CHAPTER IV

THE BINDING VINE, THE VOICES IN THE CITY

The long silence that had become the hallmark of woman’s existence is broken by
Urmila, the protagonist of *The Binding Vine*. The earlier women protagonists of Shashi
Deshpande have already begun to question their roles, functions, attitudes and even behaviours.
They have realized that they have to unshackle themselves from the chains of bondages which
have chained these women’s rights for centuries. They are aware that the age-old societal norms
and their preordained roles have subjected them to severe suffocation and humiliation. They
finally succeed in knowing about themselves but only within the limited preview of their own
lives. In a way these women have no interest to raise their feelings as modern feminists do with
the capacity to purge society of its evils and blaze forth in a trial of glory.

*The Binding Vine* may be seen as a novel that collates the themes of the previous works
in a broader, more intense canvas. Deshpande mentions that, having dealt with the theme in *The
Dark Holds No Terrors*, she wished to pursue again the notion of the sexual domination of
women’s bodies, the idea of a man possessing a woman and claiming monopoly over her body.
*The Binding Vine* may also be seen as a novel dealing with the recovery of women’s writing and
the reconstruction of women’s lives through writing. Furthering the theme of *That Long Silence*,
Lakshmi Holmstrom says *The Binding Vine* is not only about the silences of women’s lives but
the silences they sometimes break and the stories they choose to tell. ‘In this way [the novel is]
fiction, that is, about fiction, and particularly women’s fiction. The novel is also, in Deshpande’s
words, ‘to a large extent, a novel about mothers and daughters’.
Urmila, a lecturer in a college, is like most of Deshpande’s women protagonists, a middle-class professional woman living in Bombay. The novel starts with Urmila grieving over the death of her infant daughter Anu. The notion of loss is a significant recurring theme in Deshpande’s works. Deshpande’s novels usually start at a point of crisis, which initiates a process of self-discovery for the protagonists. Urmila starts to contend with her loss, with unanswered questions of the past, and an analysis of herself and her marriage to Kishore, after two significant events - the discovery of her mother-in-law Mira’s poems, and her involvement with Shakutai, whose daughter Kalpana had been brutally raped. Deshpande’s technique of counterpointing the past with the present becomes an axis for Urmila’s journey to self-discovery.

Significantly, a trunk of Mira’s papers is given to Urmila with the same kind of formality and solemnity that accompanies the handing over of the family jewels to a daughter-in-law in a traditional Indian family. Also significantly, the private papers are handed over by Akka, Kishore’s foster-mother, who had been married to Mira’s bereaved husband. Akka had been told that the man she was marrying was obsessed with his first wife, Mira, and that

“What he really wanted [now was]
a mother for that motherless child”.

[The Binding Vine [P-47]

Foregrounded against Mira’s story, there is the story of the enormous cruelty of the situation, the fortitude of Akka and her inexplicable and uncharacteristic weeping for Mira. What follows is the recovery and reconstruction of a life which impinges strangely on Urmila’s
consciousness and motivates her pursuit of the story of a woman she sees not as Kishore’s mother, but as Mira.

Urmila’s first person narrative of Mira’s poems turns out to be a discussion on literature, on women’s writing, and a historical account of a woman’s life, which through the narrator’s vision, acquires a significance for her. Urmila, like Madhu in Small Remedies, appears to be almost a spokesperson for writers like Deshpande and editors / translators like Susie Tharu and K.Lalita who have given a voice to or have recovered that writings of women in myth and history. She is initially reluctant to probe into Mira’s private papers, ‘to trespass, to violate her privacy, to lay bare her tragic story’.

The reader / Urmila is like a Voyeur looking into private documents and papers, diaries and poems - forums for self - expression that Jaya, Sumi and Madhu realized were so important for self - definition.

“I have been imagining myself the
hunter and Mira my prey; I have been
filled with the excitement of the
hunter each time I approached her”.

[The Binding Vine [P-135]

Significantly, Urmi is a woman ‘reading’ a woman’s life: Deshpande, in many instances, has written about the reconstruction, and thereby the biases, of women’s lives by men. ‘The point
is that all these stories in myths, legends and oral literatures have been created by men to fulfill their various needs … sometimes it seems to me that words and ideas cannot mean the same to us as they do to men, because what they are really built around is the self-interest of men.

Women, let us remember, have not participated in the process of word – making’.

However, Urmi bristles at Priti’s suggestions of providing a ‘woman’s vision’ to Mira’s life and poems, and is uncomfortable with the thought of an academic dissection and slotting of women’s writing. And then [Priti] went on to the line of how we had to know our mothers and grandmothers to know our situations. And now, I thought, she will quote Virginia Woolf to me. She did. And I knew then I could not work with her. Urmila needs to discover the import of Mira’s writings in her specific circumstances, not as an academic exercise geared towards a feminist issue.

As Urmi Says,

she’s not a symbol, she’s Mira who wrote This book is mine as all can tell, if you steal it you will go to hell,

the girl who wrote “Strictly Private and Confidential”.

[The Binding Vine [P-40]

Urmila arranges the papers with the same meticulousness with which Mira had arranged hers:

“I have smoothed the scraps of paper but the notebooks in chronological order, piled the other books together
and dusted the ancient file’, in a manner similar to
Mira’s ‘workmanlike orderliness about her file of poems’.

[The Binding Vine [P-50]

Moreover, since

“the past is always clearer because it is more comprehended…
we can grasp it as a whole”.

[The Binding Vine [P-21]

Urmila finds it easier to reconstruct it than to cope with the present, ‘maddeningly chaotic and unclear’ and elusive.

The story pieced together by Urmia through the diaries written in English and the poems in Kannada had already been dealt with in The Liberated Woman and The Dark Holds No Terrors. A double perspective on Mira’s marriage emerges as Urmia counterpoints Akka’s story with the story in Mira’s papers. Akka had spoken about her husband’s obsession with Mira, his single-minded pursuit of an object, to marry Mira, whom he had ‘observed’ at a wedding. Urmia notices that the story deals with the perspective of the male ‘viewer’ In A Matter of Time, Gopal watches Sumi in much the same way that Dushyanta had ‘observed’ Shankuntala and fallen in love with her in Kalidasa’s play ‘Shakuntala’. Deshpande also refers to the male director’s ‘gaze’ that constructed and depicted Indian movie actress, Waheeda Rehman in a way a woman may not have. But there is no testimony to Mira’s feeling:
“There’s no clue as to what she felt and did.

