the initial years of her marriage is very happy with her husband. Though they live in a shabby apartment and without any luxuries, they are together and happy. As, Saru remembers:

All the clichés, I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender, and loving, as well as being loved, was an intense joy... Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love, of my being loved, of my being wanted. (Deshpande: 40)
Soon Saru realised that happiness was only an allusion. As long as she was a medical student and her husband the bread winner, there was peace at home. The problem arose when she began to get recognition as a doctor. As she says:

But now I know that it was there it began... this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. I know this too... that the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (Deshpande: 42)

Sarita is a self made person and her ego, and her innate love for power create a number of problems. Right from her early days it is found that she opposes traditional codes and marries outside her community. She even defies social conventions by using Boozie to advance her career. Economic independence, status and power, becomes a goal and every move of her life is towards the realisation of that goal. Sarita becomes a reputed doctor, she becomes proud of her social status and her husband becomes insecure. She wants to outshine other not through dedicated service but through available means, including economic criteria and thinks that it is the real achievement. When material prospects get more value, Manohar’s place in her life diminishes. As a doctor, she is successful and quite busy which ultimately upsets her family life. Manohar is quite annoyed with her popularity. She is unable to give enough attention at the domestic front because of her busy professional life. She is not able to devote time to her husband and children. Here she fails as a wife and mother. Saru’s financial and social status grows far beyond that of her husband. She is a busy, successful doctor in contrast with Manu who is an underpaid lecturer. Saru’s steady rise in status brings about a rift between Saru and her husband, which grows
even wider with the passage of time. This ultimately results in the torture of bearing Manu’s physical assaults. Sarita’s financial strength turns Manohar into a rapist at night only to assert his potency and masculinity, as J.O. Brien observes, “Men often use violence against their wives when they lack in other means of control such as economic or educational superiority over women.” (qtd. in Dr. Kavya: 66) Manohar’s action humiliates Saru and she thinks:

And each time it happens and I don’t speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it, and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has really begun and what I am is a creature only half alive. And it seems I can do nothing to save myself. (Deshpande: 96)

Saru’s insecurity is escalated by her disastrous experiment with marriage. Her dreams have a choking sensation; the nights are a terrible nightmare. Loneliness becomes an integral part of her and she leads a dual life. For the world she is a competent doctor and in reality she is a tortured woman. Her pain, her suffering cannot be uttered in public, but she feels her body as a burden. She is mentally disturbed person. She is not able to speak out what she wants. She has a guilty consciousness that she has deserted her parents in order to marry Manohar. She expects sympathy from her father but to no avail. Now she thinks that had her marriage been arranged one, her parents would come to her rescue now and at least they would be respective and sympathetic for her sufferings. Absolute confusion prevails upon her. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother, brother, husband and children as well.
A woman who nurtures such deep rooted hatred for her mother and lives quite estranged from her husband cannot be a good mother to her own children. Saru’s mother also had a very unhappy childhood. Saru’s grandmother was deserted by her husband and she had to return with her two daughters, to her parents. This rejected childhood also has contributed in conditioning her mother into a domineering mother. Saru also does not prove herself to be a good mother. She has secret fear in her of proving herself a bad mother. As she says:

When she held Renu in her arms, she had felt not love, but an immense fear, a terrible feeling of inadequacy. Could she measure up to all that this being, so wholly dependent on her, would expect of her? Would she not fail her as her own mother had failed her? (Deshpande: 162)

Saru had sworn that she would never fail her children in love and understanding as her own mother had done. But the novel gives no proof that she is able to keep her promise. She has a secret fear that her children might think of her as she thinks of her mother. Once Saru’s son Abhi wanted the presents that Renu, his sister, got on her birthday. Since he cried and spoiled her birthday, she would not give them to him. Saru repeatedly asked her to give them and Renu retorted:

Why do you always scold me? You never scold him. You never say anything to him. It’s not fair. It’s my birthday, my presents... And now you scold me. You always scold me. It’s not fair, not fair. (Deshpande: 173)

These words of her daughter open up her own childhood wounds and she asks herself.
Do we travel, not in straight lines, but in circles? Do we come to the same point again and again? Dhruva and I, Renu and Abhi...is life an endless repetition of the same pattern? (Deshpande: 173)

Saru is also afraid of thinking that Renu perhaps has the same feeling towards her which she was having towards her mother.

