CHAPTER TWO
DEGENERATION AND DISINTEGRATION

In contemporary Indian English fiction, Anita Desai is indisputably a serious novelist of a very high order. In her novels, she skilfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in a contemporary chaotic milieu. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she endeavours to evaluate the various formidable factors that render it uncomfortable, unendurable. (M. Prasad, Preface i)

...ence is tragically illogical for many of the characters discussed in this chapter. Being the prisoners of unfavourable circumstances they "are at their wit's end; the world seems to be 'out of joint,' and, in their helplessness, they feel like trapped animals" (Solanki 22). Various factors generate these pernicious circumstances and produce a lot of problems for these characters. Their inability to overcome the difficulties causes their degeneration and disintegration. When Raizada discusses the impact of these circumstances on the characters of Desai, he rightly points out:

Anita Desai is the most prominent among the Indian English novelists who have tried to portray the tragedy of human souls trapped in the adverse
circumstances of life. The tragic effect in her novels is intensified because the external conditions not only oppress the protagonists in her novels from outside but also flaw their nature from within. They are always haunted by the deadly nightmares of imaginary apprehensions conjured up by their flawed nature and in the process disintegrate themselves gradually. (31-32)

Desai is a very shrewd interpreter of life. She delineates the devastating part played by the injurious circumstances that have crushed many of the characters in her novels: Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Baumgartner's Bombay. The protagonists of these novels are faced with difficult situations that are beyond their power and control. As Solanki aptly says: "...these characters find themselves trapped in a sad predicament. Like the tragic protagonists of Shakespeare, they find themselves exactly in those circumstances they cannot deal with"(14).

Cry, the Peacock with which Desai "took the literary world by storm" (M.Prasad 1) primarily gives remarkable insights into the neurotic Maya's consciousness by skilfully exploring the "psycho-emotional and socio-psychic states" (Swain 43) of Maya, a victim of society's harmful traditions. Maya, a prominent victim and a kind hearted lady of introverted and hyper-
sensitive nature longs to "fall into the soft, velvet well of the primordium, of original instinct, of first-formed love" (Cry, the Peacock 11). With her mighty love of life she "is seething in eros manifested in her multi-dimensional projections of companionship, maternality, of Keatsian sensuousness, of her identification with petunias" (S. Sharma and Kamal N. Awasthi 140). Though she thirsts for lapping up the ecstasy of existence, her adverse circumstances have united her with Gautama who fails to give a chance for physical intimacy with her. Deprived of matrimonial pleasures she suffers from the feeling of loneliness and her behaviour is strongly marked by neurotic outbursts.

Finding it very difficult to put up with Maya's neurotic behaviour and her accusation that he has betrayed her, Gautama, shaking her roughly, gives vent to his pent-up furies: 'Neurotic,' he said, 'Neurotic, that's what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse word. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya -- that is what her father taught her' (Cry, the Peacock 115).

On another occasion, stung by Maya's accusation that he does not understand her, Gautama retorts:

If you know your Freud it would all be very straightforward, and then appear as merely inevitable to you -- taking your childhood and upbringing into
consideration. You have a very obvious father obsession -- which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that, unless you mature rapidly, you will not be able to deal with, to destroy. (Cry, the Peacock 146)

The real reason for Maya's neurosis and father obsession, as Gautama points out, is rooted in the unnaturalness of the way in which she is brought up in her family. The familial circumstances have contributed a great deal for her loss of real self, father obsession and the resultant weakening of her ego and these developments result in her neurosis. Her unfavourable childhood environment, that has little connection with reality, has blocked the healthy development of her personality. Motherless Maya who has lost the love of her brother, Arjuna, is forced to depend on her father for everything. Solanki comments on the unenviable condition of Maya in her family:

Superficially she appears to be a fortunate child with a doting father and all the affluence around her. But in her fairy-world childhood, she misses one of the fundamental bonds existing between a mother and daughter. Her mother's untimely death deprives her of the emotional closeness between a protective mother and an adolescent daughter.
Consequently, the whole process of feminine adolescent development remains incomplete in Maya. She could see nothing beyond her father, and so does not grow into an independent individual. (26)

Maya is very much afraid of displeasing her father for fear of losing her security. Her father's autocratic treatment of Arjuna and the consequent rift between them have been haunting her. The possibility of losing the affection of her father dangles like the sword of Damocles over the head of Maya. Desai presents the predicament of Arjuna, who has been feeling suffocated without the healthy air of freedom at his house. Hating the stifling atmosphere of his home he rebels against it. Without realising the fact that his son should enjoy at least a modicum of freedom, Rai Sahib is very severe with him. In his eagerness to bring up his son in a controlled way he fails to show him the essential love and understanding.

Disliking the values of his father, Arjuna is forced to abandon them to the discomfiture of Rai Sahib. Arjuna displays his rebellious attitude by disobeying his father. He has completely rejected the superstitious practices of his Brahmin family. His world is totally different from his family's and he never involves himself in his family activities. As Maya observes: "His world had never been ours, he had merely been a visitor, and had now taken his leave" (Cry, the Peacock 132).
The misunderstanding between his father and himself leads to his running away from home. To have his freedom he sacrifices his comfort, property and prosperity and forgets his father and loving sister. Rai Sahib never tries to make any efforts to bring his son back home. Describing the strained relationship between Rai and Arjuna, Jain observes: "Rai Sahib with his autocratic life-style has protected Maya, and Maya has submitted to it. But Arjuna, her brother, had rebelled against it. He had defied the unwritten rule of the house, and was therefore disowned by their father" (59).

Being a girl and terribly threatened by the likelihood of facing the same cruel treatment from her father, Maya submits herself to the whims of her father. Having lost her inner freedom Maya bottles up her real feelings. While explaining the causes for the development of neurosis Bande points out: "Under favourable conditions when a child receives inner security, inner freedom and warmth, he lives according to his real self. Neurosis begins when the real self is forsaken" (103).

The widower father, whose only son has become defiant and run away to America, focuses all his attention and affections on Maya to possess her, unmindful of the serious consequences of fulfilling all her desires. The harmful effect of this treatment is that Maya loses her independent thinking. Her
wealthy father's overprotection, domination and excessive attention have shaped her character and her unreal life does not allow her to have a balanced view of life. Maya "has for long basked in her father's indulgent love at the cost of her maturation" (Rajeshwar 44).

The unhealthy daughter-father relationship has developed the Electra complex in Maya's character. The effect of indiscriminate gratification of the desires and wishes of Maya makes the id in her personality become very strong. The circumstances prevalent in her house are not helpful to tame her id. Again the circumstances that create the strange bond between Maya and her father are responsible for her father-fixation. The domination of id and development of fixation gradually weakens Maya's ego and the weakened ego is another reason for her neurosis. In this context it is helpful to note the comment of Paulkline on fixation and neurosis which amply throws a new light:

Freud likened the development of the ego to the advance of an army. Fixation was analogous to the leaving behind of troops at various points, oral, anal, and so on, on the route. If a lot of troops were left behind, then the army would be weak, in other words fixation weakened ego development. If no fixation occurs, then obviously the ego would be strong. Weak ego development is, of course, one of
the characteristics of the neurotic. (63)

It is equally instructive to record the details Page gives about a group of psychoneurotic women because these details perfectly corroborate those of Maya:

A group of dependent, emotionally immature married women, mostly of middle age, who were pampered and spoiled in childhood but are now deprived of solicititude and affection by rather unsympathetic, undemonstrative, exacting, often more sophisticated husbands who cause them to feel nakedly lonely, insecure, inferior and unimportant. These women have often exhibited delicate health in youth. They now react to their unhappy domestic situation by developing fatigue, irritability, depressed spirits, and chronic invalidism -- reactions which, as a rule, augment their husbands' impatience and criticism. (124-125)