Was she pleased … triumphant… angry.

Did she protest, say anything to her parents ?”.

[The Binding Vine [P-64]

Mira’s perspective on this relationship is only ‘voiced’ in her writings and never becomes a party of an oral family history recounted through succeeding generations. The silence of women’s histories is a theme Deshpande explores also in her later novels *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*. In a diary entry, so different from Jaya’s in *That Long Silence*, Urmi reads Mira’s conversations with her husband, a man insistent and compelling:

“Talk, he says to me, why don’t you say something, why don’t you speak to me? What shall I talk about, I ask him stupidly … and so he goes on, dragging my day, my whole self out of me… if this is love it is a terrible thing. What is it he wants from me? … Why can’t he leave me alone”.

[The Binding Vine [P-67]

Urmi is made aware that Mira’s husband tried ‘to possess another human being against her will’

[The Binding Vine [P-83]
“It was through all her writing - a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married … did it have its genesis …. during their first night together ?”

[The Binding Vine [P-63]

Mira’s aversion to her husband is at odds with the age - old tradition of Pativrata dharma (worship of the husband) instilled and internalized in women through myth, story telling, religious indoctrination and exemplum. Even women’s autobiographies, Rashundari Debi Amar Jiban My Life, 1868 and Krupabai Sattianadan’s Saguna (1895), while dealing with the tribulations of a woman’s life, did not deal with the transgression of the notion of Pativrata dharma. The advice to obey is handed down the ages from mother to daughter. Mira writes.

“Don’t tread paths barred to you obey, never utter a ‘no’ ; submit and your life will be a paradise, she said and blessed me”.

[The Binding Vine [P-83]

The appropriation of women’s bodies and minds is initiated at the time of marriage with the change in name; the survival of past traditions in today’s India is made plain when we see
Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, renamed. Mira is rechristened Nirmala, the name even Urmi had known her by before she discovered her as Mira.

“Who is this? None but I,
my name hence, bestowed upon me.
Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still.
Do you build the new without razing the old?
A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold
can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira”.

[The Binding Vine [P-67]

While appearing to submit, Mira reflects a spark of independent thinking:

“I have learnt to say “no” at last,
or the assertive ‘I am Mira’.

[The Binding Vine [P-67]

Mira uses her writing to subvert traditional myths and rewrite them from a women’s perspective. Evoking the myth of the divine couple Laxmi Narayanan - to which, Deshpande explains, a newlywed couple is often compared-Mira writes about the apprehension of Laxmi. Did she tremble,

“Fearing the coming of the dark
clouded, engulfing night?”

[The Binding Vine [P-66]
Explaining the irony of this myth in the context of Mira’s life, Deshpande says, ‘But to Mira, who has to live with a husband she does not love, has to submit unwillingly to sex with him almost every night of her life, the image is transformed into something different’. Deshpande hopes for women writers to be able to reinterpret myths and write from the woman’s point of view. ‘What women writers are doing today is not a rejection of the myths but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them’. Like Urmi, Jaya, Sumi and Madhu, Mira is a woman writer who writes her life and reworks in her writing myths aimed at conditioning women. Urmi surmises that it was only her writing that had kept Mira going while she was cloistered at home, living with a man she did not love, without a space, a room of one’s own. She would have written stealthily, like Rashundari Debi, at night. Urmi precedes Madhu in *Small Remedies* who looks for meaning in writing Bai’s life: both Urmi and Madhu, contending with the loss of a son and daughter respectively, see their writing and the subject of their writing – Mira the poet and Bai the singer – as a means of recovery. Urmi understands a meaning in Mira’s writings that has a personal significance for her, ‘But what does the reader want?’, Deshpande had asked, ‘a sharing – of an experience, a world, an idea.’

The answer is given partially in Mira’s story, strangely related to the story of Shakutai’s daughter, Kalpana, the link made by the narrator Urmi, who reads in the past a meaning for the present. The germ of the story of *The Binding Vine*, which refused to be ‘centre-stage’ for Deshpande but was the starting point, one of the three strands of the plait, the brutal rape of a young girl, finds expression in Kalpana’s story. On a visit to Vanaa, working in a hospital, Urmi encounters the hysterical, distraught mother of the rape victim. Shakutai’s insistent cry in the
hospital contains the paranoid fear of social stigma and of aspersions on her daughter’s reputation:

“My daughter is not that kind of a girl…
you people are trying to blacken my daughter’s name…
I’ll never be able to hold up my head again,
who’II marry the girl, we’re decent people”.

[The Binding Vine [P-58]

Deshpande deals with truth vis-à-vis reportage, with public knowledge vis-à-vis silence in women’s lives and writings. The silences that surround women’s lives and the silences they surround themselves with are a recurring thread in her works, from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* to *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*. In *The Binding Vine*, Shakutai demands a silence, a repression of the truth to safeguard her daughter’s reputation (later, in *Small Remedies*, Deshpande was to look into the enormous gaps in Bai’s life that Bai refused to fill in for her). The fear of public opprobrium is more terrifying to Kalpana’s mother than the desire to find the culprit and punish him. The truth must be hidden, to protect the victim and her family, especially the younger sister of marriageable age. The police are complicit with Shakutai’s insistence to repress the truth because rape cases are ‘messy and troublesome, never straightforward’. [The Binding Vine [P-88]
Moreover, the police believe the girl may have invited this kind of attention:

“For all you know she may be a professional… she must have been out with a boyfriend”.

[The Binding Vine [P-88]

For, the mother, Kalpana’s guardian, and the police, the official guardians of law, the verdict is the same – Kalpana’s rape is not to be recorded. Moreover, Kalpana had displayed an independence and wilfulness which transgressed the boundaries of that society.

“Cover yourself decently, I kept telling her, men are like animals. But she went her way. You should have seen her walking out, head in the air, caring for nobody. It’s all her fault… all her fault”.

[The Binding Vine [P-147]

The fear that women must have and the constraints they must live within are points driven home repeatedly by Shakutai:

“We have to keep to our places, we can never step out”.

