CHAPTER III
EXPLORATION OF ALIENATED SELF: VOICES IN THE CITY

Anita Desai is one of the renowned contemporary Indian women novelists in English. One of her recurring themes is the struggle of women to assert their independence in a restrictive Indian society. In her novels, she depicts the cultural and social changes that India has undergone in certain periods. She explores the power of family and society and the relationship between family members. She also depicts the aspirations and struggle of ordinary women in their homeland and focuses on the obstacles encountered by these women who are suppressed by Indian society. Her characters are mainly drawn from middle class English speaking people. Her novels evolve around themes of alienation, search for self-identity, and inter-cultural connections and survival. Salman Rushdie admires Anita Desai’s novels, “as private, universe, illuminated by her perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit”(Patel 22). Desai depicts the aspirations and struggles of ordinary people in their home as well as society.

Desai’s first two novels, Cry, the Peacock (1963) and Voices in the City (1965) deal with parallel themes of loneliness and survival. The concerns are existential and the conflict is between involvement and detachment. Voices in the City is Anita Desai’s second lyrical novel in English. It depicts the Indian society which is still in transition even after more than a decade of India’s Independence from the British rule. The novel is a complex structure of symbols and stereo types. A.V. Krishna Rao in his article Voices
in the City: A Case Study has rightly commented that the novel is “technically brilliant and thematically utterly contemporaneous in its scheme and scope” (Srivastava 162). It is also realistic representation of a decadent city culture. Society appears in the form of the city of Calcutta. The story is based on the life of the middle class intellectuals of Calcutta.

Anita Desai cleverly presents theme of loneliness in a crowd by presenting the crowded city of Calcutta where the three brothers and sisters feel left alone. The whole novel depicts three protagonists who come to the city with all the energy and enthusiasm to work and establish themselves but all their creative energies do not coverage in a common point of integration. Each character in the novel performs a particular kind of activity and each activity encounters only failure. The novel focuses that these failures are related to the actions of the three central characters. Their lives are shaped by their mother in the unconscious and mother discovers the unconscious influence from foster mother, which is none other than Calcutta city. The characters waver between their success and failure. At the end, they realize their futility of their struggle.

The novel is a symbolic presentation of Desai’s artistic attitude towards her authentic experience of life in Calcutta. It is a quest for inner as well as outer reality. It is in a nutshell a struggle for freedom. Madhusudan Prasad asserts: “Mrs. Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the sub-conscious of the major characters in this novel” (22). It represents an individual’s fight against the self and the consequent defeat of the individual. The major
themes are search for reality, search for meaning in life, depression, disillusionment, hopelessness and search for a moment of balance. It is the first time in Indian writing in English, a city emerges as a powerful character along with the other main characters. It becomes metaphor for the complexities of the life there. Desai describes Calcutta in order to accomplish the difficult task of integrating it into the plot of the novel.

Voices in the City is a story of three siblings, Amla, Nirode and Monisha and their different ways of life in Calcutta. The novel is divided into four sections. The first three are named after a trio of young adult siblings from a Himalayan village. They are separated for different reasons and they have moved to Calcutta. They struggle a lot. They search for their identity and struggle for survival and freedom in the crucial city. The narrative follows each sibling individually. Desai illuminates the myriad ways that their respective social class defines their self-identities. She describes a filthy picture of a Bengali family and illustrates the miserable condition of the three characters in the city of Calcutta and the city of Kali.

The very first line in the novel describes the train in subjective as well as objective terms. It opens with a comparison between Nirode’s failure and Arun’s bright success. The protagonist ‘I’ is not represented by a single person but consists of three individuals, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. They are presented from a divided point of view but they combine towards the end. Anita Desai adopts the technique of the diary which adds pathos to the empty married life of Monisha. She achieves a dramatic effect in the narrative by shifting the point of view in the second part of the novel. The central woman
protagonist of the novel Monisha is a close observer of the reality. The novel presents the bewildering variety of sights and sounds of the city of Calcutta. The squalor, the ugliness, the poverty and the misery of the city are all evoked through very powerful images. It pictures Calcutta’s important landmarks such as Howrah, Chowringhee, Grand Hotel, Fort Williams, Victoria Memorial and Cathedral Park. It is a family drama which has delineated martial disharmonies as they exist in Indian male-dominated society.

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 novel deals with a congenital failure of the rebellious and frustrated young man, Nirode and his fight against himself, “the pursuit of failure with grandiose and adolescent authority” (VC 62-63). The second part ‘Monisha’ pictures the Monisha’s suffering in her married life. In the third part of the novel ‘Amla’, Desai presents the sad tale of gay and lively young girl who is dejected with the influence of the deceptive and hypocritical society in the city of Calcutta. The final part ‘Mother’ deals with the fruitless reunion of the alienated mother and her love born child, Amla.

