

"Going in the Opposite Direction":  
Feminine Recusancy in Anita Desai's  
"Voices in the City"

HARVEEN SACHDEVA MANN

Monisha, standing in the doorway, suddenly called out her first independent sentence of the evening. "Amla," she cried in the sudden, harsh tone of a night jar, a wild bird flushed from some unexplored depth of jungle, "Amla, always go in the opposite direction."

ANITA DESAI, *Voices in the City* (160)

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 1965, Anita Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, has been variously described as an existentialist fiction about the meaninglessness of lives devoid of commitment to a cause, a study of the predicament of the artist torn between aesthetic and material values, a narrative about the deleterious effects of urban living, and a portrait of the dark, nocturnal side of Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the disparity in their views regarding the primary subject matter of the book, critics like Darshan Singh Maini and Madhusudan Prasad are unanimous in declaring the bohemian male character, Nirode, to be its protagonist. Not only do most such critics thus pay scant attention to Desai's treatment of female characters in *Voices in the City*, but Maini goes so far as to posit that the novelist's portrayal of Nirode's two sisters, Monisha and Amla, is an artistic failure. He believes that "[seeing] no way of carrying [Nirode's] story forward except through a vicarious involvement in the lives of his sisters," Desai simply mirrors his nihilism in Monisha's tragic life and final suicide, whereas Amla's more "gay and provocative" existence "do[es] not quite fit into the pattern" established by her Hamletian brother (222).

Opposing such supposedly apolitical and "universalist" but essentially androcentric readings of *Voices in the City*, I contend

that the novel can be regarded as a significant discourse on modern Indian feminism. As she portrays female characters who, even when they fall victim to the gendered social hierarchy, destabilize and subvert the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society—in short, as she depicts women who “go in the opposite direction”—Desai fashions in *Voices in the City* a culturally and historically specific text that participates in creating a new feminist ideology in Indian literature written in English.

An avowedly “subjective” writer, Desai nonetheless displays an acute understanding of the social, cultural, and material impediments faced by her female characters in their search for self-fulfillment. And while she does not portray female exploitation and oppression across *all* classes and castes in her fiction, Desai *does* document the specificities of the victimization of educated, middle-class urban women. *Voices in the City*, in particular, can be effectively read as a political structure within a feminist context because it insistently questions and opposes the quintessential “feminine” ideal (from a masculinist perspective) rooted in Hindu mythology. Whereas Monisha and Amla dismantle the old mythologies and iconic presentations of women as subservient, self-sacrificing, chaste, and devoted to family, their mother, Otima, and beyond her the city of Calcutta, personify two of Desai’s strongest statements of female resistance to the traditional structures of patriarchy. Repeatedly likened in the narrative to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction, Otima and Calcutta respectively counter the idealized images of a tender, nurturing mother and motherland. By creating such oppositional female characters and by adopting Kali as the reigning goddess of her novel, Desai presents recusant images of Indian femininity that underscore her dissent from the still pervasive ideology of gender in modern India.

I first review the cultural background which engenders and perpetuates the marginalization of Indian women and against which Desai casts her female characters’ narratives. Next, I briefly discuss the alternative image of Indian femininity embodied in Kali. And in the third and final section of my analysis, I examine the registers of women’s resistance in *Voices in the City*, ranging from Monisha’s suicide, through Amla’s compromises,

to Otima's iconoclasm. As she reverses the Hindu idealization of women and creates subversive portraits of Indian womanhood, Desai contributes to the abrogation of orthodox male authority in both the literary and social domains.

## I

In a country in which the scriptures as well as the Hindu legal codes have historically circumscribed women, the latter have for centuries been forced into a servitude that, in historian Stanley Wolpert's words, "border[s] on slavery" (366). The *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, prescribing brahminical male domination, declares women, like the lower castes, to be baser forms of life with no right to transcendence and eternity. Sita, the heroine of *The Ramayana*, chaste, utterly devoted to her husband, the very personification of selfless sacrifice, is regarded as the feminine ideal even in contemporary times. And the influential *Manava Dharma-shastra*, the Law Code of Manu, encodes the dependent and inferior status of women as men's property, arguing that rigid male control of female sexuality is necessitated by woman's inherently lascivious and adulterous nature.