Renu. My daughter. She stares at me critically at times, a cold, shrewd, objective observer behind those little girl’s eyes of hers. And I become nervous, unsure, uncertain of myself. She does not talk much. She reminds me of a room whose doors are closed. Nothing emerges, neither her joys nor her sorrows. And I sense a lack of feeling, of sensitivity in her. (Deshpande: 33)

Though Saru had thought romantically about motherhood, when it actually came it was far from being romantic.

Saru’s long hours of introspection into her marriage makes her realise that her professional success has killed Manu’s spirit. Actually her introspection helps her to free herself from the feelings of guilt throughout her life. She decides to assert herself and fight her own battle. She realises that her life is her own, which she will have to shape. She has to face the events of her life. There is no refuge other than one’s own self. The fear of darkness or ignorance or the unknown fear that haunted her so long gets evaporated and she decides to face her life. The novelist makes it very clear that a woman’s life is her own and she should start thinking that she is an individual, certainly not a dependent but being capable of withstanding all trials in life alone. Saru earlier, was the prisoner of her own fear and confusion but at the end of
the novel she regains her inner strength and realises that she is the master of her own destiny, as she says:

All right, so I’m alone. But so’s everyone else. Human beings... they’re going to fail you. But because there’s just us, because there’s no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk. (Deshpande:220)

The final picture of Saru is really appealing. At the end of the novel Saru stands poised to receive her husband because of her new found confidence in herself. She successfully rids her complexes and guilt and comprehends the meaning of human life, where she realises that she is not the only one caught in loneliness. Kamini Dinesh’s observation aptly sums up Saru’s development as an individual in her own right.

To be true to herself the woman has to excoriate the film of superimposed attitudes and roles. Her emancipation is not repudiating the claims of her family, but in driving upon the entrapped inner reserves of strength. (Dinesh: 200)

In this novel Deshpande’s focus is on the role and significance of family in shaping the psyche and attitudes of an individual towards self, society and life in general. Willful discrimination and disastrous girlhood of Sarita is responsible for her feelings of fear, loneliness, bewilderment and a sense of insecurity. Thus, the impact of family member’s behaviour on the psyche of the child is the strongest one in her formative years. A pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl like Sarita faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting to societal norms. Shashi Deshpande has very artistically depicted these
realities of the life of a girl, how discrimination against girl causes serious damages to her psyche, influencing her life not only as a daughter but also as a wife and a mother.

II

I am turned into a woman who keeps a dairy. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved- does this not amount to non- existence, please? (Desai: 140)

A woman needs to keep a diary only when she does not find a person to share her views. She expresses herself through a diary when she wants to close herself up in solitude and refuses to reveal her hidden self to those around her. The ideal role models are placed before Indian women and they become sad victims of the traditional stereotyped image. A woman tries hard to enact this stereotyped role and in doing so, her true self gets scattered. The ideal woman should put the familial duties on the top priority and her own self at the last one. This role is imposed upon girls. These traditional norms are so rooted in Indian minds that even the new generation of educated, liberated Indian girls find it difficult to effect a radical change. A girl is trained to adjust in her respective role neglecting her own self. In India a girl is chained and locked in traditional roles in such a way that freedom is totally denied to her.

In Indian society the patriarchal view of judgement prevails in every aspect of a girl’s life. It assigns asymmetrical values to male and female. It affects adversely a girl’s ability to signify. She stands on the battlefield where she is to fight against the
An Indian girl clings on to the false image which is inscribed in her psyche. A girl experiences loss and feels that:

...the daily life constantly reminds us that gender subjectivity is a fragile construction, a gossamer web that weaves and reweaves itself. We live with (often painful) awareness that subjectivity is demanding and requires constant negotiation against heavy odds. We are surprised and frustrated at the gaps between what we want to say and what we can say, at the grandeur of our desires and the poverty of accomplishment. (Benstock: 195)