The novel Voices in the City depicts the struggle of three characters, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. It also exposes their search for their identity in city of Calcutta. The two characters, Nirode and Monisha are quite different from each other in their attitude. Nirode and Amla are depicted through representation of their psychic reality and Monisha has recorded her pathetic thoughts and experiences in her diary. Another character developed by Anita Desai in contrast to Monisha is Sarala, a well fashioned
wife of Nirode. She is fond of drinks. Desai portrays the role of Sarala as a woman of questionable character. She neatly divides her major and minor characters into two groups in the novel. The major characters represent defiance and suffering of the elite. They are all presented as rebels-successful or unsuccessful. The minor characters stand for the dull and anemic individuals who live stupid and senseless lives. In brief, the novel is a tragic exploration of personal suffering of three major characters.

Desai brings the realistic vision of the city and its sensibility almost in all her novels. City acts as a social force for an organic entity and presents an ambivalent vision of human relationship. Sandhyarani Das has displayed beautifully the role of the city and its sensibility in the novels of Anita Desai: “The city eventually assumes a symbolic dimension that reflects existential anguish of the tormented souls who are in constant quest of selfhood” (18). Calcutta with its organic powers dominates the entire structure of this novel. Even the train standing on the platform of Calcutta in the beginning of this novel reacts to the living form of the city: “The train began to pant...the platform people loitered in various attitudes of nervousness, impatience and regret, turning now and then to the lights at the head of the platform, waiting for them to change” (7). The train in this passage is followed by the phrases like “white steam” and “night sky”. The image of “white steam” symbolizes the vision of fury and this vision of fury is deftly linked with “night sky” – a symbol of destruction and annihilation of man’s existence. Thus, Calcutta city of goddess Kali symbolizes both time and timelessness. A series of events in this novel enlarges on the rise and fall of relationship between the organic and
inorganic entities, but the city of Calcutta stands only for the destructiveness and annihilation of man’s existence. The city of Calcutta is presented symbolically as a living character and it traps all the major characters with its evil forces. They suffer immensely while passing through different stages of failure and struggle, and their mental sufferings are depicted through variegated symbols.

The novel presents the dreary picture of the Ray family whose son, Nirode goes in his own way, living the life of an intellectual in a metropolitan city. He rebels against the world of security and routine. He is disorderly emotional even from his childhood. While he was a child, he had hated sports and riding and informed this to his father. And then, he got rid of sports. He wants to live in shadows and silence. To him, silence and solitude are the most powerful things. He frequents the company of discounted intellectuals in a coffee house known for its gathering of displaced and dangerous literals of Bengal. He is a congenital failure and he becomes permanent companion of it. He starts his work as a clerk in a newspaper office. He contrasts his own glaring failures with his brother’s grand success. His brother flies to England for higher studies. Then, Nirode gives up his job, he starts editing a literary magazine named ‘Voice’ only to give it up and take up creative writing. He writes a play but it 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 mass. He is obsessed with failure. He feels, “I want to move from failure to failure, step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth” (40). He fails to make even the necessary compromises that life demands.
Nirode is the victim of a pathetic and oppressive metropolis of Calcutta. This “anonymous and shabby clerk wants nothing more than three drinks a night and a room of his own” (11). He becomes a permanent companion of it. This shows Nirode is a rootless character without any definite goal. Usha Bande comments: “Nirode’s experiments with failures are an indication of a quest for an abiding meaning in life” (73). He is a man for whom “aloneness alone” matters. Like a true existential hero, Nirode experiments with failures seeking to get meaning in life. He visualizes the futility of the struggle in publishing the magazine ‘The Voice’ which brings him failure, poverty, misery. It fails to build him any contact with the world. He searches for his identity in the city. He tries so many ways to prove his identity. But he is obsessed with failure in achieving success in life which creates a sense of emptiness. He is a rebel who symbolizes the contradictions in human nature and wishes for higher an ideal self.

Desai also presents a miserable life of Nirode’s two sisters. The novel is an examination of the plight of sensitive and independent women caught in the web of the hostile society. It dramatizes the emotional turmoil of the two neglected female protagonist, Monisha and Amla. It projects their voices to struggle for life in the formidable city of Calcutta. Life in big cities is so complex. It is busy and time consuming that one hardly has time for oneself and family. It sounds the death knell of personal peace and integrity. Voices in the City is a wonderful demonstration of what Anita Desai said in an interview with Dalmia, “the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (13). Desai describes the corrosive effects of city life
upon Indian family. Nirode, Monisha and Amla become the prey of modern civilization. Their effort to compromise with life leads to failure.

The young, dreamy-eyed, romantic Monisha is totally dissatisfied with her present life. Like Maya, she is also a miserable misfit among her in-laws. She is married to Jiban who is a middle rung officer in government department with a large joint family. He belongs to a typical middle class family. Monisha’s father gets her married to Jiban against her will. Only out of his compulsion, she marries Jiban. Monisha’s aunt tells Amla that Jiban is “...completely unsuitable to Monisha’s taste and inclinations. So your father decided, he was the right man, that it was the right family” (199). She is tormented by her indifferent husband. She weaves a web of her own and remains imprisoned in its privacy. She feels alienated from her husband and ponders over the problem of attachment. Monisha and Jiban marriage is the most pathetic illustration of maladjustment in marriage. In fact, she becomes an inseparable part of Jiban’s family after her marriage. Thus, Maya-Gautama tragedy is re-enacted in Monisha-Jiban marriage.