Although Manu's code has long been replaced by more modern legal structures, the orthodox sentiments underlying it persist to this day, ensuring the continued sexual colonization of women. Even as twentieth-century India battled British colonialism, its nationalist revolution was not accompanied by a revolution in the sphere of male-female relations. In fact, as Ketu Katrak points out, the independence struggle proved in many ways to be detrimental to the women's struggle. The glorification of indigenous traditions—intended to bind the populace together and to counteract colonial, racist denigration of the culture—impacted negatively upon Indian women after independence (398) because, with few exceptions, Hindu tradition subordinates and denigrates women.

Psychologists Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi further demonstrate in their studies of Indian women that the postindependence Indian class structure is no more egalitarian than the caste structure (which persists regardless of protestations to the contrary) with regard to gender and social hierarchy in the

ideological and material realms (236). Whereas the caste system dictates women's subordination in terms of domestic seclusion, severe restrictions on education and employment, economic dependence, and rigid controls over female sexuality, the class system contains its own set of gender inequalities. Under the latter, women have only limited control over the type, quality, and purpose of their education and the kind and level of employment they can find; they are sexually harassed in the workplace; and they have to perform all the domestic along with paid work (234).

Thus, although some modifications were made to accommodate women's resistance and they were granted constitutional equality following Indian independence in 1947, women continue to labor under religiously and socially sanctioned patriarchal oppression in modern India. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, quoting tellingly from the ancient Hindu texts, establishes that in spite of modernization, urbanization, and education, a "formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood . . . still [in the mid 1970s] governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community" (*Inner World* 68).

As if in agreement with the social scientists and cultural critics quoted above, Desai underlines the continuing "imprisonment" of the female sex in India in contemporary times, locating one of its primary causes in the Hindu deification of women. In a 1990 article entitled "A Secret Connivance," she comments upon the "one hundred thousand . . . cults built around the Mother Goddess," the "fecund figure from whom all good things flow—milk, food, warmth, comfort. Her ample bosom and loins, her exciting curves and buxom proportions make her not merely the ideal mother but the ideal woman—consort, lover, plaything" (972). Citing as well the conterminous constraints of widespread illiteracy and material dependence that make Indian women themselves "connive at" this mythological idealization, Desai concludes that they "ha[ve] no alternative" but to be complicit in their servitude. "The myth keeps [the Indian woman] . . . bound hand and foot," she points out; "[t]o rebel against it . . . would

mean that she is questioning the myth, attacking the legend, and that cannot be permitted: it is the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built" (972).

Desai nonetheless challenges such an idealization of Indian women by portraying female characters who "question the myth" in various ways. Not only do Monisha and Amla in *Voices in the City* serve as counterpoints to the middle-class ideology of the Indian Hindu woman, but Otima and Calcutta as incarnations of Kali also present alternative, empowering images of Indian femininity.

## II

Although Hindu mythology is replete with narratives extolling the virtues of ideal females like Sita, a considerable body of cultural imagery portrays women as powerful rather than weak, active rather than passive, autonomous rather than dependent, violent rather than quiescent. It is as such an oppositional figure that Kali stands out in Indian feminist historiography. The product of a pre-Aryan age given over to predominantly female-centered beliefs, Kali presents the most potent counterpoint to the latter-day stereotypical image of Indian women as self-abnegating, passive, and dependent and thus offers Desai a highly effective tool for subversion and counter-discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Cast as the antagonist of all evil, Kali is more significant as the embodiment of the female power principle. As she annihilates the mighty demon Raktabija by drinking his blood, she epitomizes the destruction of the male principle and phallic power. In addition, the figure of Kali is an enabling one for women because of the goddess's legendary sexual dominance over Shiva. And as one of the numerous manifestations of Shakti, feminine divine power, she contributes to the constitution of a larger matriarchal culture that reverences woman in all her roles.

Most often portrayed iconographically as a black woman with a garland of human heads and a girdle of human hands, her mouth dripping blood, Kali is not, however, the murderous cannibal of common perception. Rather, as Ajit Mookerjee demonstrates, the symbolism generally surrounding her is "equivocal," and she dons different guises for different purposes (62).

The human heads, for instance, symbolize knowledge; and the human hands—instruments of work—remind one that *moksha*, ultimate freedom from the cycle of life-death-rebirth, is to be gained through laudatory actions. As the virgin-creator (virginity here affirming woman's autonomous freedom), she is depicted as white; as the sustaining mother as red; and as the absorber of all as black (Mookerjee 62). Thus, to her believers, Kali conveys the totality of existence—*purna*—that enables them to accept life's contradictories—good and evil, creation and destruction, birth and death—with equanimity.