[The Binding Vine [P-148]
The ‘place’ is defined by a patriarchal society ever willing to throw stones. Kalpana, however, asserted ‘I’m not afraid of anyone’, stepped out confidently, and broke the code that kept her confined. The assertion of her self ended in a ghastly assault on her body.

Kalpana’s story of rape gives Urmi the insight into Mira’s poem and diaries:

“I’ve suddenly realized – what has happened to Kalpana happed to Mira too”.

[The Binding Vine [P-63]

Kalpana’s rape is the clue that Urmi needs to understand Mira’s relationship with an obsessive husband – the theme of marital rape also dealt with in The Liberated Woman and The Dark Holds No Terrors. Moreover, Mira’s poems, like Kalpana’s story, lie hidden.

The paranoia of mothers protecting their daughters from the danger of sexual assault is a significant theme in the novel. Vanaa cautions her daughters, Inni is hysterical when Urmi is late returning home, and Shakutai moans,

“Why does God give us daughters?”

[The Binding Vine [P-150]

Mira’s poem and Shakutai’s concern for her daughters and hopes for her own future become the axis for Urmi’s memories of her daughter Anu. The theme of motherhood, dealt within Deshpande’s previous novel, is discussed intensely in The Binding Vine. Saru in The
Dark Holds No Terrors and Jaya in That Long Silence felt that they as mothers did not approximate to the myths of glorified motherhood propounded by legend: moreover, as daughters they were closer to their fathers. In The Binding Vine, almost for the first time, Deshpande depicts, in Urmí’s grief for Anu, the all-absorbing love of motherhood, a theme she takes up in Madhu’s obsessive love for her son Aditya in Small Remedies. From the memories of physical touch—

“I can feel the softness of her body…

the heaviness of her head’ – to every sensory perception – ‘I hear the soft snuffling sounds of her breathing…

I can smell her sweet baby’s flesh”.

[The Binding Vine [P-21]

Urmí is obsessed with her love for her daughter. She is able to relate to Shakutai and her grief: they are both mothers, one having lost her daughter, the other on the verge of losing hers. The connectedness, however, is in the dreams and aspirations that mothers have for their daughters. Shakutai worked to give Kalpana all the things she never had,

“education, a good life, a good marriage,

respect from others... I don’t’ want my children to be like me”.

[The Binding Vine [P-112]
(Later, in *Small Remedies*, Munni does not wish to be like her mother). Urmi realizes that Inni had dreams for her marriage, for a world for her daughter that was her ideal, ‘a pearls and chiffons sort of existence’, Urmi’s dream was to let her daughter soar, be unfettered, climb high. Mothers want to give their daughters ‘the world (they) dreamt of for [themselves]’

[The Binding Vine [P-124]

Mira’s poem addressed to her mother, seeing Mira dressed in a green sari and green bangles, signs of marriage and fertility, has a touch of pathos – unspoken in the poem is the mother’s desire to see her daughter fulfill a destiny meant for every woman, marriage and children.

“She saw me married, she saw me
pregnant and she was happy”.

[The Binding Vine [P-126]

The pathos lies in the fact that the dream turns sour and the daughter becomes a reflection of the mother –

“unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear…
Mother, I’m now your shadow”.

[The Binding Vine [P-120]

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* inhabits her mother’s puja room, looks and acts like her.
The theme of the daughters playing the roles and lives of their mothers is taken up in *A Matter of Time*, while in *Small Remedies* Munni models herself as an antithesis to her mother. Deshpande refers to this aspect in the essay ‘The Indian Woman – Myths, Stereotypes and the Reality’. In fact, the theme of this essay is voiced by Urmi in a discussion on motherhood with Vanaa:

“Sometimes, I think, they brainwash us into this motherhood thing. They make it seem so mystical and emotional when the truth is that it’s all just a myth. They’ve told us so often and for so long that once you’re a mother, you have these feelings, that we think we do”.

[The Binding Vine [P-77]

The novel also deals with the very real problems of career women and children resentful of absent mothers. The answer to the mystery of Urmi being adopted by her paternal grandparents lies in the demands and expectations of motherhood by men. Her father thought Inni was incapable of looking after the child Urmi, and on finding Urmi alone with a trusted male servant, punishes Inni by taking Urmi away to his mother. Deshpande quotes the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakkar who speaks of the ‘good mother’ picture as being a male construct.

Urmi’s self-discovery and her ability to cope with her grief rests on her interaction with two people - Mira and Shakutai. Both survivors, in different contexts, give Urmi the impetus to take charge. She realizes that she had managed the affairs of her life – Baiajji’s death, Aju’s
hanging, marriage to Kishore, who is absent most of the time, and her father’s death – with competence because she was lucky. Deshpande says, In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi has to go through the whole exercise of understanding the privileges she has had and what she really is without all that. Not only is she privileged to start with, she is also unconscious of her privileges. To her that is existence. Finally, she is able to see and cross the line to those who do not have what she has. But first she must open her eyes and see herself. Urmi realizes that Mira and Shakutai’s voice cannot be silenced and repressed, ‘Pushed under the carpet’, any more for fear of disgrace. Urmi’s final realization comes with her decision to publish Mira’s poems and to make public the story of Kalpana’s rape. An attempt to recover the stories of women or give voice to their lives is fraught with criticism. Urmi’s friendship with Vanaa is almost destroyed when the criticism comes forcefully not from outside but from Vanaa, a woman who lives a conventional life and fears her husband.

The public hue and cry results in the identification of the rapist-Kalpana’s uncle Prabhakar, who had demanded Kalpana from his childless wife, in exchange for continued protection: the assault on Kalpana was to teach her a lesson for thwarting his advances and daring to dream of marriage with someone else – daring to be independent. Deshpande has spoken about the complicity of women in the power game of dominance – subservience in gender relations. Sulu’s attempt to hold on to her marriage impels her to pawn Kalpana. Her silence about Prabhakar’s motives is broken only after the story is made public, and with disastrous consequences. Deshpande seems to be asking about the ‘wages’ of breaking a silence and of telling a story. The recovery of Mira’s poems, the story of her repression and the domination of her mind and body would implicate others – Vanaa and Kishore’s father and
Akka’s father. A reputation in a small town, where a friendship between the sexes is frowned upon, would be tarnished.