Monisha is the victim of the crippling life within a joint family. She lives in a large house in Bow Bazar in central Calcutta with Jiban’s extended family. She is typical child of Desai’s imagination. She records Monisha’s psychic turmoil through Monisha’s diary which clearly pictures the trauma experienced in the hostile family. Her dreams and expectations of married life in the city are broken into pieces when she gets married to Jiban against her will. Her relationship with her husband is marked only by “loneliness
and in communication” (135). Jiban never tries to understand his wife. She finds herself in the midst of unsympathetic relatives.

Monisha’s suffering starts even from the first day of her marriage. It is the custom of Bengali families that newly married couples are expected to prostrate at the feet of elders to get their blessings. But Monisha is dissatisfied with the family customs and traditions. During their marriage reception, Jiban unexpectedly pushes her to bow to his mother’s feet. Monisha touches her mother-in-law’s feet immediately. When her mother-in-law touches her head for blessing, her husband hardly pushes her again. Monisha thinks that it is not necessary. She is humiliated a lot when she is forced to fall at the countless feet of their relatives.

Monisha gets upset even in the first day of their marriage. Her expectation from her husband leads to dissatisfaction. Because her husband belongs to an orthodox family and they are rooted in tradition. They have certain customs and restrictions for everything. Jiban believes in orthodox role of woman like, “cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing the children hair” (115). But Monisha likes to read books, written by Kafka, Dostoevsky, Hopkins, Camas, etc. She likes to lead a poetic life in the joint family. Sumedha Bhandari rightly comments in her article “Human Relationships: An establish Evaluation of Anita Desai’s Novels”, “Monisha lacks love for her husband and is unable to any life-giving rapport with him” (Anand 174). In her bedroom, she keeps a lot of books on the cupboard. Whenever she gets time, she wants to read books. Unfortunately, she has no time to improve her intellectual pursuits. She is always busy with her
household works. She revolves around her large house for serving the family members. She has countless duties for crowded family. She is always busy in the kitchen to prepare fresh hot chapattis and serving her uncles, listening to her mother-in-law and cooking fish in many ways. Though she lives in a joint family, she is longing for privacy. She internally suffers that she has no privacy even in her bedroom. Her room is filled with a stream of visitors with a volley of uncomfortable questions. Out of curiosity, they open her cupboard, count her saris and discuss about her books. Helpless Monisha longs for solitude from such dominating relatives.

Even though Monisha and Jiban live together, they are mentally separated from each other. Because the object of their search is absent. It is a dichotomy of presence and absence. Jiban is just physically present and mentally absent in Monisha’s company. As a husband, he offers no hope, neither companionship nor protection. She realizes that nothing is meaningfully expected in such an atmosphere. She loses her balance to search for meaning in life. Slowly, Monisha likes loneliness as she feels, “Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more whole” (115). She is mentally suffering for loneliness. Her expectation in the married life is unfulfilled. She searches for her identity in her husband and among the family members. She loses her hope and she gets mentally ill.

Her childlessness adds to her fury. The crowded relatives inhumanly discuss about her barrenness and ask questions to her. Sensitive woman never tolerates her physical deformity discussed by others in her presence. Monisha’s defect in her fallopian tube has resulted in her sterility. Her ears burn when they ask questions to her. She suffers in
silence. Elana Jo Kalinnikova opines, “Physical inferiority brings about spiritual breakdown” (175). Society does not want to accept childless, barren ladies. Monisha has to bear the pangs of criticism of her aunts, cousins and nieces when they discuss her womb, tubes and ovaries. She is treated as a third person in her own house. She is isolated when they discuss family matters concerning her. She is treated like a servant who has come to the house only to obey the orders of others. She confines herself only to the chores of the kitchen. The psyche of Monisha is unable to tolerate the vulgar exposure of the family members. Her physical inability to become a mother, lack of understanding with her husband and the derisive attitude of her in-laws lead her to suffer from inferiority complex.

After her marriage, in fact, she becomes an inseparable part of Jiban’s family. However, she is accused of stealing Jiban’s money. She is physically and mentally tortured by her in-laws. She is not allowed to take money from her own husband’s pocket. The members of her family look at her with suspicious eyes when she takes money from her husband’s pocket to pay off the bills of her brother. Even Jiban says, “Why did you tell them at once? ... why did you not tell me before you took it” (138). And Jiban’s mother also accuses her of theft. In these critical situations, she needs privacy. She wants to live alone in the house. Desai’s obsessive concern with the fate of a married woman in the Indian society of today portrays intelligent sensitive women married to gentle but insensitive men, connoting a dualistic pattern of existence. The ideals of non-involvement and self-effacement are very good as philosophical concepts.
Monisha wants to free herself from her miseries and also wants to be away from her family members. To free her mind, she goes to attend a concert for a short time. As soon as she leaves the house, her in-law starts to criticize her in her usual way of laughing at her. She remains silent even when she hears those intolerable words about her. For instance, Monisha gets into the carriage with her brother. At that time, her sari lifts a little exposing her legs. It happens unknowingly. It becomes great topic to her in-laws and they laugh at her. Monisha also notices that her in-laws watch her from the window. Humiliation increases when she has heard those vulgar words. Jiban notices the incident not to allow her to go further. Highly emotional Monisha feels, “…caught back and rebuffed, at the last and most urgent moment, utter humiliation and desolation” (122). It is extremely dangerous to live in the house.

