

CHAPTER II

FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN *VOICES IN THE CITY*

Women are the main protagonists in most of Anita Desai's novels. Novels like *Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where shall we Go this Summer?* *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day* are the good examples. Desai painted her female protagonists in the various colours and portrayed in many roles from housewives to enlightened professionals. In their restricted atmosphere they treated as helpless birds in a cage. For instance, female protagonist Maya in *Cry the Peacock* is half neurotic due to over attention of her father in her childhood.

In the novel *Voices in the City* Monisha is a typical female protagonist. In this novel novelist raises the three voices of female protagonist Monisha, her sister Amla and her brother Nirode main protagonist of the novel. Through these three characters Anita Desai presents protagonist's process of self denial, trial to explore the secret of permanent peace and delight in an absolutely world dominated by passion. From Maya in *Cry the Peacock* to Nanda Kaul and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai's female protagonists are unable to walk the often trodden way. They often prefer the traditional way to run their lives. Her female protagonists are peculiar, introspective, hypersensitive and eccentric who live in the world an outer world. Maya in *Cry the Peacock* lives in fantasy, Sita in *Where shall We Go this Summer?* seeks an Eldorado, Monisha in *Voices in the City* commits suicide and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* flee to Carignano, a lonely villa in Kasauli. This peculiar trait of the female characters in the novels of Anita Desai gives her basic raw material. Desai depicts the tragedy of female characters neglected from both self and society. Desai's female protagonists notice that they are unable to fulfill social expectations. Her novels probe into the dark interiors of the human psychology.

The novel *Voices in the City* is the fight of female protagonist Monisha, her sister Amla and Nirode their brother to adjust to life in and experiences of Calcutta. The city Calcutta is a symbol of complexes of life there. Female protagonist Monisha married with Jiban, his family is traditional Bengali family. Monisha is dreamy and she driven to suicide due to claustrophobic atmosphere in her family. Female protagonist Monisha realizes totally neglected, isolated and lonely even in a bustling joint family in crowded Calcutta. We see that in her family no one understands her sentiments or her needs, not even her husband Jiban. On the one hand Monisha longs for privacy and on the other hand, she is lonely in the midst of her husband's family.

In the novel *Cry the Peacock* novelist Anita Desai depicts her awareness and understanding of the social and cultural pattern and values of India. And the novel *Voices in the City* reveals Desai's personality an uncrowned queen of the inner emotional world of woman K. R. Srinivas Iyengar very aptly observes that.

"In Anita Desai's two novels (*Cry the Peacock and Voices in the City*)

the inner climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles

like thunder suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more

compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography

or the visible action. Her fate, in other words, is the exploration

of sensibility-the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility

that is all at ease among the barbarians and the Philistines,

the anarchists and the amoralists." (Iyengar 464)

In the novel *Voices in the City* Anita Desai captures the polyphonic music of the metropolis. Calcutta, the city of noises. The novel divided into four parts. Part one is titled as Nirode. He is the main protagonist of the novel. Part two is titled as Monisha. She is the

female protagonist of the novel. Part three for Amla, she is younger sister of Nirode and Monisha. And the last part of the novel is Mother. Thus, through the novel *Voices in the City* novelist Anita Desai tells the story of a brother, two sisters and their mother. But throughout the novel female protagonist Monisha and main protagonist Nirode are the dominant characters.

Usually Anita Desai describes the sad and frustrating aspects of married life through her novels as we see in the novel *Cry the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*. In the novel *Voices in the City* Desai describes the same aspect in the second part of the novel. When arranging the marriages individual's emotional and subjective choice as well as his or her social, emotional and political interest should be considered. But it does not happen in the case of Monisha and Jiban. So their married life becomes futile and disturbed. The tragedy of husband-wife alienation as already delineated in *Cry the Peacock* here in the novel *Voices in the City* the story is enacted through the female protagonist Monisha and Jiban tale. Female protagonist Monisha is main protagonist Nirode's sister. She is married to a well off but indifferent Jiban. He is tormented by Monisha's loneliness. Monisha is a tragic figure in the novel. She is incapable to bear a child. She cannot communicate with her husband as he is an indifferent person, her suspicion of her in-laws who condemn her as a thief and oblige her to choose between death and mean existence. It is Monisha's diary that serves as her only reliable means of communication in an atmosphere of distrust, envy, ignorance and lack of privacy. While reading her diary we come to know that Nirode is only other medium for communicating her feelings and ideas. Neither Monisha's husband Jiban nor her in-laws try to understand her. Monisha fails to adjust herself in her husband's joint family. She is always thirsty for love. That is why she remembers her mother's love and seeks her brother's sympathetic company.