Vanaa and Inni view with suspicion even Bhaskar’s friendship with Urmi. Bhaskar joins a line of male characters in Deshpande’s novels – Madhav and Boozie in The Dark Holds No Terrors, Kamat in That Long Silence and Chandru in Small Remedies - who are created simply to highlight some aspect of her women protagonists. Deshpande seems to be suggesting that a non – sexual relationship between men and women is not possible. Bhaskar, taking advantage of the absent Kishore, infers that Urmi did not love her husband. Bhaskar’s insistence motivates Urmi to analyse her marriage to Kishore, his absence and his loveless passion. As for Bhaskar, he is as easily dismissed under the recognizable safeguard of virtue and chastity – Sita’s blade of grass, in the epic Ramayana, to thwart Ravana’s advances – as Kamat is in That Long Silence.

Kishore exists outside the pages of the novel, except in Urmi’s consciousness, and is similar to both Manohar in The Dark Holds No Terrors and Mohan in That Long Silence. Deshpande says, ‘Men are in the wings... while writing The Binding Vine I kept promising to leave all the male characters intact. And they are all gone’.

Deshpande touches on issues of the translation of women’s writing from one regional language, Kannada, into English and on the bilingualism of characters who converse in Marathi and Kannada with ease. Urmi translates Mira’s poems, written in Kannada, into English, though she intends to publish them in Kannada. Deshpande appreciates the work done by Susie Tharu and K.Lalita, and by Lakshmi Holmstrom, in translating a vast compendium of women’s writing
in regional languages into English. Set against Mira’s poems is the advice given to her by the male poet Venu,

“Why do you need to write poetry?
It is enough for a young woman like you to give
birth to children. That is your poetry.
Leave the other poetry to us men”.

[The Binding Vine [P-127]

In fact it is Mira’s poem which helps Urmi ‘solve the rest of the crossword... now, with this poem, Mira has cleared my emotional life, swept away the confusing tangle of cobwebs’.
The poem on the ‘cord of this binding vine of love’ reiterates the theme of recovery after loss, of life and loving, of love and possession.

Like Nayantara Sahgal’s protagonists, Simrit of A Day in Shadow, Saroj of Storm in Chandigarh and Sonali of Rich Like Us, Urmila too does not exhibit male-hatredness. She has no desire to seek a world without men. She only wishes for a world where women are treated equal to men. Luckily for her, she finds like-minded male friends, one is Dr.Bhaskar to whom Urmila is not just a wife of somebody but an individual with an identity of her own. He even falls in love with her impressed by her passion for truth and justice. Malcolm and Dr.Jain are also essentially humane and have great respect for Urmila.
The sudden revelation of the rift between Urmila and many of her people make Urmila ponder once again how difficult relationships are, with too many chasms to bridge. As Urmila now understands that the relationship between her Papa and Inni, Baiajji and Aju, Vanaa and Harish, Vanna and her daughters, Shakutai and Kalpana are all filled with love and compassion, but it does not prevent them from being cruel to each other, ignited by clashes of egos, desires and self centred interest. Each relationship can be wholesome only when the people themselves are whole. Further, Urmila realizes that the great divide in ourselves is the hardest to bridge and the most difficult one is to accept and live with. When the fates of Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu are considered, Urmila regains her courage. She learns that accepting freedom and advantages of her life as a gift, she now decides to be content with her life with a hope that her husband Kishore will remove his armour of withdrawal one day and thus he could facilitate her to reach him.

Anu has gone but she still has her son Karthik. Urmila realizes that, however burdensome our ties are, however painful our experiences are, one can never give up. In the words of Urmila,

“we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor”.

[The Binding Vine [P-137]
The main urge is always to survive, to get on with the business of living, even if it comprises a daily routine that takes care of a hundred trifling matters, bringing an order and rhythm to it. She entirely agrees with Mira who says:

“Just as the utter futility of living overwhelms me;
I am terrified by the thought of dying, of-ceasing to be”.

[The Binding Vine [P-203]

Shashi Deshpande seems to be engaged in a constructive process of consciousness rising. Her object is to enable the more affluent women to share awareness of sexist’s experiences that create co-operation and pave the way for uniting people to find themselves with a strong cord of sisterhood like Rose, Mona and Sonali of Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*. Urmila and Vanaa help each other in their distress and suffering. Vanaa helps Urmila to come out of her emotional crisis. This novel is remarkable as it introduces the concept of female bonding, the desire of one woman for female bonding, and help another who is less fortunate. This is a positive development in Urmila unlike the other protagonists of *Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* who are involved in fighting their own battles and have strong feelings and strive for the need of sisterhood. Urmila strongly believes that women should have the courage to express themselves and expose the evils of the society fearlessly. She is indignant at their uncomplaining attitude in the name of family honour.

As Urmila realizes that love prevents one from being cruel, and it is this love that makes one to accept as it comes, through detachment. This is the only adhesive that binds people and prevent them from falling and refills and nurtures the sapling of life, with compassion and tolerance even when Shakutai cries as Urmila understands,
“this is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive”.

[The Binding Vine [P-203]

The need to express one’s feelings and the need to be heard by the society is an all-pervading urge for the present day women. If Indu and Jaya are fulfilled individuals, it is because both of them attempt to write, face resistance and find the strength to decide what they want to write. Unlike them, Urmila draws society’s attention to her protest, and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. Urmila is seen, at the end of the novel, recollecting the bonds of love that provide the “Springs of Life” (203) for human survival. She is not a rebel against the system because she believes that things are gradually improving though at a slow pace.

Desai’s *Voices in the city* deals with the psychological trauma of two weary young women doomed to reside in Calcutta, the City of Death. The novel is an examination of the plight of sensitive and independent women caught in the Web of the hostile society. Taking two neglected women as the female protagonists, it dramatizes their emotional turmoil. In the novel, Desai presents the troubled feminine psyche mainly through the character of Monisha and Amla. The novel further highlights the shallow existence of the urban people living in the transition phase of India in the post-independence era. It projects the voices of the protagonists, Monisha and Amla who are struggling for life in the formidable city of Calcutta. The novel lays trees
upon the search of three characters—Monisha, Amla and Nirode for a meaningful and pleasant life.

