



THE EXISTENTIAL PAINS OF WOMEN: A STUDY ON ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

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Abstract:

Feminism as an extension of Existentialism gets echoed in world literature. Indian English fiction is no exception to this. This Existential struggle to establish one's identity, to assert one's individuality and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity in the novels of Anita Desai. Desai revealed the confrontation of man with himself and the question of his existence. The characters of Desai are alienated and lonely; existentialists, strangers and outsiders to their own land, try to search out their own identity, and always suffer from the guilt that they do not belong to a place or to a person and finally they are left to struggle for existence in their society.

Key Words: Anita Desai, Existentialism & Identity.

The Existential Pains of Women: A Study on Anita Desai's Novels:

Indian English fiction has had a meteoric growth. It started in all genres of literature and has gained momentum, particularly the Indian novel, Indian Writers like R.K.Narayan, Mulkraj Anand, promoted conventional mode of writing. The crusaders of the contemporary and modern era include Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth Anitha Desai and many more. The Indian novels till 1970s treated themes of political and social import, exhibited a splendid array of portrayals: princes and paupers, saints and sinners, white men and barbers, farmers and labourers, untouchables and coolies, prosperity and adversity, cities and villages. Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya are pioneers in this field. Writers like Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and Khushwant singh deal with the themes of the country's Independence Movement, East-West encounter, tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism.

Jean Paul Sartre seems to have adopted the term 'Existentialism' from the French Philosopher Gabriel Marcel. He discusses his own existentialist position in his lecture in Paris on October 29, 1945 and is still regarded as a seminal document on this philosophy. The lecture was published as "Existentialism is Humanism." The term 'Existentialism' applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century, who generally focused on the condition of human existence, the nature of free will, an individual's responsibilities, the meaning and purpose of life, etc. The philosophy highlights the dilemma of human life in which one experiences unlimited desires, though his physical capacity is limited. Thus a self-transcending consciousness encased in a finite physical world is the core issue of Existentialism.

The two main literary authors, who gave importance to Existentialism, were the Franz Kafka and the Russian Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky's "Notes from underground" portrays a man unable to fit into society and unhappy with the identities he creates for himself. Sartre in his book *Existential is a Humanism* quoted Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as an example of existential crisis. The novels of Dostoyevsky cover the issues of existential philosophy. In the first decade of the twentieth century, number of philosophers and writers explored existentialist ideas.

Following the Second World War, Existentialism became a significant philosophical and cultural movement. This was because of the prominence of Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre dealt with existential themes in his novels. Existentialism implies assertion of life. But a suitable definition is difficult to make. As Marjorie Greene observes "the more fashionable a philosophy becomes, the more elusive is its definition, so the proponents of existentialism proclaim that though many attack, few understand them as the world goes around every treatise that dooms men to destruction, every novel whose characters are mad or bad, every play that depresses without elevating, is labeled, 'so existential.'"

Existentialist philosophy had become quite fashionable among the progressive urban intellectuals. Anita Desai finds its theories suitable to her themes, aspects of Existentialism are in evidence in the total frame work of her stories. Its emphasis on the alienation of man from an 'absurd' world, his consequent estrangement from "normal" society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless –presents the sensitive individual fragmented and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex enough to make him obsessed.

The existence of an unjust and imbalanced social order where the feminine voice and feminist consciousness are connected with each other in inextricably women's lack of consciousness of rights prevents her from acting on her own. In a society where contradictions and polarities, prevail, women's rights and privileges are suppressed. Hence, society must foster and encourage the spirit of courage, boldness and defiance in women so that they can voice their resentment and protest against all sorts of patriarchal oppression and male chauvinism. They should be given the right "to live a normal life", and ameliorate their hapless lot, through an open defiance of the existing state of things in a male andocentric culture. Women can no more exist before male books and stories" and let us "hear the voice of silence". They shall have to speak out, articulate, assert and affirm their "feminine self."

Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with freedom and choices. It states that whatever choice you make in your own live you must accept –and live with them as the choices have defined who you are as a person. It can sound terrifying, as the quotes go on to suggest but being terrified is not the point of this philosophy. The point is to take any terror or existential dread and turn it into a positive thing in your life. You are defined by your choices and you have the absolute freedom more content by accepting this and not blaming the world if you do happen to make some bad decisions.

Her existential crisis is conceptualized as a see –saw balanced on a central fulcrum, with women sitting on one end and men on the other. She refuses male as super power and tries to legitimize female power as if power is produced through paradox and opposition. She employs the same metaphor from which she proposed to get rid of earlier. The question "what does she want remain unanswered". Real by speaking, men and women, if they admit the component of the other sex, make themselves at once, much richer and strong. In Desai's world, no party is a winner; both of them lose the battle at each other's cost. Nor does she look for an areocentric model which lies beyond sexual stereotypes. Faculty believed that the intellectual and political world must be decentralized in order to free us to experience and understand the difference of social reality.

Existentialism emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of each person to create him or her as a self governing individual. It denies the existence of pre ordained 'human nature" the examination of femininity. Existentialism which is basically concerned with the enduring human predicament in relation to unchanging human destiny has been the last pages of her novel a very significant line from Eliot's four quartets; "Time the destroyer is time the preserver." It is time which brings about a change in the lives of the characters in the novel, the childhood intimacy of the four children – Tara, Bim, Raja and Baba is gradually lost as they grow older and become aware of their variegated dreams and aspirations Anita Desai presents their polarities or personalities through images of sound and silence. The novel focuses mainly the character deception, misperception and misunderstandings that are reflected back to them in several says finally Desai's clear light of the day issue leads us into deeper psychological studies.