Today, the relationship between husband and wife is very delicate. It should be based on the better understanding between two, but in this novel female protagonist Monisha tragically fails to win the affection of her mother-in-law and companionship of her husband. She is very sensitive to the oppressive domestic environment having some relief the mechanical recitation of the Sanskrit lessons repels her. Monisha's husband Jiban is the prisoner of a conventional culture. In our old culture woman's most important role is child-bearing, cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children. These roles are done under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Monisha often haunted by monotony of sound. She even in her dreams thinks about Nirode that he must be sitting somewhere in a corner of the family. Her past memories are scattered everywhere. Monisha faces herself against her own disposition. Her face becomes a mask of sadness due to maladjustment between her and Jiban, her husband. In her new family no one is there to console her disturbed mind. Her married life is the life of discontentment, life of mal-adjustment. Her purpose of life is only to breath but to breath is no life, it is worse than death.

Monisha is such a character who is burning in the purgatorial fire. Her conscience is lying withered. She died away for whom in communication has reached its dizzy heights. Female protagonist Monisha is a hopeless, unloved and uncared. She is misunderstood woman of sordid joint family system of Bengali community in Calcutta. Novelist Anita Desai spent some years in the early 1960, in Calcutta and observed the sights and sounds of the city in all their hues and during all the seasons of the year. As a result, Calcutta does not work only as a back drop to the narrative but it plays a vital role in the lives of the characters in the novel. Calcutta is rich and wealthy city. It is the city of Goddess Kali. Though the people live in such a holy and rich city, their hearts and minds are not as holy and rich as the city. Calcutta is a representative example of all the cities in India. Through the portrayal of Calcutta Anita Desai represents the social situation of all Indian cities. Whether the people

live in villages or cities, they are not ready to abolish their tradition. Even in modern India they stick to old tradition. Like millions of women, female protagonist Monisha in the novel *Voices in the City* is the victim of old tradition. Through the character of Monisha, Desai also draws our attention to the evils of traditional joint family. In her own family Monisha seems a refuge. She is regarded low in the eyes of her family members. She articulates her pain:

“These pettiest of people, they regard me as meaner than they.

They think me a thief. To be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth. I find that I am alone here. I find on this level that solitude that becomes me most naturally I am willing to accept this status then, and to live here, a little beyond and below everyone else, in exile.” (136)

Female protagonist Monisha is a mistrusted woman. She has no recognition, no honour, no sweet blessings and even caressing love. How pathetic life she runs! Female protagonist Monisha has lost her own identity. In the novel *Cry, the Peacock* female protagonist Maya and in novel *Fire on the Mountain* female protagonist Nanda Kaul is the victim of male monopoly. But here in the novel *Voices in the City* female protagonist Monisha is a victim of both male and female dominancy in her house. Being a woman her sister in law and her mother-in-law do not understand her. For Jiban, Monisha is only a thing. Instead of giving her tender care her family members accuse her for theft. By their false charges Monisha's inner heart is badly bruised and torn asunder. She narrates it.

“Just as I was about to open the door I have been ordered to keep always shut. Jiban's mother called out, ‘Money has been stolen, you know Jiban's money’. I turned to look at Jiban standing

disconsolately down in the courtyard below, and he did not look at me. From the other end of the balcony, his mother shouted the details across to me. "He left it in the cupboard when he went to the office: my son is always careful of his things. Only you were in the room at that time. When you left, you shut the door and none of the servants could have gone in....I will not have a thief in my house, I say, I will not have a thief in my house. Who is to tell who this thief is? After all, you were the only person who was in the room all day" (137)

While reading the novel, the character of Monisha reminds us of other tragic female personages of Anita Desai. Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Sita in *Where shall We Go this Summer?* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*. These are such female protagonists who are burning epitomes of husband and wife alienation. In Anita Desai's novels we usually see understanding is meager and love is scant in between wives and husbands. Alienation among them reaches so high a pitch that they refuse to walk hand in hand with one another. Like Maya and Gautama and Nanda Kaul and Mr. Kaul, Desai's female protagonists either turn to suicide or kill their conscience. Maya in *Cry the Peacock* kills her husband and suicide herself. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* kills her own conscience and prefers to live solitary. Here in the novel *Voices in the City* female protagonist Monisha meets a fate of abject alienation and solitariness. She lives devoid of love and bereft of understanding. She reveals her plight.