The novel illustrates the miserable condition of Monisha and Amla in the city of Calcutta, which is the city of Kali. Madhusudan Prasad aptly expresses his view in one of his book Anita Desai: The Novelist as “an epic on Calcutta” (Prasad 32) giving its important land marks, such as Howrah, Chowringhee, Grand Hotel, Fort Williams, Victoria Memorial and Cathedral Park. The novels of Charles Dickens, James Joyce and Lawrence D’urrell are called the epic novels of England, Dublin and Alexandria just as Anita Desai’s Voices in the City may be regarded as an epic on Calcutta.

The novel is divided into four unequal divisions- Part I - Nirode; Part II - Monisha, her diary; Part III - Amla; Part IV - Mother. The first part of the novels, Nirode deals with the plight of Nirode, a Youngman, neglected and frustrated by the family as well as by the society. The second part of the novel, ‘Monisha’ deals with the hollowness of the existence of Monisha, in the third part of the novel, ‘Amla’ Desai presents the sad tale of gay and lively young girl who is rendered dejected with the influence of the deceptive and hypocritical society in the city of Calcutta. The final ‘Mother’ deals with the fruitless reunion of the alienated mother and her love born child.

The fourth part is the briefest section of the novel. The feudal family of Kalimpong is dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk. They have four children two sons, Arun, Nirode and two daughters, Monisha and Amla. The story of the novel
starts, with the departure of Arun to England for higher studies. Nirode leaves for Calcutta to work in a newspaper office as a clerk. He contrasts his own glaring failures with his brother’s grand success. He gives up his job, he starts editing a literary magazine named ‘Voice’ only to give it up and take to creative writing. He writes a play, which he fears, is doomed to flop. Later, he starts a book shop in a dirty locality. He is, indeed, a rootless drifter or a rolling stone that gathered no moss. He is obsessed with failure, at one place in the novel he says

“I want to move from failure to failure, step to rock bottom.

I want to explore that depth” (VC 40).

Monisha is married to Jiban who is a middle rung officer in government department with a large joint family. There is a typical middle class family. Monisha is tormented by her indifferent husband. She has no capacity to bear a child, her lack of communication with her uncompromising husband and the suspicion of her in laws who condemn her as a thief, oblige her to choose between death and mean existence. 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. Through her character, the world of the upper class society is shown.

Voices in the City, depicts notable mother figures such as the real mother, the foster mother Calcutta and the archetypes of mother and goddess Kali. They affect and shape the unconscious lives of three characters. Nirode, Monisha and Amla. In the concluding chapter of the novel, the splendid control of mother over Nridoe’s psyche during his insanity can be seen Kali, the goddess and demon in one, converges in his mind and becomes his mother. Nirode’s
insanity starts with his mother. His father being unfair to him, he remains faithful to his mother for security and love. Nirode’s mother is “A very beautiful mystery” (VC 209). The father is no more and it’s suspected that the mother had developed an affair with military officer. Later in Part IV, when Nirode goes to the airport to receive his mother for Monisha death, he is in a prolonged embrace. Yet, he hates her too; he tells Amla that their mother is a revelation of the goddess Kali, for Monisha’s death seems, to satisfy her.

Monisha, the woman protagonist of “Voices in the City” is the victim of the crippling life within a joint family; Monisha is a typical child of Desai’s imagination. The author records Monisha’s psychic turmoil through Monisha’s own diary. Monisha has to wrestle with her partner deeply due to materialistic pursuits and has to undergo the dissonance of marital relationship.

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 is shattered to pieces when her father gets her married to Jiban against her will. Monisha’s aunt tells Amla that Jiban,

“completely unsuitable to Monisha’s taste and inclinations. So your father decided he was the right man, that it was the right family” (VC 199).

Hence, a highly sensitive and imaginative girl is married to Jiban, a boring non-entity and a blind moralist.
Monisha’s suffering starts immediately on the first day of her marriage. As it is the custom in Bengali families, the newly married couples are expected to prostrate at the feet of elders and get their blessings. During their marriage reception Jiban surreptitiously pushes Monisha to bow to his mother. Monisha goes down on her knees to touch her mother-in-law, while placing her hand in her head in blessing, he pushes a little harder than Monisha thinks is necessary. Her humiliation increases a lot when she is also forces to fall at the countless feet of others.

Monisha’s desire for privacy is meaningless because even her husband is rooted totally in tradition and the belief in the orthodox role of woman like “cutting vegetables, searing food, brushing shall children’s hair” (VC 113). Monisha is interested in reading books like Kafka, Dostoevsky, Hopkins, Camas etc. As a woman of academic bent of mind, Monisha fills her wardrobe with books instead of clothes, trying to find some time to read them. Unfortunately, in joint-family she has no time to devote to intellectual pursuits as her world revolves around the axis of domestic life. Her days are crowded with innumerable little duties like serving fresh chapatti’s to the uncles, listening to her mother-in-law, as she tells her the many ways of cooking fish that pin her down to the household. Monisha’s intellectual insights into her existential credentials only support the very absurdity that marks her life. Her psyche is 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 curiosiy, they open her wardrobe, count her saris and discuss her books. Helpless in the midst of such dominating relatives Monisha longs for solitude.
Monisha is married in a peculiar Indian extended family, where she cannot go for choice, either to satiate her intellectual urges or to seek freedom from her claustrophobic world. Monisha is left with no choice but to live through the reutilized structures of a joint family. Her in-laws treat her with indifference and without compassion almost verging on the kind of neglect that is meted to a leper, Jilban as her husband, offers her no hope, neither companionship and protection, nor freedom. Her own intellectual and aesthetic sensibility removes her considerably from the rest of the family. She realizes fully well that nothing creative and fruitful can be expected in such an atmosphere. Finding her in-laws unsympathetic and self-centred, Monisha desires loneliness as she feels,

“alone I could work better, and I should feel more whole” (VC 115).

In an atmosphere of distrust, drudgery and total banality all around, Monisha feels herself shattered and disjointed. Her childlessness also adds to her loneliness no sensitive woman will tolerate her physical deformity discussed by others, rights in her presence. Monisha’s defect in her 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. She 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.
Monisha’s crisis reaches a climax when she is accused of theft. She is not even allowed to have access to her own husband’s money. This happens because, 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 his money. To her shock, the relative of Jiban’s family and his mother accused her of theft. Jiban’s relatives who are in no way equal to her, regard her meaner than they are. Such treatment makes her feel that she is alone,

“A little beyond and below everyone else, in exile” (VC 136).