Anita Desai is one of the luminous stars in the firmament called Indian English novelists. Her greatness as an artist lies in her achievement in exploring the psyche of her female protagonists. She focuses her attention on the status of women in Indian male-dominated society. She portrays their quest of self assertion and self-actualization in the face of rigid norms of behaviour in a conformist and status-quo society. She penetrates into the inner life of Indian women. The probing of the novelist always brings up the innumerable point to the need for a new direction in the life of Indian womanhood. Bipin B. Panigrahi says:

The novels of Anita Desai depict extreme situation arising out of conflicts in the inner configurations of the individuals, the conflict between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. These conflicts revolve round the inter play of the ‘self’ with others. (Panigrahi: 74)

Anita Desai does not portray women as strong and rebellious, but as helpless and frustrated. She highlights their frustrations, sense of failure and keen awareness of
the futility of existence. Anita Desai is obsessively and entirely concerned with the depression and oppression of these intensely introvert female characters, who are unable to voice their emotions. She mainly,

... focuses on the trials and tribulations, fears and apprehensions, joys and hopes, dilemmas, predicaments, perplexities and paradoxes, in the physical and psychological lives of her characters in general and the protagonists in particular to mirror the multidimensional reality in all its contours. (Bala: 102)

Anita Desai is a root worker, who projects many battles that are fought and not fought against the subjectivity of women. Her women characters are all caught up in this repressed vacillation of gender or the instability of identity. Women are caught in the strangling grip of conflicts as the real nature of woman; her true self is distorted or repressed within the existing framework. R.K. Gupta has rightly said in this connection:

Desai’s female characters are generally neurotic, highly sensitive, but alienated in a world of dream and fantasy. Separated from their surroundings as an outcome of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. (Gupta: 96)

Fictional world of Anita Desai is located in the corridor of human consciousness. Desai’s women characters are alienated from the world, the society and the family around them because they fail to meet the challenges of life. Their inability to face life forces them to regress to their childhood world of fantasy. Childhood experiences may be seen to have a lasting influence on Desai’s women characters and may be said to control the development of their personality.
Anita Desai is indubitably a writer who enunciates the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society. She is interested in the psychic life of her characters. She penetrates profoundly into the inner working of the mind. She briefly describes the disappointments, disillusionments and the futility of life in a world which is dominated by men. Desai’s women characters rebel against the patriarchal community in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on their lives. They criticise the cultural ideologies that obstruct their way to freedom. Desai’s characters have the habit of withdrawal and live a life of detachment from the society. The self-chosen withdrawal is a form of weapon for survival in a patriarchal community. Withdrawal does not allow them to achieve the fulfillment and make them ‘complete’ beings.

The novel *Voices in the City* describes the attempts of three siblings- Ray children- Nirode, Monisha and Amla to find an identity. They all are away from their home and their dominating mother. They all experience a sense of alienation and fragmentation and share a common need to express themselves to communicate and to find an identity. Nirode, Monisha and Amla are children of indifferent parents. Their father leads an idle life and mother deliberately closes her mind to her husband and children. The strange behaviour of the parents has a damaging influence on the children. As R. S. Singh remarks, “The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother- children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in a husband - wife relationship.” (Singh: 171)

The children are devoid of parental love in their childhood. Nirode, Monisha and Amla are brought up in a family where their father is non- existent entity at home and their mother lives in a world of her own. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ray have a soul – destroying hatred and terrific fury towards each other. The father transforms into a
drunkard, and non-existent entity and the mother changes into practical, possessive woman, losing all her womanly and motherly charm and warmth. She is polished and balanced, yet very cold with a frosty love of power. Their marriage is something of a financial settlement. The father spends his life sleeping, drinking and doing nothing. There is hardly any common liking among the couple. As Amla once tells to Dharma:

My father always got on her nerves by simply never doing anything. I always see him lying back indolently, like an overfed house cat against mother’s embroidered Tibetan cushions, toying with a cheroot or a glass of whisky or both. (Desai: 206)

The truth is that the wife has deliberately forgotten her husband, shut her mind to him by concentrating it on flowers and music and fine food. This hatred between father and mother leaves a scar on the mind of the children. They are real sufferers. The private hell of the couple is enveloping and destroying their lives and pursuing them step by step. The children never occupy any space or never shown any concern by the parents. Thus, their home becomes a dark space for the Ray children and their childhood happens to be an unpleasant phase of life.