"They make me a little ashamed of myself-of my defiance towards Kalyani and Jiban's mother and 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 *Bhagvat Gita* and the *Ramayan*, in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered 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.”(120)

Throughout the novel Anita Desai points out that female protagonist Monisha’s life has no attachments, no enthusiasm, no inspiration, no charm and no desire to live in this meaningless world. So away from Calcutta, a city of noises and voices, she runs in search of peace and calm. There are many questions creep up in her mind such as – on what ground did those emotions rain their fire? On what ground the worship of the goddess Kali? Now Monisha decides to sacrifice her life on the altar of Kali. She thinks that only goddess Kali can give her peace of mind. Female protagonist Monisha tries to forget each and every incident of her past life. Now she begins to think a new way.

“Is there really anyone who lies awake all night

Waiting for love, for a love?” (239)

In all these questions female protagonist Monisha finds herself ignorant and guilty because in every walk of her life love is rejected. So she always thinks about her dear brother Nirode. In her husband’s house Monisha lives loveless life. Her husband is dry and heartless. He is totally unconscious about Monisha’s craving for love. Monisha is lonely in her crowded house. She fights her own battle alone but ultimately Desai’s female protagonists surrender themselves. They don’t have daring to fight against the situation. They lose their fighting spirit at the time it is needed. Instead of fighting bravely they choose the easiest way to end

their lives. Thus female protagonists Maya and Monisha commit suicide and Nanda Kaul runs away from her responsibilities.

While reading the heart-breaking story of Monisha number of questions raises in our minds. We see what frustration can do? By her tragedy our emotions purifies. As a human being we believe that one's passion of life leads one to frustration and chaos in the mind and heart. But a sense of sacrifice leads one to the mental peace and satisfaction. But in real hectic city-life it is not possible to find peace of mind. The people who have no time to stop and stare they never appear for love. For them material achievement and prosperity is more important. They alone can afford their mental peace and hunger of heart. But they forget one thing that only money alone cannot give what heart and mind craves.

Here we see female protagonist Monisha stands contrast to Maya, female protagonist of *Cry the Peacock*. Both Maya and Monisha is highly sensitive and lonely female against the middle-class philistinism. Monisha feels 'whole' only when she is alone. Female protagonist's Maya's life is an abundance of feelings but Monisha has stilled her emotions. In the novel *Cry the Peacock* Maya pushes Gautama off roof in order to protect her world of sensuousness, while Monisha in *Voices in the City* sets fire to herself in order to reach the core of intense feeling.

Thus, Anita Desai presents a touching account of the life of Monisha. There are thousands of Monishas who are going through such a tragic situation in our society. Female protagonist Monisha's life is miserable and empty. She has nothing to lose when she marries to Jiban her relationship with him is marked "only by loneliness." It is because of Jiban's carelessness and misunderstanding. Very beginning of her diary we see Monisha is very sensitive and emotional. Thus, married life of Desai's protagonists is not fruitful. Here in this novel we also see Monisha and Jiban's marriage is unsuccessful. Though both Monisha and

Jiban lives together, they are alien each other. Monisha is hungry for communication but it is not possible to her. The communication gap has increased day by day and she runs pathetic and unhappy life. Female protagonist Monisha tries to search for a real meaning of her life but at the end, she feels frustration. She thinks that her life is meaningless and there is nothing to hold on.

“To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettinesses of our of our mean existence...is that right? To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes in at all? What force of will does it require to shed, as I believe my mother has, at least to an extent, shed, the unnecessary, the diverting, and live the clean, husked irreducible life? If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life 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 different choice.” (122-23)

Thus, success is a journey and not a destination, also life is a journey and not a destination. True meaning of life is good understanding and healthy relationship. While talking about unsuccessful married life one can change one's unsuccessful married life into

successful life, if they both have proper understanding about each other's feelings and emotions, because marriage is not only union of two bodies but union of two families, and their feelings. In our society married couple has a special status. Marriage is not only biological need of two persons but it also expresses emotional need. In Indian society role of marriage is to establish the fundamentals of society in order to attain a state of peace and happiness. Well known writer Swami Rama in his famous book, *Marriage, parenthood and Enlightenment* observes that

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

While reading the novel *Voices in the City* thoroughly we come to know that female protagonist Monisha always suffers from mental agony. In the beginning she is unable to find the reason of her mental agony. But towards the end she can discover the reason. The reason of her agony is absence of love in her life. She also discovers her over sensitivity, her mal-adjustment with husband Jiban, his faithlessness, loneliness, and her inner crying is the reasons of her mental agony. She wants to be free from all responsibilities, duties and relationships but unfortunately like Nirode, her brother, Monisha finds it difficult to free herself of her duties. Later being a religious girl, she believes in '*The Gita*' so she prefers total detachment and try to control herself. She also reminds Nirode. They are both afraid of love.....