Monisha longs for a chance to be 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. As sons as Monisha leaves the house her in-laws start to indulge in their usual practice of laughing at her. Even a slight unconscious negligence on the part of Monisha draws cynical responses and serves criticism from them. For instance, when Monisha gets into the carriage with brother Nirode, accidentally her sari lifts a little, exposing her legs. This incident is really accidental. Monisha herself notices that her family members watched her silently from the window. Her humiliation increased a lot, when she hears them commenting her that if Jiban had been there, he could not allow her to go. Monisha becomes highly emotional and concludes that it is extremely dangerous and that this kind of cynical attitude is too humiliating to be borne. Monisha is

“caught back and rebuffed, at the last and most urgent moment, utter humiliation and desolation” (VC 122).
Music takes Monisha to be free from her tensions. So, she enjoys listening to sitar music for fours. But her familial tie does not allow her to involve in listening to music. Marriage into a family, the aesthetic in her starves, where music is regarded as

“dangerous when not confined to the assets of young marriageable girls”

(VC 122).

Monisha cannot raise her voice and revolt against the strait-jacketed discipline of the extended family. In this way her freedom vanishes.

It is true that Monisha’s problems aggravate after her marriage but the genesis can be traced back to her experience of familial disorder and parental disharmony. The basic difference between the temptations of her father and mother is obvious from Amla’s words to Dharma:

“I don’t know what my father meant perhaps only that she had forgotten him, deliberately, shut her mind to him by concentrating it on flowers and music and fine food, things he shunned” (VC 208).

to Monisha lot has fallen the conflicting traits. She has her mother’s finer sensitivity as well as her father’s cold malice and passive resistance to things she does not like.

An existence of harmonious relationships between the daughters-in-law seems to be impossible aspect their daughters-in-law to be obedient, submissive and subservient. They
expect from their daughters-in-law to do all the household duties without considering their emotions, feelings and health. Disobedience in any form either to mothers-in-law or to sisters-in-law will lead to problems in life. The society and family in which Monisha lives is in no way different from this unwritten code.

Monisha’s in-laws, both mothers-in-law expect from her that without any hesitation, she must perform the household duties. Apart from household duties, she is often called by her mother-in-law to massage her legs. Containing her feeling, Monisha always obeys the commands of her mother-in-law as she likes to be free from problems. Without considering her feelings and emotions Jiban advises Monisha to be little friendly with her in-laws. This shows that even husbands in most cases want their wives to be con-operative with their family members.

Love as ideal, remains a refrain with the heroines of Desai. Monisha exhibits no idealization about love. Rather, her formulations are in the nature of an existential understanding of the things. She feels that love must be offered “by itself, silent, discreet, pure, untouched, untouchable” (VC197). The idea of love according to her is inextricably jointed with the idea of human freedom. She does not want her sister Amla to walk into the forbidding domains of a conventional family. She would like her always to “go in the opposite direction” (VC160) and remains free of love which implies strings, demands, extort and even untruths.

Finding herself entrapped in the odd circumstances Monisha identifies herself with the bleeding heart dove-caged, “wounded and bleeding” (VC121). Monisha’s condition is
reminiscent of the caged bird metaphor used appropriately by Elizabeth Browning in ‘Aurora Leigh’. Aurora says.

“A sort of cage-bird life, born in cage. Accounting that to leap from perch to perch was act and joy enough for any bird”(294).

Monisha is a close observer of the reality, encompassing her; she is perceptive and conscious of her condition. She can comprehend the intellectual sterility of women who “like the female birds in the cages” are never given an opportunity to fly. She mourns the wastage of “lives spent in waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always being bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, the old houses, in the old city” (VC120).

Her transference on her brother can be explained as a symbiotic relationship through which she seeks substances and solutions to the riddles, which confronts her peculiar circumstances as Jiban’s wife. Caught in his own tensions and blanket reflection of everything around him, Nirode fails to help Monisha in any purposeful way. When Nirode is sick, Monisha takes care of him, purposeful way. When Nirode is sick, Monisha takes care of him like a mother during her visit to Nirode, she is totally relaxed. But this happiness is only for a short period, as her husband’s family suspects her every move and action. Her emotions attachment with Nirode is questioned and she is not allowed to meet him.
Monisha wants Jiban to free himself from the parental image but he lacks the energizing of the ago which could help him liberate from his psychic bondage. Deviod of understanding and compassion, his relationship with her is marked by

“loneliness and a desperate urge to success, the most calamitous pleasures and paints, fears and regrets.” (VC135).

Despite Monisha’s exposure to books, writers, philosophers etc. she remains incapable to stir any zones of psychic like in jiban. In fact, jiban is too shallow to fatherhood the profundity in Monisha’s character and personality.

Monisha is highly caring towards Nirode and pities him for his desultory way of living. She longs to assist, and protect Nirode from the vagaries, starvation and insecurity. Like a mother, she extents him financial support by paying his hospital bills. His bohemianism is a matter of concern for her, she says: “Nirode’s conscience sleeps, it has been so battered and bruised that it sleeps from her exhaustion” (VC136). But the behaviour of “rough, unaffectionate, understanding brother” (VC130) does not allow this relationship to flourish and expand.

Monisha undergoes tremendous problems, yet her concern for her brother and sister does not vanish. Her sister Amla, very much concerned about Monisha’s desires, wants to break her isolation and wants to spend some time with her. But her expectations are shattered. Because, Amla is not permitted to go to Monisha’s room but is directed to her mother in law’s room.
Moerover, Amla is allowed to see Monisha only in presence of mother-in-law. All this raised Monisha’s agony and humiliation.

Subjected to such humiliation and ill-treatment Monisha feels entrapped and withdraws herself into a shell. This is the fate of daughters-in-law in joint family,

“a system which traps and then destroys Monisha a system which denies freedom and privacy and encourages invasion” (Jain 74)

Monisha 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 sickens her. These fears sweep upon her in great waves smothering all vestiges of reason and drive her to the point of no return.