Monisha is interested in music. She believes that it relaxes her mind and frees her from tensions. So, she likes listening to sitar for hours. But familial bond does not allow her to enjoy such things. Music is regarded to married woman as “…. Dangerous when not confined to the assert of young marriageable girls” (122). She has no freedom to raise her voice against the strait-jacketed discipline of the extended family. Monisha lives without a touch of love or warmth because she is locked apart from all of them. They cannot touch Monisha; they can only lip-read and misinterpret her. Monisha’s total seclusion from the members of the family and her aloofness from her husband make her life “a barred enclosure” (241). Monisha is caught up in the dynamics of negative
situations of compromise wherein she suffers from opposed role of expectations, and this results in her existential tragedy.

The novelist has delineated Monisha’s psychic life at some length. She is ill-fated to militate against a corrosive emptiness within as well as without. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of proper understanding. Jiban treats her as an outsider and she is looked upon as a separate entity in her own house. Anita Desai adopts the technique of the diary which adds pathos to the empty married life of Monisha. She also expresses her mental agony from page to page. Monisha is more and more tormented. She confirms that the absence of the element of love has made both brother and sister all alone. In the city of Calcutta, Monisha desperately tries to search for the real meaning of her life, but she is completely frustrated as there is nothing in her life to sustain her. Life explores in a convincing way the inner climate of youthful despair and is permeated by the existential angst.

Monisha lives as a jailbird in her husband’s house. She has no way to escape from her regular duties. Her in-laws expect her to perform her duties well without any hesitation. They do not bother about her expectations and her needs in the family. However, she should fulfill the needs of others without considering her health, feelings and emotions. Then the society and family will accept her as the daughter-in-law. It is unwritten code to daughters-in-law like Monisha that they should be obedient, submissive and subservient to their in-laws. R.S. Sharma has pointed out that in the tension between “active involvement and passive withdrawal, the individual does not seem to have much
choice. In both situations, the characters are like trapped birds who either accept their trap situations as natural conditions” (33). In a state of bewilderment, Monisha questions herself, “Is this what life is then, my life? only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution?” (124). She feels more and more agonized when she finds hollowness everywhere. And her final resolution, “There is no escape from it” (132) shows the futility of her hollow existence which ultimately drives her to commit suicide. Her suicide reflects that she is unable to come out successfully from the duality that life had imposed on her. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha on arrival of her mother from Kalimpong. N.R. Gopalan asserts: “The life of a woman like Monisha in the given circumstances in never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death. Her impending death by suicide has been poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which comes later in the novel” (Gopal 25). Monisha has presented a typical social situation of several young couples in India. Monisha’s death is a subject of great social significance. Any form of disobedience in regular duties makes problems in married life. Except her routine work, her mother-in-law orders her to massage her legs. Being free from her problems, she always obeys the commands of her mother-in-law. But Jiban does not give importance to her feelings. He advises her to be friendly with her in-laws without considering their ill treatment on her. This shows husband’s mentality. Jiban wants his wife to co-operate with his family members without making any problem in the family. Husband like Jiban do not bother about desires, feelings, and emotions of his wife.
Monisha’s relationship with her husband Jiban is marked by solitude and silence. She has no harmonious relationship with her husband. She expresses her hollowness like an existentialist: “To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettiness’s of our mean existence – is that right” (121). Apurva Chawla in his article, *Society and Individualism: The Humanistic Concern in Anita Desai’s Voices in the City* comments that “the loneliness leads to a psychological mindset where the individual starts feeling inadequate and incomplete and gradually, universe becomes incomprehensible, problems become insurmountable, the result being that even small things acquire gigantic proportions” (Anand 178). Monisha suffers from total alienation and there is no possibility of any quality communication.