“I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for from attachment arises longing....if only love

existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirring of mind on conscience, then but there is no such love. It is not there in my relationship with Jiban, which is filled only by loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed, and once plunged me into the most calamitous pleasures and pain, fears and regrets, and never again will it possess me.” (135-36)

Though female protagonist Monisha is hungry for true love, she doesn't get what she wants. Jiban, her husband doesn't understand the real meaning of their relationship. Thus Monisha withdraws herself from materialistic concerns of the family. Thus, Monisha thinks that such a nihilistic and absurd world, it is better to die, it is better not to live at all. Monisha lived an unblemished and unscarred life in the world, but when her conscience and soul to crush and swamp, she did not let the world touch it, instead, flung it to the fire.

Voices in the City is one of the fine early novels of Anita Desai. The title of the novel directly reflects on the central theme i.e. voices of the hearts of thousands of people struggling for life in the formidable city of Calcutta. The city Calcutta associates with historical nature of various generations which are living and dying in it, without any change coming in the city. The city is not only an object but also a symbol having an obsessive emotional and spiritual significance. The central voices in the novel is Nirode, protagonist of the novel and other important voices in city are Monisha, female protagonist, Dharma, a painter, Amla and the friends of Nirode. The thematic core of the novel is Nirode's pursuit of higher life and value than the common man will aspire for common men work for success and happiness but Nirode relinquishes both, they would lead life to a blind alley.

In the novel *Voices in the City* Anita Desai raises the issue of man-woman love. In this novel protagonist Nirode has absolutely no love affair. His mother's love for his father is passingly mentioned by the novelist. Indirectly novelist Desai presents the abnormal enamour between Nirode's mother and her love for major Chadha. Dharma's daughters involvement with her first cousin is the example of only boy and girl love although it leaves and undesirable impact on the couple and a shattering effect on the father and the mother. Anita Desai does not light on female protagonist Monisha's love for husband. It can be safely asserted that finer love feelings did not develop in her. Amla's love for Dharma is Platonic and higher and idealistic.

The novel *Voices in the City*, highlights the place of women in society and especially the place of Bengali women. Anita Desai sees them as a miserable lot. The idea of independence of women and their freedom from men by the female character aunt Lila who thinks that women can themselves only when they discover their own spirits. She expresses her sentiments as follows:

“Women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channeled that way, while they go parched themselves” (221)

Aunt Lila also aware of the different between the two generations of Indians-

“The last that fought for freedom and gave freedom to the new generations that is foolish and frivolous and reluctant to handle bigger things and share bigger responsibilities. (222)

All the major characters in the novel Nirode, Monisha, Amla are the second generation. Female protagonist Monisha circumscribed both mentally and physically by gender, familial and economic ideologies. Female protagonist Monisha serves as the reigning

image of countless Indian women. The opening entry of her diary a record of her first meeting with Jiban's extended family elucidates the actual and symbolic subjugation, imprisonment and 'silencing' of the Indian daughter-in-law in an orthodox Hindu household:

"The Bow Bazaar house.....the reception arranged by the heads of this many-headed family. In the small of my back, I feel a surreptitious push from Jiban and am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother who.....while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder than I think is necessary, and still harder, till I realize what it means, and go down on my knees to touch her feet.... Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another....More-I lose count-but many more. Feet before faces here.....Into the courtyard we go, in a procession, and the tiered balconies.....rise all around us, shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well water. The balconies have metal railings, intricately criss-crossed: one could not thrust one's head through them.....Upstairs to our room.....a black, four-postered bed in the centre, and a gigantic black wardrobe against the wall. But it is not they that intimidate me-after only one night, I already feel familiar with them, their smells, their silence-but the bars at the windows. Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows- other bars. (109)

The symbols of enclosure and incarceration the dark balconies, confining metal railings; and impregnable iron bars underline the barriers not only to Monisha but also to the Indian woman's articulation of an independent self.

Early on female protagonist Monisha tries to make a success of her marriage to be Jiban's wife within the strictures of a traditional Bengali family. But her initial efforts are unsuccessful because of her married family's egoistic language so called status. So Monisha feels suppressed. There is lack of communication among the family members. A total breakdown of communication ensues as her mother-in-law accuses her of stealing money from Jiban. Neglecting to defend Monisha, Jiban contributes to her growing withdrawal from reality. Deprived of any confidantes and increasingly alienated from her philistine, impassive husband, Monisha turns to keeping diary, communing only with her in Kafkaesque ruminations of darkness, enclosure and madness. Female protagonist Monisha suffering from the larger absence of love, in her childlessness and abandonment by her mother, she chooses suicide in preference to a lingering death of the soul, ending her life in unimpeachable silence.