Monisha’s disgust, hopelessness and exhaustion gyrate with full force as she listens to the street singers from the balcony. While everyone around seems capable of responding to the passionate intensity of the song, Monisha alone stands apart,

“unnaturally cool, too perfectly aloof, too inviolably whole and alone and apart” (VC 238).
Her failure to appreciate the meaningful melancholy, the symbols of essential wisdom in the song connects her unconsciously with her own long tale of “Traceless, meaningless, involved non-existence” (VC 140). She regrets:

…. It has been my own fault, because I gave up the quest for its too soon, never seriously believed in it abandoned it before it truly began, thinking it not worth my while to search a treasure that would cost me endless devastation. I chose to stand aside and allow it to pass by, and now when it returns to terrify me with its wisdom. I do not recognize anything in it but the terror (VC 230).

Knowledge and intellect widen Monisha’s consciousness but it also draws her away from the primordial unconsciousness. Bereft of unconsciousness or instinct, this borrowed consciousness, this flirtation with logos plays havoc with her natural, unconsciousness responses and alienates her from the bliss of unconscious childhood. As she finds her instinct devoid of the essential vitality to respond to the wisdom of the song, doubt, divergence and fear overpower her psyche. This emotional inertia strengthens her decisions. When she finds herself incapacitated to experience desire and feelings, the people around communicating passion with passion with passion and sorrow with sorrow, look superior to her, she laments:

“If I won a war over the mind, then they lost a war to their instincts, and it seems my victory has less value than their loss”(VC 239).
Jiban gives prime importance to his bond with his mother. Jiban is the product of and stands, for a conventional culture. He has seen women spending their lives like bride in case without any sense of identity. He treats his wife Monisha and as outsider. 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” (Krishnaswamy 250-251). Her consciousness is bruised by the expectation, insinuations and the sarcastic remarks of her in-laws. This callous behaviour of Jiban betrays a lack of trust between husband and wife and Monisha feels at ease in her husband’s home.

Being the sensitive woman that she is, Monisha is unable to make any compromise or stand the onslaught of such an oppressive and uncaring society. In this way, Monisha slips deeper and deeper into the ravines of depression never to surface at all. She holds neither the will-power nor the psychic composure to defend her self against the expectation 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 freedom. She even expresses with self conscious buoyancy: “Calcutta does not oppress me in the least… it excites me” (VC 142). But soon she begins to feels the oppressive atmosphere.
The harshness of the city destroys her “eager, adolescent enthusiasm” (VC 173) transforming it into cynicism. Communicating to and from the office, she begins to feel that her hole as a housewife has begun to get into her working hours. In the hot summer heat, has begun to get into her working hours. In the hot summer heat, she often regrets of having come to the Calcutta city and she asks herself the question,

“Why ever did I come to Calcutta? Why didn’t stay away, in Bombay, or go home to Kalimpong?” (VC 176-177).

In fact, the role of sensitive Amla assumes significance as an observer, as a witness to the sensitive events in the novel. It is natural therefore, for her to react against Monisha’s silence and passivity. The morbidity and cold resistance of her sister who had turned sleep walker, ghost, and some unknown and dread entity mystify her. As a representative of the feminine principle, the final culmination of Monisha’s sufferings in a ghastly suicide jolts her and in that Amla realizes, her death was a significant pointer:

Monisha’s death had pointed the way of her and would had never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feat 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 virgin. (VC 248).
Her immediate response seems to register a firm resolve as far as her own forays into the reality are concerned. But this initial reaction is replaced by a realization about a sense of waste and frustration in the scheme of things.

Monisha’s death blasts Amla’s whole psychic frame. Amla turns to Nirode who also passes through a crucible and unawares seems transformed. Erratic and unawares seems transformed. Erratic and unpredictable as he is in his behaviour, he rushes out of his aunt, mother and Amla. Amla regrets that Monisha has battles alone and ultimately had to surrender before the blatant oppression and destruction. Monisha’s death connects Nirode with his entangled sister Amla. It leaves both Amla and Nirode in a state of deep emotional disturbance and depression.

Amla aspires for a higher plane of life. Of the entire woman in the novel, Amla operates at various levels of relationships. She combines in herself the different roles of a friend sister, daughter and also at times a female companion. While Monisha was stifled in the family pressures and mother remained far away at Kalimpong, Amla alone oscillates between various levels of relationship. In a manner of speaking, she exposes her ego to all kinds of societal and emotional pressures.

Amla is a liberated and intelligent woman. She attempts to master all fears and apprehension of life, so as to give meaning to it. But her experiences of the hallow city life frustrates her and she is frightened not only of the future, of the unknown outside her, but also of the unknown within her. She tries to prepare herself to what is happening around her but
unsuccessful. Dancing with Jit on a Saturday night she catches her breath with fear at the great pressures 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” (VC 208).

Amla 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 because; the freedom of a woman is completely lost.

“She does not want to be imprisoned by such an ensnaring social institution. She wants something greater than pleasure alone to the security of marriage alone. Something rarer, more responsible…” (VC 145)

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 and bend of mind by turning from commercial art to pure art.

Amla displays the aspects of a mother in her interaction with Monisha, Nirode and Dharma. Her compassionate understanding of a situation, a warm spontaneity for others problems vouch safe the existence of a mother archetype in her. Her maternal concern for Monisha is obvious as she advises her to move not of her claustrophobic world. She does arrange
for her an opportunity to visit their aunt’s house. But Monisha’s silence, withdrawal and inability to combat the realities mystify and exasperate Amla.

The disgust that grows and swells inside Monisha grips her whole being to such a degree that Amla’s efforts to enfold her in a motherly embrace seem futile. With an intention to help and protect her from the troubles of her in-laws, Amla visit Monisha’s place. But the women of house ever allow Amla to have a dialogue or any communication with Monisha. Further, Nirode’s exhausted and wasted appearance and his estrangement from the mother perturb and worry her. Her efforts to correct Nirode’s miscalculations about their mother signals amla’s concern to restore that lost family order.

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 sister and brother. She perceives

“that this monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red blooded life but one that was subterranean, under lit, stealthy and odorous of mortality had captured and enhanced or disenchanted both her sister and brother” (VC 150).

Her 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.
Monisha being entrapped in her own family cannot extend any concrete and purposeful support to Nirode. Both Monisha and Nirode, pass through the dreary phase of waste and senselessness simultaneously. In such a situation, Amla reaches out to help Nirode though they lack a harmonious relationship. In fact, what Nirode needed was a practical and pragmatic woman, who could lead him by the hand to the world of external manifestation. Such kind of manifestation is possible only through Amla who tries to stir and steer the misguided and depraved Nirode to the soils, concrete dimensions of life. She wants him to embrace life in its natural colours-its murkiness notwithstanding.