The oppressive lack of privacy, her sterility and her in-laws’ suspicion, the absence of love and understanding in her life and the resultant loneliness show Monisha a pathetic figure. Monisha is very affectionate to her brother, Nirode and her sister, Amla. Though she suffers herself, she has motherly care for them. When Nirode is sick, she stays with him in the hospital and she pays his hospital bills. She forgets her worries and relaxes for a short time, but it does not last for a long time. Her attachment to Nirode is questioned by her family members and she is not allowed to meet him. Nirode is in his own tension and he fails to help his sister in any way. She says: “Nirode’s conscience sleeps, it has been so battered and bruised that it sleeps from sheer exhaustion” (135). But the behavior of “… Rough, unaffectionate, understanding brother” (130) does not allow this relationship to flourish and expand.
Monisha advises her sister to “… go in the opposite direction” (159). She likes her sister not to be jail bird like her in the married life. She feels that love should be “… by itself, silent, discreet, pure, untouched, untouchable…” (194). Her idea of love inextricably mingles with human freedom. It shows that she longs for freedom with love. But her position is like a female bird in the cages which is never given an opportunity to fly. She cries for her meaningless life, “Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting for men self-centered and different and hungry… and dying misunderstood, always being bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, the old houses, in the old city” (120). She is unable to escape from her physical bondage.

Though Monisha is in the joint family, she is forced to be in state of isolation. Her heart dries up and she emotionally starves to search for meaningful life in the family and also in the city. No one comes forward to solve her problems and console her worries. Her husband or her family members neither understand her nor sympathy for her. Her only sister Amla is very much concerned with her desires. She wants to free her sister’s isolation and spends time with her to change her mind. Her expectation breaks when she is not allowed to go to Monisha’s room. But she is permitted to meet Monisha in the presence of her mother-in-law. She is instructed to go to mother-in-law’s room. Monisha is humiliated and gets mental agony. This is the rule of daughter-in-law in a joint family: “a system which traps and then destroys Monisha a system which denies freedom and privacy and encourages invasion” (Jain 74). She also has fear in her heart as to how to get rid of this bondage.
Monisha listens to the street song from the balcony in a dejected mind. Everyone around her responds to the passionate intensity of the song. Monisha feels that she only stands apart. The song is melancholy connects with meaningless life, but she fails to appreciate the song. She regrets:

… it has been my own fault, because I gave up the quest for it 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 (237).

Monisha’s widened knowledge also never helps her to come out of her troubles. She looks at only troubles and sorrows in and around her.

Monisha feels that the element of desired love is absent from the relations of sister and brother. She is also a rebel a ‘craven tragedian’ (105) like her brother. Her relationship with her mother is also not cordial. There is no love and hop in the life. She alternates between the duality of hope and despair in the world of her husband’s joint family. Monisha’s obsessive sense of alienation, ill treatment of her in-laws, the absence of love between the husband and the wife and others are the reasons responsible for her psychic disintegration. The only alternative for a person who has lost faith in life is death. She commits suicide and her suicide is “an attempt to rebel against this meaningless death like isolation. It is an attempt to give meaning to her death, for her life has not been able to acquire one” (Prasad 33). Her hypersensitivity does not help her to establish any life-giving rapport with her husband.
Monisha expects that her husband to help her to get relieved from her worries and to get liberated from psychic bondage. But her husband never energizes her giving hope in the life. Her expectation never gets fulfilled by her husband. Being an orthodox man, Jiban follows the words of his mother. He follows only the rules and restrictions in the family. He does not give importance to the feelings of his wife physically or mentally. His relationship with her wife is marked by “… Loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed… the most calamitous pleasures and pains, fears and regrets…” (134). An innocent Monisha wants to enjoy her life with her husband and family. But rude and monotonous Jiban never accompanies his wife in any way. He fails to satisfy the desires of his wife. He believes that women should spend their lives in their in-law’s house without a sense of identity. 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 unfulfilled expectation, humiliations and ill-treatment and sarcastic remarks of her in-laws. Jiban does not give his shoulder to console his wife. There is only lack of understanding and lack of trust between husband and wife. Monisha feels at ease in her husband’s home. Ultimately, Monisha’s effort to compromise with life leads to be a failure.

Desai depicts the tragedy of women characters alienated from self and society. They are unable to fulfill the social expectations or play their ordained roles. They suffer from a sense of rootlessness, isolation and alienation. The novel probes into the dark interiors of the human psyche. Slowly, Monisha loses her hope and she is unable to make
any compromise with such an oppressive and uncaring husband, family and also society. She feels totally neglected, isolated and lonely even in a bustling joint family. She is lonely and longs for privacy. She believes that her efforts are useless. However, Monisha slips into the uttermost level of depression and she never comes back to the surface at all. She has no self-confidence or psychic composure to defend her against the expectation of an unsympathetic and tradition bound joint family. It increases her mental agony and decides to end her life. At last, she sets fire on herself in order to reach the core of intense feelings. Monisha commits suicide out of despair at not being able to experience life … self-hate turns into self-destruction” (Bande 52). Her decision is somewhat different from the end that of Maya in Cry, the Peacock. Maya not only ends her life but also gives punishment to her husband in neurosis. But Monisha punishes only herself.