On one level, therefore, Monisha regarded as a victim of Hindu familial ideology and Patriarchal oppression. Her unfulfilled sexuality, her metaphorically and literally barren marriage, her lack of privacy, her waiting upon men, her material dependence despite her education and her violent death all marks of her sexual colonization.

Though Nirode is the central character of the novel, female protagonists Monisha and Amla and their mother play prominent role throughout the novel. While reading the novel we come to know that though novelist Anita Desai gives only one fourth spaces to female protagonist Monisha in her novels. She is a dominant character. She is one of the tragic female protagonists of Anita Desai. In the earlier part of this novel we talked about female protagonist Monisha and her pathetic odyssey. Now we talk about Amla, another major female character in the novel. In the novel *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai profoundly brings the three voices who are ill at ease, morbid, restless and above all they are rebellious

against the general environment of dreariness, brutality and absurdity of existence. While talking about Anita Desai's protagonists B. Ramchandra Rao rightly observes:

"They see more than the others; they see through appearances at the deariness of everyday life. They feel more than the others. The ugly physical reality, for them, is both a fact and a symbol-symbolic of an attitude and of a value that they cannot accept" (Rao 31)

Part three of the novel *Voices in the City* deals with Amla, younger sister of female protagonist Monisha and Nirode. Amla is unmarried. Amla is a sprightly young woman who keenly sees forward to her life and career in the big city. Amla is initially excited by her new life in Calcutta. Aunt Lila repeatedly drills into her ears that the independence and freedom the generation of today gets enjoyment and youth like her make the most of it. Amla comes to Calcutta, after completing her training in Bombay. She works as a commercial artist with a local firm. Amla's part in the novel develops the central theme. She has her own attitude about her life and love. Her attitude towards life is marked with youthful excitement and wonder. Amla is totally different from female protagonist Monisha and Nirode. Unlike Monisha and Nirode she avoids absurdity she leads a happy life. She always attends parties, dinners and dances. She wants to indulge in conversations with the painter Dharma and lives cheerfully. Anita Desai in her apt words depicts Amla's personality:

"Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupations, new accupations, and the mild sweet winter air, this sense of hollowness and futility persisted. Daily it pursued her to the office, hid quietly under the black mouthpiece of her telephone, shook ever so slightly- the lip of her pencil as she traced the severe lines of a well-draped sari, then engulfed

her in the evenings when she attended parties at which she still knew no one well, and at night when she tried to compose her unsteady thoughts for sleep.” (157-58)

After few days, Amla falls in love with Dharma, a married man much older than her. She has erotic love with Dharma. She requires communication and reciprocation. When Amla knows that Dharma disowned his daughter her dream of love is broken. Her heart is totally broken because love is an itching of the heart that cannot be scratched; and the secret of happiness depends on love. Her emotional relationship with Dharma shows her shattering experience.

We know that Amla is a career girl. She comes Bombay completed her training there to work as commercial artist at Calcutta. Amla wishes to lead a cheerful, happy life, full of vitality, but gradually gloomy and disintegrating dross beings to settle upon her luminous heart. She feels that,

“even the security and the good humour she had at first enjoyed in her office, as an extension of college days that had kindly followed her into this harsh city, now, deserted her and left her an outsider in the group of colleagues that gathered about a trayful of coffee cups” (173)

In this novel female protagonist Monisha represents miserable married woman of India whereas Amla represents the unmarried woman of India. Through these two characters Anita Desai points out that woman in India whether married or unmarried they face the disillusionment in their life. Female protagonist Monisha is tortured by her husband Jiban whereas Amla is tortured by her lover Dharma. Both run miserable and pathetic life. Though Amla is rebellious very soon the sense of estrangement, lovelessness, not-belongingness,

falsehood, deception of soul-killing Calcutta begins to trickle down in her heart. Though Amla is flamboyant lady soon she turns out quite melancholy and sad.