Amla’s career consciousness and a strong urge to establish her independently also signify her Amazonian traits. After passing her art course at Bombay, she strives for objective achievements in life. Full of excitement, curiosity and aspirations, she enters Calcutta and yearns to accomplish herself as a commercial artist. Her preference for Calcutta than Kalimpong, after her studies indicates her longing to pave a way for herself. Her education infused in her the spirit of enthusiasm and she longs to enjoy her, “Job and independence” (VC 142).

Amla’s dynamism and adaptability make her comfortable in every situation. She suits herself to the situation than Monisha, even though she encounters troubles and absurdities like that of Monisha. Amla could read and diagnose the chaotic turmoil in Monisha’s life and she sincerely wished to be a means of agent to uplift her from the darkening gloom of her senseless existence. She reaches out to both Monisha and Nirode despite the fact they refrained from contact and relation and does not worry over
“His neglect of her; she was able to persuade herself that he was engrossed in his new enterprise…..” (VC 158)

Amla attempts to exercise three-dimensional influence upon Nirode. She makes an effort to apprise him of the external reality, tries to remove his illusory perception of relationship and endeavour to piece his sequestered psyche. This shows how Amla moves as an integrated and individuated person throughout her life situations. She would have passed out of the novel as well knit and a complete character ironically of her life. Her parents, brothers and sister have not filled up the empty spaces of her life. Amla is deeply attached to her sister Monisha and brother Nirode. She feels humiliated on seeing the dejected and frustrated life of Monisha and Nirode. So, she cannot convey her feelings to them.

This makes her to seek a loving companion to soothe her disturbed feelings. As love is not forthcoming from within her family, Amla turns to other in her need for love. She looks outwards in order to make friends, she need touch, contact and living people around her, not mere shadows or ghosts and so this young independent and spirited Amla falls prey to her passions and she becomes emotionally attached to Dharma, a married man.

Amla seeks authenticity in Dharma’s art and creativity and their relation seems to expand when the model gets seriously involved with the painter. As “ease and pleasure swelled their conversations, friendship entered… (VC 204) and she feels assured and relaxed. In Dharma’s studio, her ideas appear to be translated into a means and form, naturally therefore, she becomes
“another Amla, a flowering Amla, translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward” (VC 210).

Dharma’s paintings reveal the hallucinatory quality which exerts a disturbing influence on her mind.

Amla is caught between the reality and imagination present and future and as such the tangled boughs in her consciousness melt and disintegrate her into pieces. She longs her relationship with him to be

“quite different, something normal…. gentle, not complex and disturbing and unreal…(VC 208).

The relationship is marked by a mystique, fascinating and irresistible. Dharma’s painting affects her tremendously charms her irrevocably. She is swallowed gradually into the interior volcano of understanding and helplessly wriggles to breathe her own innocence and purity of emotions.

But when Amla hears 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. Bidding farewell to Dharma’s world that brought a split in her integrated being, Amla retreats to the participatory of the family. She not only sheds the irrational anxieties which tried to control the
outcropping of her unconscious, but she also uses these experiences as a platform to take off to the renewed and transfigured zones of consciousness.

The city with its antecedent further accentuates this darkness and nightmarish gloom. Its disgust, revulsion and horror assail the dreaming Amla. Her carefully assimilated sanity and composure seem to crack and give way under its agitating environs:

“Lassitude overcame her like a fever weight against her temples, making her rest her elbows on the table and her head droop over unfinished work” (VC 174).

The monster city with its meanness and vulgarity had already captured and disenchanted Monisha. Again it wields its terrible influence upon Amla and disenchanted Monisha, hollowness and utter disgust. She tells Nirode: “This city, this city of yours it conspired against all who wish to enjoy it…” (VC 153). Amla has witnessed the city and its incomplete life choking Monisha to death. Both Amla’s education and career have equipped her with energy adequate to steer through agonizing situations.

Amla’s is fascinated by the pleasure 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 and solution as her sister Monish does though Monisha and Amla shares all common characters. Amla is little different from Monisha. Unlike her, she is portrayed as a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. 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 fact paced world. She loves independence and seeks a job which satisfies her will. Further, she takes part in social entertainments.

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 power 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 dictated of society to which average commonality submit themselves uncomplainingly.

Amla aspires to escape from the boredom and insecurity of Calcutta by attending cocktail party 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 refugee 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).
Amla’s is no better than Monisha. Her predicament is altogether different she is more balanced than Monisha in her attitude to end. Monisha’s death has a salutary effect on her. It has pointed out the way of her, and she would never allow her to lost herself. Her decision to accompany safe people like Bose indicates her will to guard herself henceforth against the life destroying forces.

“Voices in the city” dramatizes the waste land motif of the city as a place that generates aridity of feeling and frustration. Being a boy Nirode adored and admired his mother so intensely that her second marriage shattered his psyche and damaged his heart. His dandy exterior could not conceal his inner misery. Nirode, in no way, likes or loves his mother for becoming the mistress Major Chadha. Nirode’s nihilism and cynicism step from his mother’s betrayal of the family prestige. His study of Camus consoles a bit, as he finds it difficult to assimilate the existential postulates into his scheme of values. The Baudelaire –Camus Gita strand in the narrative, involving Nirode and his sisters takes a dramatic turn because of the tormenting and turbulent external world. Sociologically speaking, the seedy and nauseating industrial backdrop seems to be a fatal factor in generating various kinds of mental aberrations and psychic disorders. Nirode’s wounded self, Monisha’s agonized self and Amla’s insecure self fail to cope with the continuous violence.

“Voices in the City” perpetuates the theme of maladjusted marriage with wider aspect. Not only husband and wife but their children, relations and friends also come under the purview of existential predicament. In this novel, black becomes the predominant colour which symbolizes the darkness and desolation that engulfs the city of Calcutta and which adversely
affects the three central characters in the novel. Philosophically, Anita Desai’s novels remind the reader of the three words that Sartre emphasizes while discussing the human condition “anguish, abandonment and despair”. (350) Simultaneously, the characters are privileged by having the opportunity to make or to mend their choices and lead a life of commitment and responsibility. Sartre in his existential framework rightly pin-points:

“Men is nothing else but what he proposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore, nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is” (358).