The children find that their mother has an affair with Major Chadha immediately after the death of their father. This affair makes her mother detached from her children. The unhappy home environment makes the children feel orphaned. When Monisha overlooks her mother’s attitude towards the family, Amla feels a total lack of love. The word ‘love’ becomes an enigma to the children, especially to Nirode and Monisha. Monisha admits it, saying:

... I discover that in this unattached, drifting bird-creature that vital element that is missing from Nirode and myself- the element of love.
And I discover that it is the absence of it that makes us, brother and sister, such abject rebels, such craven tragedians. (Desai: 135)

Deprived of emotional security, they try to find their individual way of self-expression. Nirode’s hostility, Monisha’s defiance and Amla’s frantic search for love and protection come into confrontation with the complex realities of life. Monisha finds no possibility for the manifestation of love and sentiment during her childhood. Her silence and potent stubbornness have been deliberately pursued from childhood onwards. Monisha has experienced a sense of meaningless in life, which has driven her to embrace silence in childhood itself.

Monisha is married to Jiban against her will. Jiban lives in a traditional joint family. Jiban and his family is chosen by Monisha’s parents because they believed:

It would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a solid, unimaginative family as that, just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance.

(Desai: 196)

Jiban is not in any way a good match for Monisha. Monisha’s parents do not think about Monisha’s likes and dislikes. It seems that they want to get rid of her. Monisha, a fearful girl cannot say ‘no’ to her parents and have to marry Jiban against her will. Amla also wonders about this miss match couple and says:

... how and why it was that Monisha had been married to this boring nonentity, this blind moralist... this rotund, minute minded and limited official. Why had their father chosen him from amongst other young men surely known to him... Was it merely because Jiban was so
unquestionably safe, sound and secure, so utterly predictable? Or was it because fathers did, unconsciously, spite their daughters who are unavailable to them.? And why had Monisha, with that powerful silent stubbornness of hers, never rebelled? (Desai: 195)

This example presents an intense involvement and soul crushing apathy that brings in suicide in her wake. Her relationship with Jiban is characterised only by loneliness and lack of proper understanding. Like a sensitive woman Monisha feels desperately lonely and lost.

Even in educated society, people are found who consider the girl children as burdens. Often girls like Monisha are pushed into marriage without proper inquiry, never taking the girl’s interest into account, because marrying off a girl in proper time is often just a matter of prestige. Parents, show impatience to marry off their daughters and do not often care for the family of the groom or his status. In *Voices in the City* also the parents were told that the family was not suitable for Monisha but the parents proceeded with the proposal that ultimately took her life. Such unwanted girls develop a sense of loneliness and rejection and carry that into their marriage.

Marriage is a traditional role forced upon girls by society. Anita Desai vehemently criticizes the evil practices in marriage which girls consider as a holy institution. The norms of marriage are means contrived by society to cut down the female spirit and keep it under male control. The earth is giver, the source of life and never tires of it. Such seemingly benevolent titles are given to the woman so that she may never revolt against or resent her role. Desai discerns the fundamentally coercive nature of these seemingly benevolent institutions like marriage and the joint family system and portrays them as forces leading to mental strain.
Monisha is presented as an imaginative, highly liberated and creative girl who has been forced by her parents into marrying an unimaginative, conservative family in order to contain her ‘morbid inclinations’ (Desai: 198) She is unable to resolve the contradictions between her private and public life. She loses her identity. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of proper understanding. Monisha is sensitive and she is married to a pathetically wooden and insensitive husband.

Monisha’s husband Jiban is a conventional man. According to him the most important roles of a woman are limited to household chores and child bearing under the authority of a stern mother-in-law in a joint family. Monisha faces the trauma of living in a joint family, where there is no private life. She wishes to do work in privacy, away from uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. She has no privacy even in her room. The other family members make fun of her because in her wardrobe, there are more books than saris. Monisha is the intellectual type who carries her own personal library to her in-law’s house. However, nobody bothers about the books she has in her library.