### III

In a 1983 symposium hosted by the Commonwealth Institute of London, Desai acknowledged that the sensibility of modern Indian women writers remains clearly distinguishable from that of their male counterparts. The former, Desai believes, "tend to place their emphasis differently from men" because their experiences and "values" are likely to differ. Living relatively confined lives, women writers are "more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation," whereas men are preponderantly "concerned with action, experience and achievement" ("Indian Women" 57). Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Virginia Woolf, however, Desai holds that "the great mind is androgynous . . . undivided and therefore fully, wholly creative and powerful" ("Indian Women" 58). To her, the literary ideal is one fashioned after the Hindu mythological figure of the Ardhanarishwara—the Hermaphrodite—which depicts the union of Shiva and Shakti, of male substance and female energy.<sup>3</sup> But while contemporary western literature is, in Desai's view, becoming increasingly androgynous—while such novelists as Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, and Iris Murdoch display many of the same themes and styles as those of modern-day male writers—Indian women writers are, in Desai's words, "still exploring their feminine identity and trying to establish it as something worth possessing" ("Indian Women" 58). Although she rejects collective, militant feminism,<sup>4</sup> Desai's own "explorations" of Indian femininity and gender politics readily reveal themselves in her fiction as she attempts to make her readers "understand and feel what it is to

be a woman, know how a woman thinks and feels and behaves" ("Indian Women" 58).

*Voices in the City* is particularly concerned with the articulation of women's stories. Set primarily in postindependence Calcutta, the novel narrates the initiation into adulthood of the three siblings, Monisha, Amla, and Nirode Ray. Behind them looms the figure of their mother, Otima, and beyond the human mother lies the vengeful city-mother, Calcutta. Whereas Nirode grapples with existential questions regarding the meaninglessness of life, the nature of rebellion, and the value of suffering in the face of deadening bourgeois respectability in an ostensibly gender-neutral world, the female characters in *Voices in the City* are actively, sometimes tragically engaged in a search for self-fulfillment as women (and human beings) in an India still governed by a dominant patriarchal ideology.

Desai's strategy of dividing *Voices in the City* into four parts, each named for and given over to the narrative of one member of the Ray family, reflects her concern with the issue of communication as it is predicated upon gender relations. Written from Nirode's perspective, Part I almost exclusively recounts his life: his experiences as a petty journalist, his attempts to start a little magazine, his dealings with the Calcutta pseudoliterati, and his existential musings upon life and death. The near-total silencing of women in Part I, except when Otima imposes herself upon Nirode through two letters, is significant. Only once in his narrative does Nirode think of his sisters—to wonder what they thought of their father's funding of the education abroad of a second brother, Arun, and not their own. And then, in idle curiosity, he conjectures about what they might be "thinking tonight," but he dismisses them a sentence later: "Nirode did not know" (8). And he does not care to find out.

Pursuing his own dreams singlemindedly and confining women to the periphery of the "masculine" world of work, Nirode reflects the arrogant dominance of Indian men in the 1950s, the chronological setting of *Voices in the City*. Conflating India's servitude under colonial rule with the Indian woman's modern-day circumscription, he stereotypes the latter as "one of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali [or, by extension, Indian]

women," with "nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry, and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront," a woman who, following the country's independence, went "back to [her] old beauty sleep of neglect and delay and corruption" because of her "slave" mentality (81). Although in his nihilism Nirode does not hold much hope for the men he knows either—Sonny Ghosh, Jit Nair, and David Gunney—at least he tells their stories more fully and sympathetically than he does the women's. His accounts of the latter's lives are, by contrast, dismissive, parenthetical, or pejorative, his misogyny the result of the cultural marginalization of women as well as his own incestuous—and therefore forbidden and guilt-ridden—attraction to his mother (an emotion that perhaps also paradoxically accounts for his implied homosexuality).

It is, therefore, doubly ironic that, failing in his existentialist quest, Nirode finds meaning and completes his "rebellion" against the absurdity of life via Monisha's suicide. Although he claims that in the face of cowardly compromise, it is "better not to live" (18), he makes no such grand gesture of revolt himself. Rather, it is through the "excess of caring" which leads Monisha to her death that Nirode reconciles himself to others and to "the whole fantastic design of life and death" and admits the "deceit" of his earlier self-centered stance (248, 250). But even his epiphanic vision is negated at the novel's end, for, unable to shoulder the responsibility of true human "communion" and to "reverence" his mother, he sees her only as a castrating figure who has sentenced him to "death" (250, 256).