The marital discord between Maya and Gautama generated by the irreconcilability of their temperaments creates a communication gap which severely damages their relationship. A pampered child of her father, Maya expects the same treatment from Gautama. She expects Gautama to love her intensely to find meaning in her barren existence. Gautama, a pragmatic, unsentimental and detached person, disappoints her on every
count leading her to a sense of rejection and alienation. Narrating the causes of Maya's inability to establish a rapport with her husband, Tripathi states:

Maya, the tender clinging creeper, can not absorb herself in totality in the personality of Gautama, a mighty tree no doubt but lacking the elixir of consolation and sweetness of temperament which she may sap on. Gautama, a realistic, practical man of common-sense, believing in work, guided by logic and reasoning aims at a philosophical detachment in life. (11)

Their marriage is not a marriage of love. The loveless marriage is the direct result of an unfortunate circumstance brought forth by a blind faith in a social superstition. Having been brought up in a society known for its superstitious activities, Maya's father with a great faith in astrology terribly feels rattled by the albino astrologer's prediction that either Maya or her husband will face death after four years of their marriage. The impact of the prophecy on Maya is so terrific that she, being shocked and frightened, cries that she will never marry.

In an effort to avoid the catastrophe, her father arranges her marriage with Gautama whose family is fortunately alien to horoscope, astrology and other superstitious practices. But he
completely fails to realise that his clever arrangement of marriage to shun the horoscope-related problems is incapable of erasing the indelible imprint of the fear of horoscope-tragedy from Maya's psyche. As Iyengar rightly says: "This... prophecy acts upon Maya with the same force of inevitability as the prophecy of the Witches acts upon Macbeth" (65). The fear of death emanating from the prediction is dormant in her unconscious mind and temporarily forgotten by her. It is waiting for a suitable circumstance to raise its ugly head.

Thwarted by her unhappy marriage and frustrated by her husband's discouraging love-responses she becomes the picture of despair and desolation. Being unable to get a sense of fulfilment, security and emotional stability from Gautama, she sadly muses over the emptiness of her marriage:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (Cry, the Peacock 40)

It is plain that they are not able to part, to permanently put a heavy lid over their joyless married life, only because of superstition, a social factor that creates a life of hell and
torture for countless people in the society.

Maya's world of love, beauty, sounds, colours and odours stands in sharp contrast to Gautama's world of non-attachment, pragmatism and cold logic. Maya's intense desire for contact and communion becomes trivial to him; her tender sensibilities stand crushed by his callousness; her unflagging effort to make him understand her is an exercise in futility; and her strong wish to bask in the warmth of his body is not realised. Becoming depressed, Maya remarks about her unfeeling and under-sexed husband:

I turned upon my side, closer to him, conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded form. His eyes remained blank of appraisal, of any response. it was as though he had seen only what he had expected to see, nothing less, and nothing more. What cause for excitement then. (Cry, the Peacock 41-42)

The dismal atmosphere surcharged with quarrels and intellectual discussions on social and political problems in the house of Gautama heightens her depression and dejection. None of the family members is sympathetic to Maya; no one has a semblance of regard for her; and everyone treats her like a toy. Immensely wounded by their inhospitality she is not able
to have even a modicum of interaction with them. Not only is she left out of the discussion, but also she is considered incapable of understanding anything. Being cold-shouldered, insulted and neglected, Maya becomes the embodiment of helplessness. It is true that Gautama is kind to Maya on some occasions. But the standoffish stance maintained by him bedevils her problems and compounds her ire. His light hearted assurances do not square up with the ground situation in the absence of real love.

The not-so-good-economic condition of the family of Gautama disenchants Maya to a great extent. Hailing from a wealthy family, she finds it very difficult to face the economic problems which have contributed a great deal for the unhappiness of Maya. The difficulties emanated from the impecuniousness of the family of Gautama add to the intensification of her alienation. Accustomed to visit new places of interest she has a proclivity to enjoy visits to a few important places. When Maya expresses her strong desire to go south to witness Kathakali dance, Gautama bluntly tells her to wait till a Kathakali troupe visits Delhi, stressing the fact that "it will be less expensive" (Cry, the Peacock 43). Because of economic reasons, he is never able to satisfy her wish to go to hill stations.
While coming back after shopping Maya feels very tired being a tender lady who is not used to hard activities. When she articulates her desire to engage a taxi, Gautama's mother who is getting money from the father of Maya to run her creche, does not fulfil her wish. Instead, she prefers a bus because it is the cheapest mode. With a great obsession with money she disregards Maya's sentiments without realizing her delicate physical condition. Neither Gautama nor his mother gauges the extent to which their inhuman attitude has offended the feelings of Maya.

Heavily drowned in desolation, depression, despair, despondency, alienation and helplessness, childless Maya is extremely shocked over the death of her pet dog. Her immeasurable sorrow that keeps increasing due to the apathetic attitude of Gautama towards the death of Toto violently triggers off her fear of death sown by the unfortunate prophecy that has been in her unconscious mind like a dormant volcano whose disastrous eruption will definitely give a death blow to those in its vicinity. Dealing with the tremendous effect of the death of Toto on Maya, Guruprasad makes an assessment:

As she enters the fateful year, her pet dog Toto dies. The brooding sensitive Maya takes it as a premonition of the prophesied death, even though the prophecy had been discounted at once by her irate father, the horoscope destroyed, and the hushed up
content almost forgotten. The dog's death initiates turbulent motions in her mind. (72)

Maya's inner-world-odyssey to escape from the cruel clutches of her terror of death is excruciatingly heart-breaking. When the anticipated reassurance is not forthcoming from any quarters she is at a loss to know what to do. Her remembrance of her father's fatalistic advice of acceptance is powerless to bale her out of the crisis. With great expectations to get the missing reassurance she rushes to her friends Leila and Pom. Maya is deeply moved by the tragic life of Leila whose despair and frustration is the result of her unfortunate marriage with a patient of tuberculosis.

Without seeing her parents from the day of her elopement, without any fun in her life, without wearing any jewellery and without having any pleasure of married life Leila has been living with her invalid husband and cursing herself for being responsible for the unhappy life. With a great sympathy for Leila, Maya describes her life of grief: "When I saw her hand him a glass of medicine, or lift his body into comfortable position, I saw in her movements an aching tenderness subdued, by a long sadness, into great beauty and great bitterness" (Cry, the Peacock 57). But what is disheartening to Maya is that Leila, whose life is marked by only untold sufferings, is resigned to her lot saying "it was all written in my fate long
ago" (Cry, the Peacock 59).

The unreasonable attitude of Porn is highly disappointing to Maya. Porn who has been making relentless efforts to extricate herself from the clutches of joint family meekly submits to her mother-in-law who forces her to visit Birla Mandir if Porn wants to have a male son. Frustrated by this superstitious belief, Maya, who has been struggling to escape from the severe hold of the horoscope-prediction, sadly reflects: "There was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor any more, and to whomsoever I turned for reassurance, betrayed me now" (Cry, the Peacock 64). Discouraged by the fatalistic attitude of her friends she begins to indulge in regression. But her regression to her toy-world "specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes" (Cry, the Peacock 36) does not help her either.