Anita Desai has presented the picture of women as daughters-in-law in typical Indian middle class families. All their ambitions, talents, potentialities are reduced to mere housewives and they can do nothing beyond household chores. Monisha’s plight is a typical representation of the social situation of numerous young brides in India, where even husbands fail to understand and communicate with them and who unable to bear everlasting pinching behaviour of the husband’s family members, end up their lives, burning or killing themselves. Shushila Singh has said in this connection:
The situation of women is that she- a free and autonomous being like all creatures- nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other. (Singh, Shushila: 22)

Anita Desai portrays Monisha’s plight more entirely and carefully, recounts it to “The women who are like the female birds in the cages.” (Desai: 120) Monisha’s in-laws display not only the traditional mindset of the males, but also the uglier and most disastrous impact of social conditioning on the female psyche. Monisha is expected to willingly enslave herself to the ideas internalised and practiced by Jiban’s family; her duty is to confirm not to create. She feels stifled in the crowded house and longs for some privacy, some time to forget the role play she constantly indulges in, and to be her own true self.

Roles are an integral or indispensable part of our life. In society each individual is assigned certain roles. These roles become a deep grained part of the person’s existence. According to E.E. Jones and H.B. Gerard, role is, “Behaviour that is characteristic and expected of a person or persons who occupy a position in the group.” (178). The roles thus impute fixed qualities and behavioural patterns to the genders. Historically the roles imposed on different genders are also influenced by the belief that man is superior to woman and woman should be controlled by man. This belief forms the basis of many of our religious and moral laws, custom and traditions, which confine women to their homes or places of duty assigned to them. These selected roles are imposed upon the girl child’s psyche in such a way that she starts putting efforts to be expectable in assigned role. The girl children are taught by parents to prove themselves to be fit in the assigned role. They are forced to, “learn that certain behaviour patterns are expected of them just because they occupy certain positions.” (David: 113) Role obligations take precedence and are of great importance
in Indian society especially in the case of girl children. According to Sara S. Mitter, “No Western culture places such potent, challenging and ubiquitous role models before the eyes of its daughters.” (67) The ideal role models are placed before Indian daughters and further in their life as women they become sad victims of the steamrolling of stereotyping by the traditional customs. Thus, the role enactment becomes mechanical and their true selves get fragmented.

Monisha’s husband Jiban is a part of traditional culture in which the duties and the domains of men and women are neatly carved out. Monisha’s artistic temperament and sensitivity is treated with a tolerant disinterest by her husband and in-laws. Jiban’s constant silence only reinforces his family’s view that modernity in women should be defined and chastised by tradition. Jiban does not openly object Monisha’s preferences, but still expect her to remain inessential. Her independence is in contradiction with the ways the family defines femininity. In Jiban’s family the men work in respectable offices and women stay back at home to do household chores. Monisha in such a constrained environment is unable to communicate her needs and desires to others. She wants to do some tasks in privacy, for herself, but not at all given a single chance to live for the self.

Monisha’s situation in her in-law’s house shows the traditional male psyche of her family members. The men are portrayed as superiors, occupying privileged positions, whereas women are expected to submit themselves passively, doing nothing more than looking after the conveniences and comforts of the males in the family. Desai’s novel emphasises the traditional status of women in society and the dominance of male in it. In Voices in the City this kind of life has been described 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. (Desai: 120)

The most crucial issue regarding women’s freedom is taken up by Desai in *Voices in the City* through the portrayal of Monisha. The freedom, which men always possess, is denied to women. Monisha is even unhappy on account of the denial of freedom to her. Jiban’s house is like a jail to her. Standing aloof, enclosed in a locked container, she remains an observer of life. Monisha craves for an experience and searches for her own feeling. The crisis of identity is really pathetic to Monisha. Irene Reweliotty has pointed out the plight of such girls in following way,

To be accepted by men you have to think and act like them; if you don’t they treat you like a black sheep and solitude becomes your lot.