In stark contrast to Nirode's solipsistic narrative in Part I, the remaining three parts of the novel—"Monisha," "Amla," and "Mother"—transcend such a rigid dichotomizing of genders to draw in the stories of both women and men. Even in her diary—a highly personal text—Monisha refers frequently to Nirode, recording her concerns about his vulnerabilities, her nursing of him after his breakdown, her finding comfort in what she perceives to be a temperamental affinity with him. Amla too seeks out her brother's counsel as she struggles to come to terms with Calcutta and adulthood. In her heartache over her relationship with the married painter, Dharma, she turns to Nirode rather



than to her sister, the more conventional choice of a confidante. Despite his jibes to her about the schoolgirlish nature of her infatuations, the philistinism of her work as a commercial artist, and her resemblance in her "feminine" possessiveness to their mother, Amla retains a familial fondness for Nirode. And in the last, climactic segment, "Mother," all the major characters come together for the first time in the novel, momentarily unified by Monisha's death as Otima reasserts her role as matriarch.

The issue of communication and its converse, silence, is particularly significant to Monisha's history as it is recorded not only in her own narrative in Part II of the novel but in Amla's and Otima's narratives in Parts III and IV as well. Intelligent, well-read, and self-aware, Monisha is, however, given no voice in determining her spouse and hence the course of her life after leaving her parents' home. Her marriage with Jiban appears, at first, to have been arranged for the sake of social expediency. Her mother, unhappy in her own incompatible marriage and aware that so educated and sensitive a young woman as her daughter would not appeal to scores of prospective husbands and in-laws, "excuses" the match on the grounds that Jiban's family, "stolid, unimaginative . . . just sufficiently educated," would at least "accept [Monisha] with tolerance" (199); and her father approves of Jiban's "respectable, middle-class Congress family" that is "so unquestionably safe, sound and secure, so utterly predictable" (199, 198). But when Amla puzzles over her parents' choice of a husband for her sister, she reveals her father's proclivity to incest. Perhaps he selected Jiban because "fathers did, unconsciously, spite their daughters who were unavailable to them," she reasons (198). And to Amla's question, "[W]hy had Monisha . . . never rebelled?" (198), there are several potential answers, all predicated upon an oppressive sexual politics. Monisha conceivably maintained her silence because of her guilt at having provoked incestuous thoughts in her father; because she saw herself as a sacrifice to her parents' floundering marriage; because she felt compelled to play the part of a dutiful daughter conforming to the patriarchal practice of arranged marriage; or because she was overwhelmed by a sense of fatalism at the lot of Indian women.

Circumscribed both mentally and physically by gender, familial, and economic ideologies, Monisha serves as the type 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 passage bears quoting at length:

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's but also to the Indian woman's articulation of an independent self.

Early on, Monisha attempts to make a success of her marriage, to "be Jiban's wife" (111-12) within the strictures of a traditional Bengali family. But her initial efforts to adapt, to make the "language" of her married family "her own" (113), come to naught, and 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 a diary, communing only with herself in Kafkaesque ruminations of darkness, enclosure, and

madness.<sup>5</sup> Suffering as well from the larger absence of “that vital element . . . of love” (135) in her childlessness and abandonment by her mother, she chooses suicide over a lingering death of the soul, ending her life in “unimpeachable silence” (246).

On one level, therefore, Monisha can be 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 are all marks of her sexual colonization. On another level, however, she can be seen as a victor, transcending the reaches of patriarchy in her “madness” and death. Measured against the teachings of the Hindu scriptures that equate women’s mental health with domesticity and motherhood, Monisha appears abnormal. Intellectual, silent, and introverted, she is “distrusted” by her in-laws and perceived as “dangerous,” “an infidel who ought never to have been allowed into this stronghold of . . . practicality and chatter” (119). In some of her diary entries, Monisha reveals her internalization of others’ beliefs regarding her irrationality and underscores the patriarchal pressures that have driven her to distraction. She imagines the incessant repetition of Sanskrit verses by a nephew to “have been contrived solely to drive [her] mad” (112); she is fearful that an unidentified “they” will “spring on [her], claw the flesh off [her] back and devour it”; and she imagines that “there is no escape from them” (118). But her “madness” can also be interpreted as her protest against an intolerable situation. In her abnormality she not only questions the institutions of marriage and family but also puts herself beyond their confining reach. “[A]part” from others, and “separate” (239) from Jiban’s family, she is aware that “they cannot touch [her]” (138).