The ill-timed and unexpected discussion on fate, stars, palmistry and horoscope at Mr. Lal's party by the Sikh and the prim lady who both prove with concrete and real examples that prophecies and prediction will become correct unerringly drives a nail into Maya's coffin, touching off the beginning of the process of her insanity. The mind-bending impact of this dreaded discussion on her is explicit from what Maya expresses
with terrible fear:

The voice echoed down a tunnel of memory to me, and that one word set playing again the mysterious leitmotive that this year's spring had so disturbingly brought to life. I opened mouth to scream, in order to bring a halt that force that had been set so subtly into motion and was driving me to an extreme of insane fear. (Cry, the Peacock 80)

Maya's fear of insanity sets off her disintegration and she often exhibits psychoneurotic symptoms like tension, memory disturbances, headache, fever, depressed spirits, feeling of insecurity, restlessness. Her behaviour is marked by screaming, self-hate and self-pity. In her helpless condition she identifies herself with peacocks whose agonizing cries symbolically represent her mental agony:

When I heard one cry in the stillness of night, its hoarse, heart-torn voice pierced my white flesh and plunged its knife to the hilt in my palpitating heart. 'Lover, I die.' Now that I understood their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine. (Cry, the Peacock 97)

Her tragic flaw of unlimited love of life makes her think of murdering Gautama and her logic for the cruel thought is
that he is a man of detachment and does not lose anything if he
dies. Analysing the causes of Maya's decision to kill Gautama,
Jain observes: "She is unable to extricate her thoughts from
these fears of death and her sensuous love for her life and her
desire for self-preservation make her shift the burden of the
prophecy to Gautama's life" (20).

Though Maya has been thinking of killing Gautama she has
no heart to translate her thought. The death of Gautama is the
result of an unexpected circumstance. While they both have a
stroll on the roof, Gautama commits the mistake of "coming
between me and the worshipped moon" (Cry, the Peacock 208).
Becoming extremely furious beyond measure Maya pushes him down
from the roof causing his tragic death. The sudden fall and
demise of Gautama makes her realize the enormity of her
emotional action and this shocking realization completes the
process of her insanity. At the height of her insaneness Maya
commits suicide.

On the heartrending tragedy of Maya, Bande observes: "Had
she displayed some will-power, she would have mastered the
situation. External chances are available... But, her father's
fatalism has a stronger hold on her"(53). Not only the fatalism
of her father but also the fatalistic inclination of others,
especially her friends and the Sikh, have a severe hold on her.
The weak external chances are powerless to influence and
nullify the massive impact of the social superstition of fatalism on Maya, a tragic victim of circumstances.

The untimely and tragic death of Gautama, "an Apollonian" (S.Sharma and Kamal N.Awasthi 140) is a clear example of purposelessness of existence. His zest for amassing money can be traced back to his early life marked by poverty. A casual reference to a gibbon by Maya makes Gautama talk about his unsatisfactory school education:

My education, you see, was restricted to what could be imparted within the brief confines of a small, airless, chalky class-room in a far from fashionable school. Economy demanded that, and trips to the zoo with bags of pea-nuts were as far from it as elephant rides in a jungle. (Cry, the Peacock 199-200)

The impact of Gautama's family poverty has made him study hard at college sacrificing even small pleasures. Immediately after becoming a lawyer, he plunges himself into earning money without forgetting the old days of suffering caused by lack of money, to the detriment of Maya's happiness. His only reason for refusing to take Maya, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer, to summer resorts is that it will consume money. The parsimonious attitude of Gautama to Maya seriously damages their marital relationship.
Commenting on Gautama's materialistic orientation Tripathi remarks: "Money, success, fame are the chief concerns of Gautama and his family" (16). Apart from the economic factor, another major factor that greatly causes their matrimonial troubles is the loveless dimension of the personality of Gautama. Maya gives expression to this deficiency at many places. Without bothering to comfort Maya who is sickeningly mourning over the death of her pet dog, he is only interested in his own world. Feeling hurt and frustrated, Maya sorrowfully observes that "he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed" (Cry, the Peacock 9). On another occasion Maya pours out her anguish:

But it was Gautama who found many more things to teach that heart, new, strange and painful things. He taught it pain, for there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much. (Cry, the Peacock 201)

Gautama's aversion to contact and passion is also noticeable during his college days. Whereas other students are interested in going out and seeing girls from the women's college, he is immersed in his studies even though he is implored by his friends to go with them. Unable to tolerate the
discouraging attitude of Gautama towards love Maya sadly complains to him that he has never loved her. Unmindful of the agony of Maya he begins to talk about his notion of love with a peculiar posture much to Maya's chagrin. Seething with anger Maya aptly describes his appearance and attitude:

He looked very much the meditator beneath the bo tree, seated upon a soft tiger skin, too fastidious to touch the common earth, with those long, clean-cut hands of his, too fastidious to admit such matters as love, with its accompanying horror of copulation, of physical demands.... (Cry, the Peacock 113)

It should be noted that Gautama's family is notorious for its loveless atmosphere and love is alien to the members of his family. With a very great interest they incessantly speak and discuss the social and political situations, but no one speaks "of love, far less of affection" (Cry, the Peacock 46). Gautama's mother's preoccupation with her own activities outside her house and his father's continuous visits to many places, forgetting his family responsibilities, to achieve his own goals have snapped the bond of love between parents and children. And this is the reason why their children attach little importance to them. Commenting on the environment of the family and its repercussion on Gautama, S.Sharma and Awasthi point out: "In such an atmosphere of upbringing, it is natural
for Gautama to be devoid of any eros which Maya clamours for" (144).

Though the family atmosphere is responsible for Gautama's lovelessness, the most important reason lies elsewhere. Gautama's incapacity to love, his powerlessness to feel intensely, his partiality for reticence, his incapability to have empathy and his forcelessness for contact are the direct results of a hereditary trait he has acquired from his mother. This unhealthy characteristic is also found in his sister Nila. Desai's poetic description of the tendency and nature of Nila, Gautama and their mother throws ample light on this point:

They sat there, knee to knee, but scrupulously avoiding contact, in the semi-dark beyond the ring of lamp-light, two black figures in bowed postures, jointed by a thread of white that each held in her hands and worked at, silently, absorbedly. Neither spoke, they dreaded speech now that they were so close together, as though their thoughts and ideas, safe and controlled by each one within herself, would explode out of the bounds prescribed for them and spill into the open, were the two to meet and touch. They dreaded this as their son and brother had dreaded passion, as wise men dread their flesh. There was a certain fear in the tautness of their bodies, in the way in which they held themselves,
and the way in which they started steadily down at
the wool which spun between their hands, flying from
one woman to another, a dangerous live wire of
connection, capable, at any moment, of ignition.
(Cry, the Peacock 216-217)

The presence of hereditary factor is further strengthened
by the observation Maya makes about Gautama's mother. Horribly
 rattled by her loneliness on the prospect of Nila's departure
to Calcutta, Maya implores her to stay back and talk to her.
She very eagerly expects every word of Nila and at the same
time does not fail to watch Nila's mother "longing for her
arms, hating her detachment" (Cry, the Peacock 164). Maya's
description of the life of Nila and that of her children
clearly underlines the absence of love, contact and affection
in their barren life: "Her own children teased her, consulted
her, lived with her and understood her, but they did not caress
her. She did not have time for caresses, very little of it, and
nor did they" (Cry, the Peacock 163). And the fact that Nila
makes efforts to divorce her husband bears out that their life
is devoid of love.

Whereas Gautama is only partly responsible for Maya's
unhappiness, Nila herself is fully responsible for her own
degenerated life. Severely reproaching Nila for seeking
divorce, Gautama, a reputed lawyer, refuses to oblige her,
vehemently accuses her of being responsible for the disorder in her family and advises her to approach her husband to solve her problems. Her mother is also not in favour of divorce and does not like her grandchildren to go without their father. But, unfortunately things have come to such a pass that Nila, unwilling to have a compromise with her husband, engages another lawyer for her case.