The death of Monisha portrays the power of Kali once again over the inhabitants of the city. Kali, the goddesses of death in the streets underlines the tragic tone of the novel. The novel recaptures the ethos of religious festivals of spirit and belief in gods and goddesses commonly witnessed in India. There are so many voices heard in the city, and then one voice goes unheard and life looks meaningless and futile, unchanged and unimproved. The search for her life in the tradition-bound society like Calcutta leads to the death of Monisha. The city never gives lovely place to search for the innocent girl like Monisha but it takes away her last breath. It not only captures her breath but also shatters her hopes, dreams, expectations and aspirations. She is driven to tragedy as she fails to take an active interest in life.
Anita Desai symbolically predicts Monisha’s death: “Monisha in Calcutta and over the still cemetery a pale dawn breeze wandered silently in through the window” (106). Cemetery is the symbol of the city of Calcutta where death dwells. It also symbolizes death. Monisha’s life in Calcutta means she is with death. Her room is decorated with furniture which is highly symbolic. It is “a black, four-postured bed in the centre and a gigantic black wardrobe against the wall” (109). The black colour stands for lonely and melancholic life and also death. So, Monisha always lives in her dark side of life. The appearance of the barred windows gives her the feeling of prison. She is annoyed at the sound of the monotonous repetition of some lesson by a neighboring child. This sound symbolishes her monotonous life of the house where she is unable to free herself. At last, she wants to leave city of Calcutta which means the city of death. She wishes to live in the sky only: “Leave me to gather the stars, frosty and distant and cool. Leave me to gather- and then to reject them. Queen like” (137). She wants to reject the night beauty of Calcutta and this suggests her rejection of life and the world.

Monisha’s death blasts her sister Amla’s whole psychic frame. It connects her pathetic brother Nirode with her entangled sister Amla. It leads both of them to a state of deep emotional disturbance and depression. While Monisha suffers from the familial pressure, her mother is far away at Kalimpong. Amla oscillates between her brother and sister. Nirode denies himself even the consolation of suffering. Nirode sees her dead body and his silence is broken and his exile ends: “He seemed unable... agonizingly neglected” (248). Nirode’s rebellion is completed through Monisha’s death.
Desai’s themes, characterization and images deal with confinement and lack of freedom. In addition to existentialistic reality of life, she evokes the sentiment and sensibility of women for their role and respect in society. The most recurring themes are woman’s struggle for self-realization, woman’s quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level.

Amla is the foil to Monisha. Though they are sisters, there are striking differences between them. Armed with fine arts degree from Bombay, Amla arrives at Calcutta to begin working as a commercial artist. Her Bohemian life-style is in total contrast to Monisha’s virtual internment in Jiban’s old family. Aunt Lila thinks of Amla as “absolutely free and in the centre of such an exciting world”(144). Amla decides to enjoy the city, her new job and freedom. She confidently expresses her decision: “… Calcutta does not oppress me in the least… it excites me…” (142). Though she looks forward a beautiful life in the city; she experiences the pressure of the puzzling loneliness. She is depressed by her friendless life. She craves for single friend to enjoy her life. But she does not find any one in the city: “Why is pleasure the most rotten sensation of all in this city? When, where is it to be found clear, fresh unadultered? Not here, not now…”(146). It symbolizes Amla’s boredom and lonely experience in the city. Unexpectedly, she also worries about the oppressive atmosphere. Monisha becomes the prey of modern civilization. After her marriage, she lives in a radically different environment compared to her native place. The appearance of the house seems prison to her. She tries to find
comfort and happiness with her husband. But she gets disappointment. She is driven to her tragedy as she fails to take active interest in the life.

In the novel, the role of sensitive Amla assumes significance as an observer and she is a witness to the sensitive events. Her reaction to the events is quite opposite to Monisha’s silence and passivity. Her sister’s morbidity and cold resistance turns her as a sleep walker, ghost and some unknown and dread entity mystify her. Amla analyses her sister’s life in every point of view and comes to the conclusion that death was a significant pointer: “Monisha’s death had pointed the way of her and would had never allow her loose herself... She had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin” (245). Her death teaches and gives strength to face her problems in her life.

Amla’s approach of life is different from Nirode and Monisha. She wants to enjoy the city life with youthful excitement. She is an intelligent and liberated woman. She learns a good lesson from the life of her sister. She tries to prove herself and also gives meaning to it. She keenly looks forward for the happy life and career in the big city. But, her experiences of the hallow city life frustrates her in so many ways. When she dances with Jit on a Saturday night, she catches her breath with fear at the great pressure of Calcutta’s night life. Later, she perceives the impact on Dharma’s paintings, “she felt afraid now, longed to struggle away from any responsibility” (205). She attempts to master over fears and struggles in her life.
Amla wants to lead an individualistic life in the city. She is not interested in the joint family system where the freedom of a woman is completely lost. She is very bold to precede her view, unlike Monisha. She does not want to be imprisoned in such an ill-hearted family. She wants pleasure and secured married life alone, “…Something more rare, more responsible…” (145). But her profession and her interests in commerce and art defeat the very sense of creativity and beauty. Later, she turns his mind from commercial art to pure art. Her world at the advertising firm soon gets into rut. Her work suffers and her threat of communication is broken.