“Then the rot set in-overnight, without warning. Amla was melancholyIt seemed to her that the coffee always came to her cold. It seemed to her that her colleagues smoked too many of their ostentatiously cheap cigarettes; that Jaya Abhay made too much of their ‘Star-crossed lovers’ attitude and that, in reality, they relished it; that Dada was merely a garrulous day dreamer who had carried his day dreams too far, too close to the region of nightmares; that Adil was spineless and despicable. It seemed to her that Mrs. Basu was queen of unscrupulous commerce, that her clients were sharks and liars that the round babies she drew got no benefit whatsoever from the gripe water she was advertising, that she was involved in a shady and unconscientious organization, business and art. She thought her drawing were awful. She thought the summer was never going to end.”(174-175)

Amla confronts general atmosphere of sordidness, lassitude, boredom, anonymity and violence in the streets of Calcutta. Desai aptly describes the city Calcutta where tempers were frayed, feelings injured, quarrels flared up and there was a general atmosphere of disintegration.

Gradually Amla realizes the true picture of the city Calcutta. She also understands what true life is. She comes to know that real life is far different than what she imagines. Life is not a straight road that one has to pass but there are many turns and crosses, stones and

potholes have to cross. As a young girl, Amla has a spirit to fight the odds but one level she feels frustrate. In the big city like Calcutta she realizes that the environment in which she enmeshes affords there is no encouragement for sincere, conscientious, and full-blooded enterprises. Vanity persists all around with breath taking sense of destruction and dissolution. Like female protagonist Monisha, Amla also feels dissatisfied. After spending some days in Calcutta her joyful friendliness is dry. Her communication is close. He also understands and rejuvenates moral climate. Jit underlines the sense of despair in Amla.

“I don’t understand it- this terrible destructiveness in all of you. You seem to worship it, shelter it inside yourself as though it were essential to you. Nothing will persuade you to forgo it—not you, not your brother, nor that strange sister of yours.....’You destroy, you destroy yourselves, you destroy that part of others that gets so fatally involved in you. There is this—this dreadful attractiveness in your dark ways of thinking and feeling through life towards death.” (175)

Amla is going through the same tragic experiences faced by female protagonist Monisha and Nirode, her brother. She faces the experiences of futility and hollowness in a cool, petrifying world. Amla loses her interest in life. She chases meaningless absurdity where she goes:

“Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupations, new acquaintances and the mild sweet winter air, this sense of hollowness and futility persisted. Daily it pursued her to the office, hid quietly under the black mouthpiece of her telephone, shook-

ever so slightly-the tip of her pencil as she traced the severe lines
of a well draped sari. then engulfed her in the evenings when she
attended parties at which she still knew no one well, and at night
when she tried to compose her unsteady thoughts for sleep.” (157-158)

The novel *Voices in the City* is a novel of three major voices. They are female protagonist Monisha, Amla and Nirode. They face single-handed the ferocious assaults of the worldly situation. In this world they find themselves beaten and battered. They feel strangers in this world. They born and die like strangers. They don't find themselves happy at home. They always feel sad and despairing. The world of Calcutta for all these major characters is as menacing, disintegrating, dissolving and absurd as the world outside. Nirode feels nauseatic and threatened in the city:

“On all sides the city pressed down, alight, aglow, and stirring
with its own marsh-bread monster life that, like an ogre, kept
one eye open through sleep and waking.....the city was as much
atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a
frenzied passage towards early death.” (41-42)

Also female protagonist Monisha, does not suit the city Calcutta. Both Monisha and Amla are suffering their way. Monisha finds the city devoid of conscience and bereft of spiritual atmosphere:

“Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head
between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a
bottom black with the dirt that it sits on”. (117)

Amla also feels that her brother and sister devour a monster. Thus, the novel portrays the unsuccessful quest of higher life of these three characters. Anita Desai beautifully describes sense of chaos, amorality and meanness of Calcutta.

“They wandered past the empty food stalls, the prostitutes who still stood at the corners, now and then crying out in harsh, arresting tones of night jars, into the wide streets, against empty barrows and on doorsteps. From some concealed nightclubs came the frenzied sounds of drums and Castanets, and the wistful passion of a violin. At a traffic signal an urchin stood trying to peddle his last bunch of roses, their petals already veined with the dark purple of asphyxia. Under a mauve gas light several watchmen had gathered to play cards and, in the intense silence, their dice rattled like small skulls. Before they had come to the end of that road, an argument broke out among the gamblers and quickly developed into a small riot.....” (95)

Through the character of Amla Desai investigates an alternate, perhaps less courageous but also less devastating mode of resistance to extroverted Amla appears to be a counter point to her detached, isolated sister Monisha. Amla is sexually circumscribed and has no passionate relationship with a man. While walking through Calcutta, one day she comes upon a statue of Shiva and Parvati locked together in an embrace, the sisters quickly look away, the goddess's ‘purpose’ and ‘delight’ being especially to them. Brought up in a Calcutta that compels women to repress their sexuality female protagonist Monisha and her sister Amla, in this novel are further betrayed by passionless or manipulative men. Whereas

Jiban quells Monisha's early ardour with his impassiveness. Dharma's treatment of Amla is even more reprehensible.