Gautama's philosophy of non-attachment should be viewed against his full family background. Whenever Maya tries to involve him in her colourful world he begins to talk about detachment. But one cannot fail to notice that Gautama is not at all detached so far as his legal profession is concerned. Throughout the novel he is engrossed in his business. When his enthusiasm is for money and glory he cannot be detached. A little before his death he is very thoughtful and immersed in the court case of Krishnan much to Maya's unbearable annoyance.

The reason for the dichotomy in his behaviour is not far from seeking. Gautama's harping on detachment is a handy facade for him to cover his true nature of lovelessness. Making a cryptic comment on Gautama's habit of profusely quoting from the Gita, Bande very aptly states that "his preaching is merely a verbose intellectual jugglery. It cannot (and it does not) bring happiness to him or to his wife" (244).
Voices in the City poignantly presents the difficult situations and sufferings of many characters tormented by formidable circumstances and in this connection the observation of M. Prasad on this novel is worth quoting:

It is, as a matter of fact, a very remarkable . . . novel that undoubtedly exemplifies what Anita Desai describes quoting Ortega Gasset in her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia as "the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence." (22)

Nirode, an intelligent artist and the hero of the novel feels dejected because he strongly harbours a feeling that life has treated him very badly and he, therefore, has a grouse against it.

His frustrating childhood experiences in his family where his father is partial to Arun arouse his jealousy against his younger brother. The fact that he is inferior to Arun in the matter of studies and extracurricular activities tortures him. Frustrated over the fact that he is "a congenital failure" (Voices in the City 8), and stimulated by the desire that he should show others that he is important he runs away many times from his family. While struggling to erase the stigma of his being worthless, the horrible and shocking revelation that his adored mother has illicit relationship with Major Chadha comes to him as a bolt from the blue and mauls his tender psyche.
Otima, a most beautiful lady and the mother of Nirode is a sad victim of loveless marriage that causes her degeneration. The uncomfortable economic condition of Nirode's father has forced him to marry her so that he can get her money, houses and tea estates. The incompatibility of temperaments between them severely strains their relationship creating an ever widening gap of communication. Her husband's intolerable laziness, his too much indulgence in alcoholic drinks and his imperviousness to beautiful things and music which she very much enjoys make her neglect and avoid him. Bored by the monotonous life with her very dull husband and frustrated by the killing loneliness she becomes desperate and her desperation and impulsiveness drives her to seek the company of Major Chadha.

In an effort to forget the humiliation caused by his mother Nirode makes Herculean efforts to involve himself in activities but the stigma of the infidelity of his mother has been haunting him so much so that he wants only failures in his life. As M. Prasad rightly points out: "... he keeps experimenting with failures in quest of an abiding meaning in life..." (24). The disloyalty of his mother to his father makes Nirode have a strong dislike for his mother. The extent to which he hates his mother is perceivable from the conversation between Amla and himself. Amla's talk about love in their conversation stirs up a hornets' nest and it is time for the
recrudescence of his pent up furies. Hurling the choicest epithets at his mother, Nirode uncontrollably bursts out:

As her about the love that made her swallow father whole, like a cobra swallows a fat, petrified rat, then spews him out in one flabby yellow mass. Ask her about the love that makes her perch on her mountain top, waiting so patiently and surely for retirement and tedium and the last wormy twisting of lust to send Major Chadha -- Chadha! -- into her arms. (Voices in the City 190)

Shocked by the words used by her brother against their mother, Amla takes umbrage at his venom and calls him mad. But undaunted by Amla's protest he violently continues to hit out at their mother:

I know of their little Monopoly and mah-jong games, she wrote herself. I can see them, the major with bushes of hair bristling in his ears, bushes of hair tickling inside his nose, and his red pop eyes trying to nudge the sari off her shoulder. I can see her leaning across to give him a good look into her blouse, saying "Ah-ha, ah-ha, I have you now," the way she does. Don't imagine that isn't also an aspect of love of which you, you human beings, claim to know so much. (Voices in the City 191)
Some critics argue that Nirode is under the influence of Oedipus complex and they compare him with Hamlet because like him Nirode also hates his mother. But it is quite wrong to say that sexual factor is the reason for his angry attitude towards his mother. If it is based on sex he would not have talked to Amla about his sanity and conscience later. Rejecting the argument that Nirode's attitude towards his mother is based on his jealousy and libidinal craving for his mother, Bande rightly and convincingly puts forth the reason for Nirode's anger:

Culturally, his mother's behaviour violates Nirode's moral and social standards. Womanhood in India is deified, particularly motherhood... the Hindu view of woman is an exalted one. She has been assigned the most important function of bearing and rearing children and is seen capable of great heights of self-control and self-denial. With such a sublime picture of motherhood as its backdrop, Nirode cannot digest the loose conduct of his mother. It arouses severe repugnance in him and heightens his alienation. Devoid of her reassuring and confirming touch, he experiences extreme loneliness and separation. He feels an outcast in the world where he was already feeling unwanted. He is seized with violent rage. (89-90)
Alienated from his mother, Nirode loses all his power of concentration. Having lost his hope he wanders about without any hold on life. He wants to pack up and go away to a far-off place but he is not able to do so because he has no faith in life. He is tormented by his mother's conduct. Reading a letter written by his mother he feels that "it was like sinking his teeth through a sweet mulberry to bite into a caterpillar's entrails" (Voices in the City 37). Unable to bear his anguish in his barren existence he is overcome with self-pity. While he is conversing with his friend, David, he quotes Albert Camus: "In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day" (Voices in the City 40).

With no goals in life he is obsessed by failure, defeat and negation. Dissatisfied with everything he hates his past and spurns away his family wealth and he wants neither happiness nor suffering. With introverted temperament and sensitive nature he finds it impossible to work under others and he gives up his job with the newspaper Patrika. But, starting his own magazine The Vioce he undergoes a lot of sufferings. As Krishna Rao points out: "He reminds us of Sisyphus, the archetype of absurd drudgery and pathetic failure ... Nirode negates life's possibilities in a desperate bid to see beyond happiness and suffering" (165). His starvation,
unemployment and the torture of borrowing money from others do not teach him any worthwhile lesson and make him see the ground realities. When his magazine which he starts with great difficulties begins to show signs of success he abandons it, to the horrible disappointment of his friends. He tells David:

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

Deliberately suppressing his wishes and finding no meaning in life he sees only void in everything and considers everything insignificant and worthless.

Strongly developing a distaste for touch, contact, relationship, approach and obligation he terribly hates himself and the world. As Solanki says: "Like Camus's Meursault, in The Outsider, Nirode has no set of moral or spiritual values. Meursault also fails to conform to the social norms and finds life absurd and meaningless. It is a mode of asserting his freedom from common social norms and values" (30). Disliking
endless waiting he feels that there is nothing worth waiting for. Like the hero of Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* who finds no purpose in life, Nirode feels that his life is purposeless. Both are deeply confused. At least Bellow's hero has the chance of serving the army but Nirode has nothing to occupy him. Both are tortured by the feeling of the meaninglessness of life.

Conscious of his degenerated state and violently disturbed by a lurking fear of being underestimated by his friends, Nirode pretends to be superior to them. Rejecting the help offered by Jit and other friends he confronts Boss and insults Sonny. Intolerable of the opinions and criticism of others he spurns the suggestion of his friends with violent outbursts. When Tripathi analyses the causes of the erotic and chaotic behaviour of Nirode, he observes:

> With father dead, and mother selfishly indulging in belated eroticism, most of Ray brothers and sisters feel orphaned and unwanted and a tinge of unnecessary prejudice and bitterness against everything in life enters their personality ... Nirode is the most important case in point. The entire Ray family has a desire for self-esteem. (33-34)

Dissatisfied with the reckless attitude of Nirode towards life, Maini criticises his tendencies. He complains that Nirode
cannot "turn his undoubted gifts and talents to community" and "unlike Camus's" Outsider," he makes no significant gesture to establish his credentials as one who has opted out of the "absurd" world" (124). Though these charges are legitimate, one should understand that if Nirode does not use his talents for useful purposes it is because of the deep-rooted frustration over his mother's infidelity and if he is not able to opt out of the meaningless world it is due to his deep involvement in life. Though Nirode, like Gautama in Cry, the Peacock, poses as being detached he is not actually so and this true dimension of his personality is unambiguously revealed in his play which is incoherently written describing his most absurd incidence of life.