And I, now, I’m fed with solitude and I want people not only around me but with me...Living now and no longer existing and waiting and dreaming and telling yourself everything within yourself, your mouth shut and your body motionless. (qtd. in Beauvoir, 2011: 389)

Anita Desai portrays the existential insecurity created by stereotyping in a very powerful manner. According to Desai women feel that they are outcasts. They feel empty, threatened and depersonalised by family and society. The Indian woman owing to this, experiences the risk of losing potentiated forms. Through Monisha in *Voices in The City* Desai unveils the real drama of Indian woman’s life bordering on the tragedy. She is swamped, impinged upon by the stereotyped role models, customs
and traditions of the establishment. Monisha feels that she lives to satisfy others. Monisha feels an outcast in the confines of her husband’s joint family.

The greatest trauma according to Desai is to exist alone, amidst the madding crowd, without any understanding and love. If the person is more conscious or aware of her autonomous self, the anguish is more. The trapped situation of Indian woman as evidences in the case of Monisha is comparable to that of a caged dove which is unable to move freely. Monisha, looking out through the bared window of the house brings home to us the domestic confines that really limit, handicap and even obstruct the personal development of Indian women. She oscillates between two extremes: either to completely submerge her identity or to impel her individual self forward, breaking all confines and then existing in isolation and preserving her autonomy. According to Desai the discrimination against women and the submissiveness of her sex have become enduring characteristics of Indian society. As R.K. Gupta remarks:

Monisha’s plight depicts not only her individual state but also the state of so many daughter-in-laws who become jail birds in the house of their husbands. Even husbands fail to understand and communicate with them because of their father’s or mother’s domination. (96)

More terrible and more overwhelming environment highlight Monisha’s situation when she is looked upon as an intruder into her husband’s family by the proverbial, cynical sister-in-law Kalyani. Kalyani delights in giving pricks to Monisha by frequently teasing her, asking about the number of saris she had brought in dowry. This incident presents the social evil of dowry which leads to divorces and suicides and inhuman tortures inflicted on young brides.
The retreat into the self weakens Monisha’s involvement in the living world and rift between the observer and the observed, widens and conflicts multiply. Monisha is frustrated and alienated. The oppressive lack of privacy, Monisha’s sterility and in her in-law’s suspicion and lack of love and understanding in marriage haunt her. Monisha as the victim of a loveless marriage is suspicious of the word ‘love’. Monisha’s life is without a touch of love. It is because in her childhood also she was deprived of parental love and care. Monisha also confesses that her relationship with her mother is not founded on love, but on a sense of duty and concern. Monisha lacks love in her childhood and even as a woman when she gets stuck in Jiban’s house, she cannot think of going back to her mother. She rather chooses to die. Monisha laments:

... that vital element that is missing from Nirode and myself- the element of love. ...In place of this love that suffuses the white face of this mystic waif, we possess a darker, fiercer element- fear...there is no such love. It is not there in my relationship with Jiban which is filled only by loneliness...Nor it is there in my relationship with mother which is filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty, honour, of concern. (Desai: 134)

Monisha’s life in her husband’s home is hedged in by an enclosed space that sanctions no options. She says, “I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me.” (Desai: 240) The members of Jiban’s family restrict her individuality in multiple ways. They detain her within the day to day routine of an ideal Bengali middle class wife and homemaker. Patriarchal culture looks down upon women, restraining their natural tendencies, and women become mere functionaries in the hands of the powerful.
Monisha denies coping with the present reality of her husband’s conventional home and describes the oppressive nature of domesticity,

Look at me, my equipment, my appurtenances. My wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapatis to the uncles as they eat, of listening of my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban’s wife. (Desai: 111-112)

Caught in the dark spaces of the women’s realm, Monisha finds her life dedicated to nothing. It is, “a life teeming with the trivialities, these pettinesses of a mean existence.” (Desai: 121) Monisha is unhappy on account of the denial of freedom to her. Monisha craves for an experience and searches for her own feeling. Monisha faces this pathetic identity crisis. She finds herself empty like an empty corridor and grows, “smaller every day.” (Desai: 139) Monisha shrinks, “more and more of my weight, my appurtenances, the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of this world.” (Desai: 139) Monisha has lost contact with the outside world because of her confinement in the house. The pathetic situation in which she experiences a diminishing of her personality is summed up in these words, “I am already too small to be regarded much by everyone. I will be invisible yet.” (Desai: 139)

Anita Desai’s characters get involved in self-recrimination and a feeling of guilt. Characters suffer from loneliness which gives rise to insecurity. There is tension in their mind which results in their strained relationships. In this connection Coleman says:

Feeling of insecurity may have widely differing effects on behaviour, but typically they lead to a restriction in activities, to fearfulness and
apprehension and a failure to participate fully in one’s world.