Amla worries about her brother and sister. Many times, she tries to change their life style by giving advice. But she is shocked to see that they are the victims of the ruthless society. She is disillusioned to see the depressed and corroded psyche of her sister and brother. She feels, “that this monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, under lit, stealthy and odorous of mortality has captured and enchanted- or disenchanted- both her sister and brother”(150). She knows that her family never gives any purposeful support to her brother or sister. So, she approaches like her mother to solve the problems. But, her efforts to enfold them seem futile. She visited Monisha’s place to protect her from the problems, but she was not allowed to meet her separately where as she was allowed only in the presence of her mother-in-law. Amla is highly disturbed by Nirode’s exhausted and wasted appearance and his estrangement from her mother. Her effort to correct her brother’s thought about their mother becomes a failure. Both Monisha and Nirode pass through the dreary phase
of senselessness simultaneously. In such a situation, Amla wants to help Nirode though they do not harmonious relationship.

Amla concentrates on her bright future life. It shows her career consciousness and wants to lead a carefree life in the city. After passing her art course at Bombay, she strives for objective achievements in life. She enters Calcutta with full of excitement and enthusiasm. She longs to enjoy her, “…job and independence.” (142) She becomes a commercial artist and her preference for Calcutta then Kalimpong shows her search to lead a great life in the city. Her dynamism and adaptability make her comfortable in every situation. She is ready to face any troubles around her. She tries to uplift her from the darkening gloom of her senseless existence. She does not get any support even from her family members. She is attached to her brother and sister even though they do not support her.

One day, Nirode comes to see her and she refuses to show her paintings to him. Nirode is obviously disturbed at this intrusion on her privacy. He offers her to meet his friend Dharma, a painter. It takes Amla up on a different plane altogether for a while. Dharma is not in his studio when they arrive. However, Dharma keeps on talking to Nirode of inconsequent things. Amla watches his hands “in a passion of curiosity and premonition, they seemed to mark her, impress themselves upon her” (185). Amla is loaded with her frenzied thoughts of Dharma. She wants so much to share the aching burden of them. Such an independent and individualistic Amla falls prey to her passions and she becomes emotionally attached to Dharma, a married man.
Amla gets impressed by Dharma’s art and creativity in portrait paintings. Their relationships expand when she poses as a model for his paintings. A kind of “…ease and pleasure swelled their conversations, friendship entered…” (201). She feels happy and relaxed when she talks to him. Dharma accepts her views which transforms into means and forms in his studio. She becomes … another Amla, a flowering Amla, translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward” (207). She loves not only Dharma’s paintings but also falls in love with him. She longs for her relationship with him to be “… something quite different, something normal… gentle, not complex and disturbing and unreal…” (205). She is caught between the present reality of imagination and expected bright future. Dharma’s paintings affect her tremendously and charm her irrevocably. Amla escapes from the cruel realities of life and she wants mingle with world of Dharma that is the world of fantasy. She is swallowed gradually into the interior volcano of understanding and wriggles her own innocence and purity of emotions.

Amla’s dream of love and involvement with Dharma is broken when she comes to know that he is married and also has a daughter. She is disappointed by Dharma’s self-centered and cynical existence. She bids farewell to Dharma when she knows about his married life. She uses these experiences as a platform to take off to the renewed and transfigured zones of consciousness. Her expected bright life is shattered by her fascination for the city. She feels helpless in the city of Calcutta, but she does not choose a negative solution like her sister. Her way of fight with the sordid realities of life is totally different from that of her brother and sister. The monster city has terrible influence
upon Amla, on disenchanted Monisha and Nirode. Amla is equipped with education and career to prove her identity in any agonizing situations. She faces disillusion at the end and suffers much. For Amla: Calcutta is a monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of morality, had captured and enchanted – or disenchanted – both her sister (Monisha) and brother (184). The city of Calcutta engulfs Amla in its morbidity and melancholy. Initially, she has enjoyed round of parties and club dance. Despite all her new experiences and acquaintances, a sense of hollowness and futility persisted. Even at her working place, she feels like, “an outsider in the group of colleagues that gathered about a tray full of coffee cups” (150). She is fascinated by the pleasure of Calcutta life, and its disgust and horror assail the dreaming Amla. She tells Nirode: “… This city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it…” (152). She has witnessed an incomplete life in the city.

In the novel, Amla represents the educated, enlightened womanhood of Indian cities today. She is determined to enjoy her life in the city, her new job and her independence. With self-conscious, Amla tells her aunt Lila, “Calcutta doesn’t oppress me in the least…It excites me” (142). She feels the impact of Calcutta. Amla has to hide her paintings to guard them as a secret. Amla’s profession is the routine and normal. The insight of the glorious moments of creativity and the enthusiasm of Amla is presented in the novel. Though Monisha and Amla commonly suffer in the city, Amla is different from Monisha. A modern girl, Amla wants to live independently and seeks a job.
for her career development. Unlike Monisha, she is a rebellious young woman eager to master life and ready to overcome every obstacle. She also takes part in the social activities. She tries to prove her identity in the society. But her fascination of people brings trouble to her. She is unable to overcome the devilish influence of the society. The agony in Amla’s mind springs from her inability to flow with the general current of society. She is more balanced than Monisha in the end. She loses her identity or she braves to choose a new way or gets annihilated in the process like her sister Monisha. A rebellious woman, Amla is better than Monisha who never allow to lost herself in anywhere.