It is Monisha who is able to discover his deep involvement in their mother. His involvement in life is manifest on the occasion of the tragic death of Monisha. When Amla and aunt Lila weep over the death, he consoles them and "he pressed them to him with hunger and joy as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other flesh, other's pains, longed to make them mingle with his own, which till now had been agonisingly neglected" (Voices in the City 248).

Later when Nirode explains to Amla that he is not morbid and he has suffered a lot just to preserve his sanity and
conscience, he says:

You've just told me that you've discovered that anything that is of value is vulnerable, violable, and that it must be protected as fiercely and madly as you can, humanly, protect it. Don't you see that my whole life is a process of just that? And that that is the process of retaining one's sanity.

(Voices in the City 183)

On seeing his mother who has come to attend the funeral ceremony of her daughter Monisha, his tender feelings are aroused and he likes to fall over her lap and weep. But unfortunately he is rejected by his mother and this unexpected rejection lands him in the gloomy land of permanent alienation.

The tragedy of Monisha, a sad victim, is caused by a combination of various circumstances. Like Maya in Cry, the Peacock experiences a frustrating childhood environment, Monisha is greatly affected by an unhealthy childhood atmosphere. The disharmonious relationship of her indifferent parents does not allow her to have a healthy emotional life. As Solanki points out:

The ungratifying childhood interactions have incapacitated her in establishing meaningful relations in her adult life. The model of complex, disturbing and unreal relationship presented by her
parents is like a seed of destruction and degeneration sown in her formative years. (33)

Like the marriage of Maya to Gautama in Cry, the Peacock the unfortunate marriage of Monisha to Jiban, a boring official belonging to a middle-class family, does not give her conjugal happiness. Her unhappy life painfully disturbs her sister Amla, a commercial artist who comes to Calcutta with great expectations. Shocked by the horrible changes in Monisha and baffled by her ghostly appearance Amla is overcome with lassitude. Distressed by the pathetic status of Monisha and worried that her dream of having a cheerful life in the city is shattered, she is filled with the feelings of emptiness and disillusionment: "Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupations, new acquaintances, and the mild sweet winter air, this sense of hollowness and futility persisted" (Voices in the City 157).

The strange and shocking experience Amla has in the house of Monisha in Bow Bazar heightens her anguish and despair. The fact that Amla is allowed to meet her sister Monisha only in the presence of Jiban's mother and the detestable critical attention of the members of Jiban's family clearly reveal to her the tragic life of Monisha. Amla's anxious enquiry about Monisha from Nikhil proves to be an exercise in futility and this disappointment increases her desperation. The cry of
Monisha to Amla asking her to "always go in the opposite direction" (Voices in the City 160) terribly rattles her and this unfortunate experience fills Amla's cup of sorrow. The unhappy life of Monisha, the only fly in Amla's ointment makes her sorrowfully feel that Calcutta has mercilessly cheated her.

When Amla, angered by the loveless and monotonous married life of Monisha, asks her aunt why she has been married to Jiban, a very dull man completely unsuitable to Monisha's temperament, her aunt replies that she has visited Jiban's family and reported to her parents that Jiban's family is not congenial to "Monisha's tastes and inclinations" (Voices in the City 199). But her father has decided that that is the right family. Aunt Lila further expresses the feelings of her parents in this regard:

... he thought, he was being sensible -- that Monisha ought not to be encouraged in her morbid inclinations, and that it would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a stolid, unimaginative family as that, just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance. That is how your mother excused its happening. (Voices in the City 199)

Like Maya in Cry, the Peacock is ignored by the members of Gautama's family, Monisha is avoided and hated by the members of Jiban's family. The dismal environment prevalent in Jiban's
house suffocates Monisha. Neither Jiban nor his family members have any inclination to love and regard her. Her sensitive nature makes her hate the duties of the daughter-in-law of a traditional joint family which does not permit her to have the much desired privacy and intellectual pursuit. Solanki comments on the miserable predicament of Monisha in the family of Jiban:

In the absence of mutual love and respect Monisha's life becomes meaningless. Thus, the domination of middle class, non-aesthetic and unintellectual attitude in her in-laws' house destroys her completely. Jiban, being a traditional male, wants to dominate her. She feels frustrated due to the constraint put on her urge for an intellectual life and ability to express herself outside the traditional boundaries. (32)

Having failed to obtain a sympathetic treatment from anybody else, Monisha longs for the sympathy of Nirode. Witnessing the illness of Nirode she advises him to accept his condition to survive in the meaningless world. She also develops the same attitude of acceptance and suppresses all her feelings in her.

The insulting reception in which she is forced to go through the ritual of touching the feet of many members of the joint family, the unbearable monotonous sound emanating from the house, the vulgar discussion by her sisters-in-law on her ovaries and tubes, the suspicion, distrust and heartless
accusation that she is a thief, Kalyani's indecent practice of scrutinising her wardrobe in order to count her saris she has brought in dowry, the lack of privacy in the family, her disappointing matrimonial relationship with Jiban that is marked by loneliness and incommunication, her miserable state of childlessness and the apathetic attitude and hostility to which she is subjected -- all these completely alienate her and increase the intensity of her neurosis. As Bande observes:

Married into a placid, middle-class family and to a prosaically dull husband, she is unable to adjust to her environment. She stoically refuses to identify herself with her in-laws' family. She is charged of theft and commits suicide. Monisha suppresses her emotions and makes no attempt whatsoever to analyse herself. Instead, she yearns for greater willlessness, which is symptomatic of severe neurosis. From Horneyan psycho-analytical angle, Monisha adopts the strategy of resignation. (59-60)

Monisha is tortured not only by the miserable environment of Jiban's family but also by the suffocating atmosphere of Calcutta with its overpopulation, empty sound, unbearable voices, overflowing gutters, diseased beggars, frightening darkness, chill penury, heartless trade houses with no ethics and horrible ruthlessness of people. The disorder of Calcutta
makes her tired and she is fed up with the intolerable cacophony of the filthy city.

The part played by the city of Calcutta that is more than a background to the story of Voices in the City is comparable to that of Egdon Heath in Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native. Both Calcutta and Egdon Heath are the chief characters of the respective novels. Like Egdon Heath, Calcutta also has an individuality of its own. It subverts and throttles the plans and activities of its people. Nirode, Monisha, Amla and Dharma feel extremely tortured in Calcutta. While Nirode describes the city as "beastly, blood-thirsty Calcutta" (Voices in the City 96), Monisha asks: "Has this city a conscience at all...?" (Voices in the City 116). Whereas Amla brands it as a monster city, Dharma calls it a dead city. As M.Prasad points out:

Anita Desai makes of the locale of Calcutta a much more complex experience in Voices in the City. It accentuates and even embodies the despair of oversensitive souls, Nirode and Monisha. The external landscape becomes the internal climate of these characters . . . . (59)