(Coleman: 70-72)

Anita Desai, almost all in her novels portrays female protagonists who are hypersensitive, solitary and retrospective. Desai is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia Anita Desai told:

In characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against general current. It is easy to flow with the current; it makes no demands, it casts no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great no’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Dalmia: TOI)

The emotional needs of these women remain unsatisfied, with the result; they are withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness. Monisha practices silence and rejects the roles of an ideal housewife; this is her mode of resistance against patriarchal authority. She realises that her husband’s family abhors silence and consciously makes it a weapon against everything that she considers unjust; to her, silence is a strategy for self-defence. She says: “My silence, I find, has powers over others.” (Desai: 130) They all distrust silence; she is “too silent for them.” (Desai: 118). According to Simone De Beauvoir:

If the young girl often develops psychoses ...it is because she feels defenceless in front of a deaf fate that condemns her to unimaginable trials; her femininity signifies illness, suffering and death in her eyes and she is transfixed by this destiny. (Beauvoir, 2011: 341)
As an isolated type, Monisha’s first automatic impulse is to save herself by retaining into her shell of loneliness. Solitude suits her temperament. What Monisha considers freedom is just a conflict and liberation from all fears. She does not get freedom as she does not acquire self-knowledge. Her inability to share her feelings with others isolates her and makes her a pitiable person. Realising this, she is terrified by her emotional vacuum. This new awareness leaves her guilty. She is aware of her distinct situation:

I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me...what a waste, it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer at that... I have not given birth. I have not attended death. All the intervening drama has gone by, unwound itself, like a silent, blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified me. (Desai: 237-238)

Monisha’s sensitive nature and educational background don’t make it easy for her to accept her role as the eldest daughter-in-law of a traditional joint family whose members constantly show their lack of refinement. Monisha like a prisoner, in the dark emptiness of Jiban’s home, develops incurable claustrophobia, and becomes a ‘sleepwalker, a ghost, some unknown and dread entity’. (Desai: 138). She closes herself in fierce solitude; she does not reveal her feelings to the people around her. She writes a diary and makes it her only companion and friend. She expresses her hidden self in her diary.
Monisha is accused of theft by everyone in the family. She has taken Jiban’s money to pay the hospital bills for Nirode. She has to suffer the humiliation from men and women who are mean and low. The mother-in-law shouts, “the servants will be dismissed, all of them. I will not have a thief in my house... After all; you were the only person who was in the room all day.” (Desai: 137) Monisha is willing to accept this status and to live here a little beyond and below everyone else in exile. But she is not able to bear this for long and commits suicide.

Desai pictures Monisha’s individual strife against her plight as a victim’s dissent. Monisha’s silent submission and her policy of detachment and non-involvement seem to be her strategic resistance to male authority. Monisha fails to express her protest and anger and finally creates a void of detachment around her that causes a communication gap between herself and Jiban. Fed up with the trivialities of a confined life, she follows a philosophic way of attaining wisdom by suppressing all memories, longings and desires. The unhappy home condition, works towards the emotional imbalance in Monisha and she turns into a mute suffer. Consequently, she loses self confidence and fails to confront with the trivialities of day–to–day life. Monisha practices silence and rejects the role of an ideal housewife, this is her mode of resistance against patriarchal authority.