Thus, Anita Desai shows through these two characters, female protagonists Monisha and Amla are starved for sexual pleasure. In multicultural country like India women are not able to express their sexual as well as physical desires. In this developing country expressing hidden sexual desire is considered as sin. Desai voices against this suppression of millions of women through these two female characters.

Yet, Amla has little courage to live in her own ways; she displays a resilience and independence that enable her to live on her own terms. Towards the end of the novel Amla appears as an illustrator of children's stories. Thus betokening hope for the future. Here Amla reminds us the character of Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* who also fights for freedom like Amla. Like female protagonist Monisha, Amla defies the quintessential ideal of woman as a dutiful wife and mother. She gives in the opposite direction but after her own fashion. Her sister Monisha's death gives her a glimpse of 'what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin.' she resolves never 'lose herself' but rather to 'go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people.' (248)

An unyielding stance like female protagonist Monisha's though admirable in its dauntlessness, usually ends in self-destruction, Anita Desai seems to argue; so a compromise like Amla's- one that does not jeopardize the self- is perhaps the best available alternative for Indian women at present as Desai in a 1977 interview,

"If one is alive, in this world, one cannot survive without compromise

-----It is for heroes and martyrs to say "the great yes" or "the great

No "[as Monisha does] – most of us have not the courage to say

either yes or No, we say----- "All right then, if I must -----." (98-99)

Thus, female protagonist Monisha and her sister Amla are two contrasting figures. Both are unsuccessful to fulfill their personal desires. Novelist Anita Desai presents futility and meaninglessness of her female protagonists in the novel. Desai manages to introduce the way that Indian women have to choose to make their life meaningful.

In Anita Desai's novels we see male characters are less-dominant. They are inferior to female characters. Though they are flat characters in the novels, they keep their influence upon female protagonists in her novels. As we see in *Cry the Peacock* Gautama is flat character, he keeps his influence on Maya, female protagonist of the novel and also we see Mr. Kaul is flat character in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* he also keeps his influence on female protagonist Nanda Kaul. Here in the novel *Voices in the city* we also find the same impact of male characters on female characters Nirode is the main character of the novel. He is elder brother of female protagonist Monisha and Amla. He is 24 years old. Novel begins with his introduction.

As we know that the novel *Voices in the City* encompasses the harrowing experiences of Nirode, female protagonist Monisha and Amla, their sister. The novelist keeps constant eye upon their inevitable ends they meet in course of their rebellion against everything. The writer registers these three characters quest for ultimate meaning of life as we see female protagonist Monisha and Amla's quest in the earlier part of this chapter. Now we see Nirode's quests for meaningful life and how his quest's affect on female characters personality. Nirode wants to shake up and dismantle the existing value system of his world, dissatisfying and unjust as it stands. Throughout the novel we see he travels alone to realize unity and coherence in the world. In his disillusionment Nirode sounds the clarion-call:

"Everything is temporary for people like us. If we had thought it was going to be permanent, neither you, nor I would have agreed

to this kind of a relationship. You know that. You and I will always be travelers, David, and we will always travel alone.” (91).

Like female protagonist Monisha he is not stable in his family. As elder brother he does not find suitable job for himself. But only he dreams for higher life than action, as a result looking towards Nirode, female protagonist Monisha and Amla also dreams for higher life. They do not adjust themselves in the surrounding. Nirode is a flamboyant rebel, defying all limits and transcending all barriers till a new moral philosophy or religion is established on earth. Happiness and success are illusions that baffle and delude the mortals. According to Nirode happiness and success are hazy mirage to attract the prey but to leave him haunted and exhausted. That’s why he throws these human families to the winds and decries:

“What worse death than at the hands of happiness? Anyone who feels happy deserves to die. If we use all to become happy?.... ‘the world would come to a standstill, and no one would move another step. How would you like your trains to stop dead once they have arrived at some lunatic happy station? Wouldn’t that be death to you” (94)

Such a negative philosophy of Nirode seriously acquired by his sisters Monisha and Amla. Throughout the novel we see that female protagonist Monisha has not found happiness and pleasure in her life. She runs meaningless life in her husband’s house. She always remembers her brother Nirode and his philosophy. As a elder brother Nirode totally fails to assure his two sisters and give them courage to live happy life. But we know that he himself is unhappy then how can he assure for others happiness. Thus we can say that because of Nirode’s negative philosophy towards life and its impact on Monisha makes her life meaningless.