Similarly Egdon Heath gives troubles to the characters of Hardy: it colours and distorts the arrangements of its people; and it causes great misfortunes and serious disasters through
its terrible night, stormy weather and hot summer. Eustacia and Wildeve suffer a lot in Egdon Heath. To some extent it is responsible for the tragedies of Mrs. Yeobright, Wildeve and Eustacia. Likewise the city of Calcutta is partly responsible for the tragic death of Monisha and the sufferings of Dharma, Nirode and Amla. The unfortunate hereditary element Monisha has got from her father acts as a great impediment that severely hampers the development of a harmonious relationship with others. The quality of malice on her face prevents others from approaching her and her cheerlessness and friendlessness readily prompts Jiban and his mother to ask her to be a little cheerful and friendly. The harmful effect of the hereditary factor on Monisha in mentioned by Amla:

Only Monisha, amongst us all, has taken after my father. She has his silence and a touch of his malice -- oh, bleached, refined, purified to just a pale shade of it, harmless to anyone but herself, but the shape, the design of it remains, in her eyes and on her mouth. (Voices in the City 209)

Conscious of her inferiority complex generated by hereditary trait Monisha, in a bid to cover up her complex, considers herself superior to Bengali women of Calcutta. Disdaining their mean and meaningless existence she makes a comment:

I think of generations of Bengali women hidden
behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagvad-Gita and the Ramayana in the dim light of sooty lamps. 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. (Voices in the City 120)

Another important element of love essential to sustain life is sadly missing in Monisha. The matrimonial discord between her parents and the knowledge of her mother's disgraceful life make her unable to spontaneously respond to others and she shuns love. This horrible experience invests her with fear and distrust. While conversing with Nirode she suddenly discovers to her horror that they have lost the trait of love in them. As Jain points out:

Both Monisha and Nirode are afraid of touch, of human contact and this isolation finally sends Monisha to her death which is an act of sacrifice for the family's past, as well as an act of atonement for her own inability to love. (72)
Like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, who identifies herself with crying peacocks, Monisha identifies herself with the bleeding doves in the cages. Unable to find out a solution for her problems, created by the system of joint family which is detrimental to her individual development and freedom, Monisha expresses her pathetic condition and intolerable anguish:

> If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived -- a life dedicated to nothing -- that this husk is a protection from death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice. (Voices in the City 122)

Monisha's utter faithlessness in religion makes one remember Som Bhasker in Arun Joshi's Novel *The Last Labyrinth* who also does not have faith in religion. As Solanki observes: "Like Som Bhasker, Monisha's mental agonies are, to some extent related to her lack of religious faith" (32).

Though attracted by death wish, Monisha tries to seek relief from the monotony of her situation and toys with the idea of returning to her mother. Had she returned to her mother she would have avoided her tragic death. But the absence of
love between them and her mother's adulterous relationship with Chadha do not encourage her to approach her mother. Left alone, she wishes to be detached:

Sometimes I wonder, would mother take this shrunken, etiolated, wasted thing into her house if I begged her to?... But I know I will never ask her again I do not fear her disapproval, no. Her disapproval I could adapt myself to, but it is her disgrace in which I will not involve myself. I will involve myself in nothing anymore. (Voices in the City 139)

Without understanding the significance of maintaining her mental equilibrium and without maturity to accept the real and hard challenges of life, Monisha, haunted by the pettiness of her existence, gradually becomes a passive victim losing her will-power. The performance of a group of street musicians gives her an opportunity for introspection. The pathos of the song of a female singer touches the hearts of the spectators and they freely respond to the song shaking their heads in fine appreciation. But Monisha is horribly annoyed to see her real nature which is incapable of being touched and moved.

Pained over her real personality that is devoid of passion and emotion, she is gripped with the power of fear. She shockingly realises that her existence has so far been a mere waste and her life of detachment becomes meaningless. Her
painful self-discovery results in self-hate. Immensely worried by her emotional emptiness, she hurries out, gets in the bathroom, shuts it and sets herself on fire. On the suicide of Monisha, Belliappa comments: "Her suicide is as much a result of her own morbid nature and emotional insufficiency as the result of her uncongenial surroundings" (51).

Baumgartner's Bombay, another tragic novel, abounds with characters who are victims of circumstances. Commenting on these hapless characters Bande rightly observes:

Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay has a host of such lost personage -- pathetic in their loneliness, unable to find their cosmos. Besides Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist, and his lover-friend Lotte, there are others, both Indians and foreigners, who remain "outsider" for various reasons. These are individuals trapped by circumstances, the victims of forces beyond their control -- social, political, and above all psychological. The pre-war conditions in Germany, the aftermath of the war, the partition of India and the post-independence degradation of values seem to have affected their psyche. ("The Outsider Situation in Baumgartner's Bombay" 122)
The tragic intensity of the miserable life of Hugo Baumgartner is acutely deepened in view of the fact that he is a man with rare qualities. His remarkable love of abandoned cats, his genuine concern for the suffering humanity as is revealed from his attempt to save a woman blindly thrashed by her drunken husband while others are silent spectators and, in spite of his very worst condition of existence, his sense of shame on the squalor of the migrants that is crystal clear from his observation that he "shuffled past with his head bowed and his eyes averted -- not to avoid contamination as the others did, but to hide his shame at being alive, fed, sheltered, privileged" (Baumgartner's Bombay 207) are clear pointers that Hugo belongs to a rare group of people which is fast becoming extinct not only in Bombay but all over the world.

The escape of Hugo, a victim of racial hatred, from Germany to India is like an escape out of the frying-pan into the fire. His miserable life in the prison camp gives an opportunity to have an insight into his personality. While the other internees in the camp share their fears and anxieties with one another Hugo alone carries all his worries with him. His feeling of loneliness is so acute that he desperately looks for a cigarette in the camp to save himself from "the lip of hell and insanity" (Baumgartner's Bombay 119). Though his acquaintance with Julius serves him as a relief from the torture of solitude, his untold sufferings make him think about the
safety of his mother in Berlin and
it was then that the pressing, stabbing anxiety about his mother became most urgent and his defences against it most weak. Heaving himself off the bunk, he tried to carry it away into some place where he could mourn over it unwatched by the others, like a sick animal. (Baumgartner's Bombay 126)

Hugo's sense of helplessness is so great that he has to feel thankful "that captivity provided him with an escape from the fate of those in Germany, and safety from the anarchy of the world outside" (Baumgartner's Bombay 131). Though insulted, ill-treated and manhandled he remains silent and he "was willing to go along with all these absurdities in the resigned, half-hearted way taught him by years of helpless submission to bullying, first in Germany, then in the camp, which was an extension of the former" (Baumgartner's Bombay 116). The origin of Hugo's resignation, loneliness, helplessness, withdrawal and despair can be traced back to his frustrating and disappointing familial and childhood experiences which have badly affected his psyche.

The matrimonial discord between Frau Baumgartner and her husband is sharply highlighted by their temperamental incompatibility with regard to their tastes and interests in life. The things and articles can be "divided, even by a child,
into 'his' belongings and 'hers' (Baumgartner's Bombay 27). The incommunication, unhappiness, disgust, frustrations and despair which are the natural concomitants of their loveless existence pave the way for the emotional alienation and insecurity of Hugo. The discord between his parents inevitably generates for Hugo an abnormal childhood environment which Nirode and Monisha in *Voices in the City* have faced to the detriment of their happiness.