In contrast to countless other women who endure endless suffering and lead meaningless lives, Monisha thus “go[es] in the opposite direction” in her “madness” as well as her death. Rather than keep “waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in” (120), she voluntarily

chooses the freedom of death, thus also imparting meaning to her life.

Such an alternative interpretation of Monisha's end as heroic is additionally supported by the imagery of Kali that surrounds it. That Desai intends Monisha's suicide to be read against the mythology of Kali is evident. She not only describes the event in the last part of *Voices in the City*, "Mother," in which Otima is repeatedly portrayed as Kali incarnate, but she also attributes Monisha's decision to end her life to her encounter with a street singer who is cast as another personification of the goddess. Positioning the narrative from Monisha's perspective, Desai contrasts the "raw passion" of the itinerant street singer with the former's deadened emotional state as she stands "unnaturally cool, too perfectly aloof, too inviolably whole and alone" (238). Monisha sees the singer not only as a contrastive figure—in her apotheosis of a love, passion, and sensuality that Monisha herself has never known—but also as Kali come to life; and the symbolic parallels between the singer and the goddess proliferate.

As she fantasizes about the singer's history, Monisha imagines her, in the likeness of Kali, "building the funeral pyres of her own children," "slit[ting] throats and drain[ing] blood into her cupped hands," and "bath[ing] and soak[ing] in the sweat of lust" (237). Her face is that of the Eternal Mother, the Earth Mother,<sup>6</sup> "ravaged by the most unbearable emotions of woman"; her "terrible black eyes [hold] an eternally unfulfilled promise of vision, of understanding, of boundless love" (237). Aware that she herself has "not given birth . . . not attended death"—in short, that she has not lived life fully—Monisha is impelled to partake of the "primaeval truth" regarding life and death that the singer epitomizes (240, 238). In an effort to exchange her emotional barrenness for "a passion that ravages the soul and body and being" (239) and to participate in the physicality and undifferentiated wholeness of life that Kali deifies, Monisha goes bravely to her death.

In her choice, then, Monisha can be regarded as one of those heroic Desai characters who, "driven into some extremity of despair," has "turned against, or made a stand against, the general current" ("Anita Desai" 13). Resisting compromise and

meek submission, she has cried out “the great No” (“Anita Desai” 13).<sup>7</sup> Yet, because in real terms Monisha’s self-immolation fails to herald a new beginning for Indian women, the narrative in *Voices in the City* describes it as a “cloistered tragedy,” noting tellingly that “[n]o ashes of that fire drifted out over the city, no wind carried the smoke away to inform others” (242-43). However, the external fire which Monisha sets can be construed as symbolically positive, albeit on a limited scale: not only does the fire outside reflect the “fire” inside Monisha as she experiences acute desire and feeling for the first time in her life, but her fiery death also enables Nirode to reconcile himself to human fate, and it points the way for Amla’s less self-destructive approach to life. In this context, Monisha’s dying words, “No! No! No!” (242), can be read both as the articulation of the tragedy of Indian womanhood and of the oppositional intervention of women in the prevalent patriarchal sociolect.<sup>8</sup>

In Amla, whose story is told in Part III of *Voices in the City*, Desai investigates an alternate, perhaps less courageous but also less devastating mode of resistance to male hegemony. At first glance, the young, extroverted Amla appears to be a counterpoint to her detached, isolated sister. But beneath her vivacious exterior Amla shares with Monisha a “terrible destructiveness,” what an acquaintance of hers describes as a “dark way of thinking and feeling through life towards death” (175). This description also links Amla to the totality of life that Kali represents: aware of the “inevitable decline” that follows “the perfection of the moment” (219), she is made even more acutely conscious of the inextricable design of life and death by Monisha’s suicide.

Initially excited at being in Calcutta and savoring her economic independence as a commercial artist in an advertising firm, Amla soon feels the “rot” creeping into her life (173). She perceives the fraudulence underlying her work, the pettiness of her social round, and her lack of connectedness with family and friends. Even as she tries to “[proclaim] her youth, her aliveness, her courage,” Calcutta—and the mortality that it stands for— “[lays] waste all that [is] fine and moral” (150), until she starts to sink into a despair resembling Monisha’s and muses repeatedly upon death.