The normal or abnormal behaviour of a person expresses or reflects conflicts and complexities of a person. This constitute the inner–nature and if it is, “suppressed one gets sick, if it is encouraged it leads to healthy personality.” (Bande: 25) When inner nature is suppressed it gives rise to frustrations. This fact has been illumined by Coleman in following words:
Frustration results when our motives are thwarted either by some obstacle that blocks or impedes our progress towards a desirable goal, or by the absence of an appropriate goal. Frustration may be minor or they may be serious threats to our welfare, they may arise from outer or inner sources. (Coleman: 82)

Desai captures very well the hurt, humiliation, distrust, cheating and temperamental incompatibility of the husband and wife. Monisha tries to defend herself but fails. Caught up in the frightening acceleration of disappointments and existential agony she ends her life thus:

Two elements had met and in their embrace she was caught. Warmth, heat, terrible heat, a bright glare, smoke, an unbearably loud noise, bubbling, hissing, a gigantic cracking and whipping in her ears – heat seared her eyeballs- a great fog enveloped her...- and God, the pain! Here it was on her eyes, her face, here it came- there, all over-with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted- she screamed ‘NO! NO! NO! Screamed, screamed. (Desai: 240)

The prejudice of the family has stressful and disorienting effects on Monisha. The familial environment totally fails to provide her anchorage and does not give her any sense of security. The oppressive atmosphere increases the cognitive and emotional insecurities. She resigns to her plight meekly, and feels that there is no escape from the shattering and oppressive atmosphere of a traditional ridden family. She feels as though she is chopped up by the stereotyping patterns and traditional bound family. Monisha would like very much to deviate from the accepted and acceptable social norms but owing to an impaired and inadequate self- image, she
feels frustrated and consequently changes the venue of her fight to her own inner self, where she is deeply entrenched in a cocoon of apparent safety.

Through the character of Monisha Desai also projects the injustice done to daughters by parents. Parents’ love and care make a child confident and on the contrary parents’ indifference towards a child makes him/her fearful and vulnerable. There are so many hindrances in a girl’s journey from girlhood to womanhood. In her journey if she finds her parents with her she can fight any battle that comes in front of her. But if she does not find her parents’ support she becomes a victim of such hindrances and fails to accept the challenges of life. Monisha in *Voices in The City* fails to raise her voice against the traditional, suffocative norms of Jiban’s family perhaps because she does not have her parents’ support. Lack of healthy familial atmosphere provided during girlhood plays an important role in womanhood. In her childhood Monisha lacked parental love and care. It seems that she was burden for her parents and they wanted to get rid of this burden by marrying her off. They did not bother about Monisha’s choice, likes and dislikes even in choosing a life partner for her. At that time also Monisha could not rebel against her parents and could not say ‘NO’ to them. She silently agreed to it. Monisha’ parents did not concern for their daughter’s happiness. Her parents did not shape her to be a bold girl who can voice against the traditional norms of society and be the self. Rather, they shape her to be a fearful girl who silently suffers and can never raise her voice. Monisha’s parents are more responsible than Jiban and his family in Monisha’s suicide. Their unconcern for their daughter forces Monisha to end her life in such a tragic way.

In this modern world, there are so many Monishas who become victim of their parents’ unconcern and lack of love. There are so many girls who are forcefully married off without bothering about their future. It is their parents’ responsibility to
mould their daughters’ psyche in such a way that they can face the challenges in life very boldly. Unfortunately, in India there are so many girls, who cannot react positively towards the challenges in life and have tragic ends of their lives.

Tracing the causes of the failure of the wives, one is led to their childhood. The wives presented by Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, are in one way or another, women with battered childhood. In this chapter a study of the childhood of two female protagonists of both Desai and Deshpande is made in order to find how their childhood has influenced their lives, as wives, in later life. The parents bequeath to the children the keys to unlock the treasure chest of love and understanding. A close look at the past of the protagonists reveal that they all had deprived childhoods and that the deprivation was multifaceted and sprang from a deprived family atmosphere where elders themselves led deprived lives. Anita Desai’s and Shashi Deshpande’s novels show this socialization and the stultifying effects of culturally determined ideas of marriage and wifehood on Indian women. The protagonists desperately try to fit themselves to the prescribed image before they learn to question the image itself. But questioning the age old traditions is not easy. Revolting it, is even more difficult as the leading principle of society is that women exist to serve other people’s needs. The stress they give to the childhood of their characters reveals their conviction that all of them carry the legacy of their disturbed childhoods into their married lives and also seems to suggest the need to impart due care and support to girl children in order to have a healthy society.
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