Hugo is very much aware of the fact that when the tension of his parents is about to reach the boiling point, they go out to places they like to take the heat off. His realisation that his parents are not happy at home and each one is comfortable in the absence of the other makes him feel sad. His father's blunt refusal to satisfy his aspiration of going with him to see horse races not only alienates him from his father but also causes him to lose his faith in his father. As Solanki states:

Hugo's father fails to infuse trust, confidence and inspiration in the young boy. He finds himself trapped in an unhappy situation when his father stubbornly refuses to let him go with him. The inconsiderable behaviour makes him feel nothing but contempt for his father. His confidence in himself and his faith in his father get shattered. Hugo does not appreciate his mother's justification for not going to horse races along with his father. (64)
Like his father, his mother also cannot absolve herself from the role she plays that causes his alienation. He strongly feels that he is disliked not only by his father but also by his mother and this feeling of Hugo is effectively butressed when he "was a little hurt by the way his mother eagerly saw him off and turned to her friends as though she had been waiting for this moment" (Baumgartner's Bombay 46). When he feels terribly rattled by his fearful experience of seeing the suspicious appearance of a young man with a newspaper and hearing the horrible sound produced by a mad woman, his mother utterly fails to reassure him and inculcate self-confidence in him. Neither his father nor his mother is interested in taking him with them when they go out and this indifferent attitude causes him to lose the opportunity of mingling with others of his age group and learning the significance of friendship and social interaction.

Just as Tara in Clear Light of Day faces nightmarish experiences in her school, Hugo undergoes traumatic experiences in his school. The annihilation-effects on his self-esteem emanate from his school life which ironically increases his sense of alienation, fear and insecurity already developed by his familial circumstances. Disappointed over the non-arrival of his mother with bonbons on time at the end of the first day of his school life, he sorrowfully stands alone and Desai
describes his condition:

He had been so afraid she would not be. All the other children had talked of the bonbons their parents had promised to bring to school -- already ordered, already brought, they said ecstatically -- and he had stood silent, so consumed by fear that she would not meet him with a similar prize....

(Baumgartner's Bombay 32-33)

The Christmas party at his school again ironically proves to be highly frustrating and agonizingly disappointing. When all the other children receive the presents their parents have sent for them Hugo is the only boy without any present. Though his teacher, understanding his delicate condition, calls him out to give the glittering redglass ball on which he sets his heart, his realisation that the ball is offered to him only because there is no other gift left prevents him from getting the present. Explaining the impact of this incident on Hugo, Desai says:

Then the agony was over and he could collapse into the dark ditch of his shame. What was the shame? The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration? But no one had said that, Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the
triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child. (Baumgartner's Bombay 36)

The teacher's off-the-cuff remark upon Hugo at the school for Jewish children gives a heavy jolt to his psyche. Besides this comment which makes the other children cruelly laugh at him, the uncharitable comment of the children in chorus on his nose likening it to a thumb crushes his image of his physical appearance: "He fell to fingerling it nervously, trying to discover the relation between his nose and his thumb, a habit that never left him" (Baumgartner's Bombay 38). And this inhuman and insulting remark "makes him uncomfortable, inculcates in him a fear of strangers and unknown people" (Solanki 66). Hugo's very sad experience recalls to mind that of Nissim Ezekiel in a Roman Catholic school where he frightfully feels like "A mugging Jew among the wolves" (Ezekiel 34).

The sudden and unexpected demise of the father of Hugo caused by the barbaric racial discrimination against the Jewish society and the consequent nightmarish experiences his mother and he face leave an indelible scar on his psyche. Abandoned by his own countrymen in the midst of racial enmity and saddened by his lucrative business being hit, Herr Baumgartner, a prosperous furniture businessman with some authority in Berlin, finds himself helpless. He stands with the same helplessness when his beautiful shop is damaged and ransacked. In his agony
and terror he "was opening and closing his fist as though to catch a fly" (Baumgartner's Bombay 41). With racial enmity at its height, he is keeping his fingers crossed about his insecure future. Not unexpectedly, he is carried away by the police and the mental agony and anguish suffered by his family on this count is terrific.

The facts that he refuses to speak to either his wife or his son and he likes the embrace of neither his wife nor his son speak volumes of the humiliation and ill-treatment he has received from the police. Desai gives a heart-rending account of his physical condition:

He would say nothing about Dachau. When they came near him, he began to shiver -- the shiver started in the back of his neck, making his head jerk like a hen's, and then ran down into his shoulders so that they shook. He had to go to bed and they pulled on quilt after quilt, trying to make him stop shivering. Even his face twitched on the pillow, pulled in every direction. Eventually he turned on to his side and stared at the wall. Now and then a remnant of that shiver made the quilts suddenly heave, subside. (Baumgartner's Bombay 43-44)

Being unable to endure the worst effect of inhuman treatment and unwilling to live with this disgrace Hugo's father
pathetically commits suicide in the absence of the other members of his family.

The irony of circumstance is that the economic hardship of Hugo's family forces him to be employed in his father's shop now owned by a gentleman from Hamburg. Hugo's decision to protest against the piano being taken from his house is a clear indication of his pent up furies. But his mother's sharp and embarrassing statement that "stepchildren must behave doubly well" (Baumgartner's Bombay 51) damages his self-esteem and sense of pride beyond repair and this experience permanently sows the seed of accepting anything without protest though temperamentally he tends to be aggressive. By showing their empty apartment Desai symbolically implies that their existence has become empty. Chandra observes that Hugo "felt a sense of emptiness within, which was reflected in the outer ambience" (133). Threatened by the racial holocaust in Germany Hugo finds himself unwanted and uprooted in his own country.

Hugo's ambition of beginning a new life is mercilessly shattered in India where even after more than fifty years of precarious existence he has always been considered an alien and a firanghi. Commenting on the rootlessness of Hugo, Desai says: "... he felt only relief that his had never been a part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped the mainstream" (Baumgartner's Bombay 211). Like Gautama in Cry, the Peacock
and Monisha in Voices in the City are affected by hereditary factors, Hugo feels handicapped by the same factor. Hugo's physical characteristics inherited from his Jewish parents always stand in the way of finding his roots in India. On his realization that his physical appearance is a stumbling block to establish a rapport with Indian people he dyes his hair but he can do nothing about the colour of his eyes. Describing the predicament of Hugo, Desai points out:

Accepting -- but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark -- his darkness had marked him the Jew, der Jude. In India he was fair -- and that marked him the firanghi. In both lands, the unacceptable. (Baumgartner's Bombay 20)

Hugo's unenviable condition in India brings to mind the pitiable condition of Adit and Dev in Bye-Bye, Blackbird in England. When Solanki comments on the treatment of Adit and Dev in England he observes:

The agony of being treated as an outsider accepting but not acceptable becomes an aching sadness for them. Loneliness and alienation overwhelm them from all directions, making them feel, sometimes as bewildered aliens and at other times, as outraged outsiders. (36)
The unprecedented violence and murder in Calcutta where Hugo's timber business comes to a grinding halt due to the outbreak of War and the sudden disappearance of his friend Habibullah, a victim of communal frenzy, drive him to Bombay where his hope of leading a peaceful life is thwarted by the inhuman attitude of the son of Sethia. Feeling alienated and intimidated by his poor economic condition he reduces his needs to a minimum and begins to neglect his personal appearance. As Hospital aptly points out: "Eventually, Baumgartner drifts west to Bombay and downward to poverty" (69). Dissatisfied with the wornout shoes of Hugo who looks like a beggar, his friend Lotte complains about them and the response of Hugo reveals his very bad financial condition: "But Lotte, I am not earning anymore. I am retired, you know, old retired man now. So I can't buy clothes and look like a fancy man still" (Baumgartner's Bombay 206).