Again like Monisha, Amla is sexually circumscribed and has no passionate relationship with a man. Coming 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 "inexplicable" to them (147). Brought up in a culture that compels women to repress their sexuality, Amla and Monisha 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. Taking advantage of her vulnerability to his charms—she feels his "magic" and "hypnotism" come over her like "anaesthesia" (187, 188, 193)—Dharma exploits Amla's candor and freshness as a model to draw him out of a stultifying surrealism into the palpable world of realism in his paintings. But his use for her over, he discards her in favor of other models, unmindful of her desires. Thus, Amla realizes that her pursuit of feminine selfhood, of "something more *rare*, more responsible" than the "security" of marriage can only end in disillusionment, a compromise with life, and an abiding isolation (145).

Yet Amla displays a resilience and independence that enable her to live on her own terms. Declining the amorous attentions of several young men, she appears poised at the novel's end to pursue a career as an illustrator of children's stories, thus betokening hope for the future. Like Monisha, therefore, Amla defies the quintessential ideal of woman as dutiful wife and mother and "goes in the opposite direction," but after her own fashion. Her sister's death having given her a glimpse of "what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin," she resolves never to "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 Monisha's, though admirable in its dauntlessness, usually ends in self-destruction, 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 stated in a 1977 interview, "[I]f 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 . . .'" ("Interview" 98-99).

Referring more specifically to Indian women's current situation, Desai observed in 1988 that "they have a life presented to them and they have to make the best of it"; their rebellion can consist only of "exercis[ing] whatever control they can within those parameters" ("Against" 524). The pragmatist in Desai thus acknowledges that the majority of Indian women fatalistically accept their lot, while those who do resist patriarchal hegemony do so within a confined space. Yet she portrays a strong female character like Otima in *Voices in the City* who subverts the established patriarchal code by shattering the myth of the ideal feminine.

In a culture that historically sanctioned and glorified *sati* and that even today demands that a widow be self-abnegating, dependent, and passive, Otima proves iconoclastic in her widowhood. Long resentful of her *mariage convenable*—her husband married her for her inheritance—Otima finds herself liberated by his death. Independent and sensual even in her middle age, she consorts with Major Chadha, thereby overturning the constrictive pattern of sexuality and behaviour culturally prescribed for widows. In addition, in a country that institutionalizes and paradoxically reveres motherhood—paradoxically, because it simultaneously marginalizes, disfranchises, and even derogates women—Otima reverses the paradigm by rejecting and symbolically destroying her children. Even though she rues the marriage of her older son, Arun, to an American woman because she feels she will lose him forever, and although she appears stricken by Monisha's suicide, Otima "rejects" her remaining offspring, Nirode and Amla, "pushing them away" so that "she might stand alone and free" (255, 251). Having once raised her children affectionately, she now abandons them and lives alone in her childhood home in Kalimpong (a town appropriately linked to Kali), which she admits is a "secluded paradise" with "no channel of communication" with her children (201). Having once given them life, she now deals her children death—a literal death in Monisha's case as she fails to come to her daughter's aid, and a

metaphoric death in Nirode's case as she "ensnares" him in maternal bonds even as she denies him.

Cast in the role of antagonist along with the city of Calcutta, Otima appears for the first time in *Voices in the City* following Monisha's death. Even more than the street singer, the narrative directly and indirectly equates her with Kali. Tellingly enough, the direct identification is made by Nirode, the chief male character in the novel and hence a representative of the masculine principle that Otima-Kali threatens. As he drives his mother through Calcutta, Nirode imagines the sky darkening and the people lighting *divas* or lamps in her honor; he hears them chant hymns to her and "[knows] at once then, that she is Kali" (255).

Contrasting Hindu sexual mythology with that of other patriarchal societies, Sudhir Kakar underscores just such a male fear of the "sexual mother" in India. While Hindus share the widespread patriarchal impulse to "superimpose" the image of woman-as-mother and thereby to erase the picture of woman-as-sexual-being, they differ from other patriarchal communities in their conception of the "composite image" of the sexual mother (*Intimate Relations* 143). Describing the latter construct as "the most salient feature of male fantasy in India," Kakar asserts that it is "an overwhelming presence in the [Indian] men's perception of woman, a being to whom one is in danger of ceding both genitals and the self" (*Intimate Relations* 143).