In the novel *Voices in the City* Anita Desai spends more than hundred pages to describe traits of Nirode's personality. While reading the novel thoroughly we come to know that Nirode does not like to compromise with the human condition in which he, along with his fellow human beings, is thrown. Success will sound a death knell to his missionary and inquisitive zeal. That is why he moves from one sojourn to another from a journalist he becomes a writer, starts a magazine, and abandons it just when it was proving to be a financial success. Then he begins writing a play and also it leaves finally. He declares:

"I want 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, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore than depth.
When you climb a ladder all you find at the top is space, all you can
do is leap of- fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that
meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly (40).

Thus Nirode is in quest for an eternal, permanent and abiding meaning in life. Also female protagonist Monisha and her sister Amla is in quest for permanent and abiding meaning in life but none of them find it. If one wants to be succeeded he must work continuously and honestly. One must not leave the way or change the way shortly. Nirode becomes habitual to leave the way or any profession that he chooses shortly. Having an impact of Nirode's personality upon female protagonist Monisha, she also leaves her life shortly. Amla is also unsuccessful in her career. It is an instinctual influence. If Nirode would think positively towards his life then female protagonist Monisha and Amla would be positive towards their life.

Nirode is a typical character of this novel. We see he rejects his past, the wealth of his family, everything that may tie him. He also rejects intimacy and touch and does not want

to meet with his friends. He wants peaceful atmosphere and loneliness. He prefers to be in his private world of doubts. All this shows his frustration and negation from life. He doesn't want to do his work continuously and feels that he is born with empty heart. This is the reason that he feels loneliness and closes himself in his world and doesn't like outside world. For him life is nothing but only an empty bottle. The magazine 'voice' also fails to build any contact between him and the world. Nirode wants negation, not acceptance. About his oblivion, meaninglessness and his dauntless defiance female protagonist Monisha articulates Nirode's perspectives on life:

“What does he need, this grounded, broken brother-bird? Merely his mother? Or a justification of his birth? Whom does he converse with so fiercely as if he were involved in a dialogue with death itself? Not merciful physical death, but with Oblivion, meaninglessness. Again and again he tries to explain, to plead, to convey something which no one understands or approves or accepts. Always he is beaten down, spurned, turned away, into an anonymous solitude he seems unable to accept. Accept, I plead with him, accept defeat, accept insignificance, accept solitude, a truer gift than any communication, any art, any faith or delusion in the world can offer you. If he accepts, he will survive”. (128)

Nirode like female protagonist Maya rejects both faith and the need for faith surviving only through doubt and questioning. If Maya of *Cry the Peacock* has a father fixation, Nirode has a mother-fixation. He is jealous of Major Chadda who is carrying on with his mother in Kalimpong. So he is alienated from his mother. He is caught in an unbearable love-hate relationship with her. Wanting her love and his independence at the

same time his resentment is against the passion and sensuality of life. He stems Amla's confessions of love and suggests her to go home to mother and grow up a bit by listening to her experience of love.

“Ask her about the love that made her swallow father whole,
like a cobra swallow a fast, petrified rat, then spews him out
in one flabby yellow mess. 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 Chadda into her open arms.(40)

Nirode is not able to distinguish between platonic love and physical love. Amla's conceptions of love are different. According to her, love is not passion, lust or satisfaction of body. It is a hunger that demands food for heart and is never appeased. Love goes on burning in the heart like fire, only its smoke is visible and so it is eternal. It never burns for other's right; it may be felt by lovers alone. Nirode is existentialist Hamlet. He feels shaken and sickened when he learns that her mother has become the mistress of another. His life suffers through self-torture, pride and agony.

Thus, Nirode, female protagonist Monisha, and Amla all live in sharp sensitivity. They are sharply contrasted with these victims of conformity. In the novel *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai presented them as rebels whether successful or unsuccessful. They are seen as constituting an aristocracy of suffering and non-conformity. Their problems are existential. As rebels they seek ways and means by which they can protect their individuality against the pressure of conformity.

Thus, the novel *Voices in the City* deals with a very important humanistic concern of society against Individualism. Anita Desai's concern is the shift of emphasis from a cohesive

social structure based on the principle community and collective thinking to a heightened sense of individualism which leads to an imbalance in the social structure as well as individuals psyche. By focusing on individualism in the novel through its female protagonists Monisha and Amla, and other characters like Nirode, mother. Desai shows the reader the price one has to pay for an extreme sense of individualism.