Again Hugo's poverty is responsible for losing his selfrespect in Cafe de Paris and he is always conscious that he should ever please Farrokh irrespective of the insult heaped on him. Whatever be the quality of the food he receives, he has to accept it just to avoid his becoming a beggar in streets. Hugo's loss of self-respect just to get food from the hotel reminds one of the blow to the self-respect of Adit in Bye-Bye Blackbird when he is offered "Sandwiches left over from tea" (Bye-Bye Blackbird 147) for his supper by his mother-in-law,
Mrs. Roscommon-James. The repercussion of this incident is that Adit feels offended and decides to return to India. But where can Hugo go? With no place to go, he simply pockets all the insults. When Farrokh makes a blistering attack on the character of whitemen, Hugo has to look down at his feet to dispel the impression that he tries to support them. His lurking fear caused by economic difficulties is sharply revealed in his reaction when Farrokh wants to have a word with him:

Baumgartner's face fell -- was he going to say the cafe would no longer supply scraps for Baumgartner's cats? Would Baumgartner have to look elsewhere for largesse, and establish working relations with a new set of benefactors so as to keep his growing family fed and contented? This was a constantly renewed fear. Putting down his spoon, he sat up meekly to hear. (Baumgartner's Bombay 138)

The root cause of the tragic death of Hugo is his inability to displease Farrokh when the latter compels him to drive away Kurt, another German, from his cafe. Though Hugo does not want to have anything to do with Kurt, he unwillingly persuades him to go away just to please the owner. Had Hugo not taken Kurt with him, he would not have been killed by Kurt. While airing his views on the tragic life of Hugo Baumgartner,
Saxena makes a pertinent observation:

Baumgartner is the protagonist of this deeply disturbing novel. He closely resembles Job -- the central personage in "The Book of Job." Like Job, Baumgartner also suffers a lot for no fault of his own. He runs for refuge from nowhere to nowhere. His predicament is universal. Anita Desai has created a memorable character in Baumgartner. The life-story of this German Jew follows a text-book pattern of an ancient Greek classic with all its trappings of suffering through several vicissitudes in life.

(142)

The cruel killer of Hugo Baumgartner is a hippy, delinquent, drug addict and criminal and it is crystal clear that unfavourable social, familial, economic and psychological factors cause the emergence of delinquents. Kurt's rejection of social conventions and his desire of having unlimited freedom lands him in the company of antisocial elements. His involvement in smuggling and drug trafficking turns him to be inhuman and his stay in Kathmandu has made him a thief. Kurt's association with addicts has made him consume opium, marijuana, cannabis and heroin and he is suffering from psychotic disturbances showing the symptoms of irritability, fatigue, drowsiness and hallucinations which ultimately cause his degeneration. While describing the impact of drug addiction
Page mentions:

The continued use of opium, morphine, heroin and other derivatives is attended by two serious consequences. To begin with, the organism becomes physiologically conditioned to the drug so that once the habit is firmly established, the patient is forced to continue taking the drug or else experience painful withdrawal symptoms.... Secondly, a condition of tolerance is gradually developed, so that enormous doses must be taken to elicit their usual effects. (324)

Kurt has reached this terrible stage but he has no money to get the drug. When he sees the silver trophies in the flat of Hugo he sets his eyes on them. Thinking that Hugo is an impediment to take them away, Kurt, forgetting the fact that he is being helped by Hugo, ungratefully stabs him to death. Commenting on the economic reason of the murder of Hugo, Chandra points out:

The silver trophies in Baumgartner's room attract Kurt's attention for their monetary value. He must have his drug at any cost -- even at the cost of Baumgartner's life. And he mercilessly plunges a knife into the sleeping, helpless mass of flesh. (137)
The only person who uncontrollably laughs on the wrong side of her mouth over the tragic death of Hugo is his unfortunate friend, Lotte, a German victim in India, whose pathetic life is strongly marked by anxiety, despair, loneliness, alienation and rootlessness. With her ambition of becoming a famous actress being mercilessly thwarted by her parents, she finds herself lonely in Calcutta. Tortured by her economic hardships and privations she inevitably feels forced to become a dancer in the Grand Hotel to keep the pot boiling.

Lotte's hand-to-mouth existence is threatened all of a sudden as a result of the unfortunate pre-war conditions. Faced with a difficult situation when she is on the verge of being sent to the internment camp because of her nationality problems, Lotte, a very young and beautiful lady, has to accept the offer of marriage with Kanti Sethia, an old married businessman. But even her marriage does not give her the expected life of happiness. Since the Hindu society cannot accept their wedlock it is kept very secret and due to this social factor she is not able to enjoy her new status as a wife of Sethia.

Sethia's serious efforts to give Lotte protection by making her a member of his family under the pretext of providing an English governess to his sons fail to bear fruits. Mrs. Sethia begins to show her anger by shouting and quarrelling
with Lotte. The fallout is that the atmosphere in the house is heavily surcharged with tension and unease. Habibullah describes the terrible situation prevalent in the house:

But already fighting is taking place. Mrs. Sethia is very very angry. Mrs. Sethia is making faces and putting chilli powder in all the food and showing to Madam Lola the - what you call? - tongs, kitchen tongs? And Madam Lola getting frightened and running out of the house, and all the neighbours looking and seeing. (Baumgartner's Bombay 170)

Frustrated with her lonely condition and cruel rootlessness, she leads her hopeless life like a prisoner in a small room in Bombay. Commenting on her predicament Bande says:

Even Lotte, lively and aggressive, fails to identify with the country of her adoption by marriage. Despite the brave front she puts up, she is lonely within. The life Kanti Sethia gives her has no charm. She is reduced to being his mistress, living in reasonable comfort but always alone, waiting for his trips to Bombay. (The Outsider Situation in Baumgartner's Bombay" 126)

The unexpected demise of Sethia puts her in a fix. The protracted court case to save her flat consumes not only long years but also her savings and health. Wounded by the
treacherous attitude of her neighbours, disheartened by the vicious ingratitude of the worst sons of Sethia, tormented by the precarious state of insecurity and saddened by her abject helplessness and painful emptiness of life she keeps herself aloof in an uncomfortably wretched room surrounded by antisocial elements. In a bid to forget her perennial worries and painful memories she begins to use liquor and ultimately becomes a pathetic victim of alcoholic drinks. In this context it is quite instructive to quote what Page says about the purposes served by liquor:

It is a solvent for responsibilities and heart aches. Sorrows and cares are drowned and replaced by gaiety and good cheer. It is a vehicle of escape from domestic conflicts, business worries and feelings of inferiority. It is the eraser of painful memories and the remover of social inhibitions. It gives courage to the coward, confidence to the timid, pleasure to the unhappy, and success to the failure. In brief, alcohol permits a flight from the disappointments and frustrations of reality. (296-297)

Too much indulgence in the consumption of liquor to get a flight from the very painfully unpleasant realities makes Lotte lose her mental equilibrium and not unexpectedly she becomes belligerent and indecorous. Degradation is visible in her
personal appearance and degeneration is unmistakably noticed in her speech and "she seemed to get into perpetual rows with the neighbours. More than once the police had to come and intervene so that the neighbourhood brawl did not turn into a riot..." (Baumgartner's Bombay 210).

With no heart to bear her indescribably miserable existence in India Lotte laments: "Oh, Hugo, why did we not go back? We should have gone back long, long ago" (Baumgartner's Bombay 211). The euphoria emanated from her legitimate consolation that after a long and unavoidable separation she has found Hugo again whose presence will be a source of strength to her lonely existence in the crowded city of Bombay is shattered with the tragic death of Hugo Baumgartner. When Hospital gives his impression of this novel he rightly points out: "At novel's end the only enlightenment is a stark one. The meaning is that there is no meaning" (68).

The tragic degeneration and disintegration of the characters discussed so far recalls to mind a small and effective poem taken from a collection of poems called Wars Is Kind written by Stephen Crane:

A man said to the universe,
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,  
"The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation." (qtd. in High 89)

Since the existence of these major characters is invariably tragic, one is immediately reminded of the hapless characters of Thomas Hardy. But Desai's vision of existence is different from that of Hardy. Whereas Hardy forcefully presents only the tragic dimension of life Desai intensely portrays its multiple dimensions. The next chapter deals with a set of characters many of whom feel frustrated and flee to far off places to avoid the grim realities of the human drama.