The mother is the fourth important character in the novel. The mother is a shadowy figure. She plays a major role throughout the novel. Nirode hates his mother because he suspects her of having affair with Major Chaddha. Amla considers her mother to be a very beautiful, balanced and polished person. Though she tends to every need of all the four children, she cannot ever to be a mother figure to them. None of the protagonists in the novel consider motherhood as an essential facet of their lives. The mother is used as the symbol of the city, Calcutta. The most powerful character ‘the city of Calcutta’ affects moods and attitudes of the other characters. The novel contains notable mother-figures – the real mother, the foster-mother Calcutta, and the archetypal mother, Goddess Kali. The mother is a more beautiful mystery who remains an enigma to the children.
In *Voices in the City*, the three voices—Monisha, Nirode and Amla—are struggled by a process of self-denial. They attempt to explore the secret of permanent peace and happiness in an absolutely physical world dominated by passion. Nirode and Amla are supplements to Monisha whose extraordinary powers of visualization endow Amla’s sharp reactions against the degrading social values and ethical degradation. With her loveless marriage with Jiban in a bustling joint family, Monisha was propelled into the artificial love behind the threshold. She became an object of pity and neglect, ultimately of indifference. It was a household where she was merely tolerated. Her suicide relieved everyone of this outsider who could never adjust to the well-established middle-class set up in central Calcutta with “an idol in the shape of an umbrella stand” where the folded, black umbrellas are hung “like the offerings of pilgrims and worshippers.”

*Voices in the City* is a record of unspoken reactions. Of all other women characters, Monisha is a victim of the situation that drains out the last drop of life in her. Monisha’s suicide is a confession of failure. She embodies the negation of the concept that women place themselves in a bondage to men. Monisha’s reaction to her dingy, claustrophobic existence is violent, but it upholds that death is more welcome than a mean and subhuman existence. Meanwhile, Amla questions and reassesses her attitudes after her sister’s death.
The peculiar traits of the women characters in the novels of Anita Desai provide the basic raw material. The novels are probe into the dark interiors of the human psyche. The peculiar, introspective, hypersensitive, occasionally eccentric women live in a world of fantasy. Monisha feels totally neglected, isolated and lonely even in a joint family in crowded Calcutta. No one seems to understand her feelings or her needs. Her husband Jiban hardly pays any attention and she longs for privacy. She is absolutely unhappy in Jiban’s house. The barred windows of their house separate her from the rest of Calcutta.

Monisha feels fed up with the claustrophobia of Calcutta and wants privacy which is denied to her. This creates a conflict in her being. Attaining a negotiated meaning of existence is far from her reach. Her desire to achieve privacy is obvious when she says, “Alone I could work better… I wish they would leave me alone…” (115). In the city of Calcutta, which stands as metaphor of millions of people, she is alone. She wants some place where there is some rest, a relief from oppositional state of psychic affairs. She desires to get rid of this city and yearns for seclusion. She feels nostalgic about her mother’s place, Kalimpong, and the district town where Jiban worked earlier. She feels like someone trapped in the house of her in-laws because she finds herself exposed all the time “to their scrutiny” (113). She does not have a room of her own to read in this suffocating overpopulated city and she does not find a peaceful place where she can take some shelter. The continuous mental tortures and agonies make Monisha feel herself merely ‘an outsider’ in the secluded society.

In Monisha’s case, interpersonal conflicts and disruptions, associated with marital conflict, result in severe stress and ultimate self-immolation. Before committing suicide, Monisha is under a strong maniac grip. Her self-destructive tendencies externalize in the form of action. It is only self-hate which she wants to destroy, not herself. She confesses before her death: “God, (she) pain! Here it was, on her eyes, her face, here it came – there, all over – with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she
wanted – she screamed No! No! No!” (242). J.A.C. Brown argues that the act of suicide, like a neurotic symptom, satisfies both the desire to punish oneself for hating one, who should be loved, and the desire to punish the beloved for real or imagined neglect. The meaning of the act is, therefore, “a specific approach: If you had treated me better I should not have killed myself” (Solanki 123). Her expected alienation ends in her death.

In Jiban’s house, Monisha’s congenital and hypersensitivity are combined with an atmosphere of distrust, ignorance and lack of privacy. Monisha’s situation represents not only her individual situation of so many daughter-in-laws who become jail birds in the houses of their husbands. Her situation is a typical representation of the social situation of numerous young birds in India who end up as cases of bride-burning or suicide. However, Monisha’s death is symbolically predicted by the novelist. Ultimately, her death gives Nirode the knowledge of reality.