That Nirode experiences such sexual anxiety linked to the figure of the castrating mother is clear in his association of Otima with Kali and with death in general. It is only in Monisha's death that, according to Nirode, their mother is appeased. "She is Kali," he cries to Amla; "[s]he has watched the sacrifice and she is satisfied" (255). To Amla's remonstrances that she is "Mother . . . that is all," he replies, "[S]he is the mother of us all. . . once she has given birth to us, she must also deal us our deaths" (256). Within her person Otima reconciles life's contraries, as Kali does, he believes: she is "good and evil"; "knowledge and ignorance"; "everything to which we are attached" and "everything from which we will always be detached"; she is, finally, in the image of Kali, the "amalgamation of death and life" (256). As if to confirm Nirode's assessment, the novel ends with a procession



celebrating the goddess, as Otima, now in white—also potentially signifying the birth of a new order for women—stands silent watch over Nirode and Amla. In the contemporary Kali Yuga, the Age of Kali, of Hindu tradition,<sup>9</sup> Otima can thus be seen as an appropriate symbol of the resurgence, albeit limited, of feminine power.

Whereas Madhusudan Prasad criticizes Desai's representation of Otima as Kali, declaring it to be both "unconvincing and inappropriate" ("Imagery" 366), it is precisely through such associations that the novelist offers her most serious challenge to the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society. The antithesis of the prototypical selfless and submissive mother and wife, Otima maintains her independence even in marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. Her association with the mountains—she writes repeatedly of the Kanchenjunga range in her letters—signifies her autonomy even as it confirms her in the role of the archetypal female. And at the end of *Voices in the City*, Otima evinces a desire to divest herself of all familial bonds and to seek self-fulfillment in unfettered solitude. Like Kali, she is herself whole and undifferentiated; like Shakti, or primal female energy, she is *svatantrya*, independent, her existence contingent upon nothing extraneous to herself. Having borne witness to both life and death, she has attained "that consummate wisdom besides which all others were incomplete, aborted beings" (254). And in defiance of Hindu masculinist tradition that reserves the right of *moksha*, release from the material world, for men alone, Otima appears at the novel's end to be preparing herself for this final stage of existence. Thus "going in the opposite direction" in her manifestation as Kali, Otima reveals the latent power of women and offers her sex the potential for subversive action.

Desai employs the metaphor of Kali not only at the human level but also at the non-human, portraying Calcutta primarily as an expressionistic city devoted to the goddess after which it is named<sup>10</sup> and only secondarily as the recognizable east Indian megalopolis. Desai's Calcutta, which comes to function as a character in its own right in *Voices in the City*, is, significantly, a place of moral and physical turpitude, of poverty, disease, and death. The narrative, furthermore, repeatedly invokes Kali as the

city's patron deity and foregrounds the tenebrosity of life there. The darkness of Calcutta can be variously interpreted. On one level, it can be seen as a metaphor for the "darkness" of human existence in India at large. On another level, it can be regarded specifically as a symbol of women's subjugation and oppression. On a third, it can be read as a counter to the idealized image of a tender, nurturing "Mother India" or Bharat Mata.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in its link with the imagery of blackness that surrounds Kali, it can be construed as an indicator of women's latent sexuality and strength.

Hardly recognizable as one of India's leading commercial centres, the home of great literature and music, and the site of incendiary politics, Desai's Calcutta is a "monster city" that "live[s] no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that [is] subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality" (150). Images of blood, death, and cannibalism abound in the novel, linking the city unambiguously to Kali in her destructive aspect: a fallen race horse is torn and devoured by birds of prey; Calcutta is a "coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour" (8), its streets lined with "dark, gap-toothed houses where the half-dead and the half-alive live" (92); and again, the "bestly, blood-thirsty" (96) city, with its reminders of a "gory history . . . slow mortality . . . [and] corruption" (150), covers everything with "filth and blood and rot" (182).

Yet in its very carnality, Calcutta also represents the potency of a specifically female sexuality that has ever threatened male dominance. Walking through the city streets, for instance, Nirode shudders to think of "marriage, bodies, touch and torture"; he is "almost afraid of the dark of Calcutta, its warmth that clung to one with a moist, perspiring embrace, rich with the odours of open gutters and tuberose garlands" (35). Conversely, Monisha, caught in an emotionally and physically barren marriage, her "calamitous pleasures and pains" neglected by Jiban, shuts herself off from palpable humanity, ignoring the "shrieks," "groans" (135), and "cries" emanating from the city (138). But in her own death by fire—imaging the "fire" within her to "experience desire, to experience feeling" (240)—she paradoxically reconnects herself with "life" in Calcutta, with all those "capable

of responding to passion with passion, to sorrow with sorrow" (238).

Commenting on the alternative perspective on reality that Kali affords her devotees, David Kinsley, a religious studies scholar, notes that "[t]o meditate on the dark goddess . . . is to step out of the everyday world of predictable dharmic order and enter a world of reversals, opposites, and contrasts and in doing so to wake up to new possibilities and new frames of reference" (130). As Desai depicts female characters who, in the image of Kali, "go in the opposite direction" to subvert or abrogate orthodox male authority in *Voices in the City*, she too can be seen as contributing to the overturning of the patriarchal social dharma that circumscribes Indian women.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Maini 221-22; Prasad, *Anita Desai* 22-46; and Srivastava 47-57.
- 2 Desai is not alone in presenting the goddess as an empowering figure for women. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi believe that the matriarchal myth of Kali, despite its later circumscription by a patriarchal discourse, "tells the story of [Indian] women's continuing power and their resistance to male control" over the ages (55). The latter is perhaps also the reason that the contemporary Indian women's movement has adopted Kali as a symbol to convey its goal of freedom from oppression and that India's first feminist publishing house, established in 1984, is called Kali for Women.
- 3 It is, however, ironic that even the androgynous Ardhanarishwara does not signify a true equality of the sexes. As Wendy O'Flaherty points out, the word is a masculine noun for a male hermaphrodite, and the puranic mythological figure is always regarded as a form of Shiva, not a form of Shiva *and* Shakti/Parvati or of Shakti/Parvati alone (*Women* 317).
- 4 In a 1979 interview, Desai declared, "I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest" ("Anita Desai" 13).
- 5 One of Monisha's diary entries specifically notes the parallel to Kafka: "Kafka, a scene for you," it begins (112).
- 6 Klaus Klostermaier points out that the hundreds of goddesses worshipped in India through the ages are "but manifestations of an unmanifest Supreme Goddess [Devi, the Great/Eternal Mother], appearing in various guises and exercising a variety of functions" (156). Kali is but one dimension of this divine feminine.
- 7 In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Desai quotes the following excerpt from the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, which acknowledges the courage necessary to cope with life's demands but also underscores the heroism of rebellion:

To certain people there comes a day  
When they must say the great Yes or the great No.  
He who has the Yes ready within him  
reveals himself at once, and saying it he crosses over

to the path of honour and his own convictions.  
 He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again,  
 he would say No again. And yet that No—  
 the right No—crushes him for the rest of his life.  
 (37, 139)

Desai also refers in interviews to this conflict between "Yes" and "No" to underline the choice between compromise and valorous, although finally ruinous revolt ("Interview" 98; "Anita Desai" 13).

- 8 The ambivalent nature of Monisha's end is also indicated by its symbolic association with *sati*. As Julia Leslie notes, the practice of widow immolation undeniably reveals the victim status of women, but *sati* can also be regarded as an empowerment, as "a strategy for dignity in a demeaning world" that condemns a widow to a very difficult ascetic path (188-89). Similarly, Monisha's suicide can be interpreted as a demonstration of her ultimate power in an otherwise powerless situation.
- 9 Whereas traditionally the Kali Yuga has been defined as the Age of Darkness in which there is a dearth of virtue and scripture carries no authority (O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* 43, 345), Ajit Mookerjee presents an alternative interpretation. As the ascendent deity of our times, Kali will in the Kali Yuga annihilate the patriarchal universe to reveal the truth of things and restore to us the divine feminine spirituality we have lost, he asserts (9). In a kindred spirit, I read Desai's adoption of the Kali myth as contributing to the formation of a new feminist ideology in the literary and social domains.
- 10 Calcutta is the anglicized version of Kalikata, the name of the city built on Kalikshetra, the land of Kali. The city is also the home of several temples dedicated to Kali, the most famous of which is the Kali temple at Kalighat, which Desai specifically refers to in *Voices in the City* (233).
- 11 A nationalistic discursive construct introduced by the nineteenth-century Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the image of India as mother nevertheless continues to function as "truth" in modern times. Whereas Chatterji's hymn "Bande Mataram," "Hail to Thee, Mother," described India as benevolent and protective as well as as explosive and virile, contemporary patriarchal culture privileges the former characteristics and virtually excludes the latter. In her focus upon Kali, the dark goddess, in *Voices in the City*, however, Desai overturns such an ideal hegemonic reading of the sacrality of the land and of women more generally.
- 12 An early version of this article was presented at the 1992 Twentieth-Century Literature Conference held in Louisville, Kentucky.

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