Anita Desai attempts to underline the existential concerns that are so common to humanity. She chooses her characters that are under stress and tries to peep inside their psyche and come up with an explanation of their actions. All her characters have existential pangs and they are on a spree to find out the root cause and reach at some sort of realization to complete their cycle of search of life. But in her works this existential journey is spoiled by the advent of males into the lives of females and the shift mars the impact of her existential concerns. The novels *Fire on the Mountain* and *Journey to Ithaca* do not have any return. Once the characters who have taken psychological and physical journey have undergone transformation, they cannot get back to their normal life. The voyage made them realize who they are and proceed their life from their knowledge of their self-identity.

The characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in the utter maze of isolation and ennui. Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anita Desai examines certain pertinent facets of this school of thought her protagonists, treating predominant themes like, alienation, quest and conflict with all her mature and sensitive story telling panache. Nanda Kaul makes a classic study epitomizing alienation and existential angst, while Raka comes to symbolize the individual 'futile quest for finding meaning in an otherwise hopeless life. Ila Das's life stands as a testimony to the eternal conflict enshrouding the individual dogged fight with dominant forces of oppression. However, the author pulls off a masterstroke by cleaving these three disparate characters in a common thread of life in isolation.

Desai has examined the predicament of women in the existentialism wilderness by placing these three characters on Kasauli, a place surrounded by hills and valleys, far removed from civilization. She has consciously done it to examine the predicament and psyche of women in isolation. By placing her female protagonists with nature herself as the backdrop, Anita Desai has endowed a symbolic and universal significance to the plight of her protagonists .she creates a believable set of a small world populated by marginally smaller milieu. Things and objects, however small and insignificant acquire larger propositions in novel. Anita Desai takes her turns at being reflective going deep into the psyche, going to places in the heart and mind where things acquire, a different form a different hue a different character. She then dwells on moods on feelings emotions, on all those that impress the mind and leave their imprints there. As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she

voices “the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments.”

A women novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life and draws her gaze towards the starker aspects of life. She portrays a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in inhospitable terrains.

Fire on the Mountain reveals a woman's struggle to secure self respect and self identity for herself. Desai subtly lays bare the multiple levels of gender differentiation and oppression experienced by new women in human society. She tries to define the admit of freedom for of the Indian women within the Indian Socio-cultural value systems and institutions and modernity. Her characters become the embodiment of revolt, questioning the restrictions independence and right to self-fulfillment.

Quest for identity forms the base of the both the novels. *Fire on the mountains* reveals that the entangle with the world will never let anyone experience the real joy of life whereas journey to Ithaca emphasizes mystical union with dive. Both the novels stress essential loneliness that is at the centre of the human predicament when faced with the eternal verities, the realization of which alone will bring peace and understanding. Till then one has to go through the quest alone *fire on the mountain* function on an existential socio psychologically plane, journey of Ithaca passes on to a metaphysical and mystical dimension.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, she tries to delineate a picture of the diseased psyche of woman almost on the verge of insanity. The manner, in which she organizes her fictional material here, seems to prove the internal conflicts more effectively, with the objectivity of a perceiver; she creates characters that inherit her own experiences or seek to solicit meaning from experience. The women characters suffer from neurosis. They are guided by fear, guilt, jealousy, aggression and their psyche loses grip of their own central position. However, the tendency is to take them to consciousness and transport them in terms of inseparable images moving them sometimes backwards and sometimes forwards. Her narrative style integrates the past and the present, the sides, sounds and smells.

Thus, in *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai shows Maya's experience of love and short-lived ecstasy which she never attains. The cry of the peacock is simply a symbol, which is not adequate to describe the emotion that is more realistic. Maya's consciousness has been deeply disturbed by her nightmare and sub-human existence. Almost her every image has a dual existence with certain variations. With the passage of time Maya's despair turns into guilt and through the process of psychic-transitions she perceives her active participation, and also the feeling of guilt. The image of storm suggests the complexity of emotions and terrifies Maya to develop the feeling of guilt and insecurity. The major weakness in the relationship of Maya and Gautama is hardly on the footing of equality. In *Voices in the City*, Desai has made an attempt, for the first time in Indian fiction, to relate the subjective reality world of such individuals to the extent of giving it also as a force to affect the emotional sensibility of men. Monish reveals through her diary, the inner landscape of the psyche, which proves fatal for her end.

In this novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, she projects the chains, physical; and psychological and explores the difficulties of adjustment with an immigrant individual of England. As the novelist describes Indians living in England, she makes an attempt to create English atmosphere, and, in this way, is once again at her best with rich visual imagination. The characters define themselves, and they express reaction against the alien atmosphere. London is beautifully described with its crows and shopping centers. Though the characters are unreal, the conflicts and the crisis in the novel leave an imprint on the mind of the readers. The blackbird's feeling of an unwelcome tone in England and tensions arising out of an alien atmosphere are faithfully described.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* she dramatizes two opposite conflicts. The protagonist is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman. She finds herself alienated from her husband and children. This sense of her alienation is because of her emotional imbalances. The unhappy part of her life is due to her inability to accept the values and the mode of attitude of her society. She feels boredom and dullness in every individual. And these are the greatest threats to her existence. The heroine tries to visualize the world of her dreams. But ultimately, she intensifies her desire to recapture the experience and excitement in her. Therefore, she comes to a dilemma to decide as where she should go that summer.

Desai describes in *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's motherly feelings of humiliation and desolation for lifetime alienation. The poor Raka is bewildered when she finds her home completely shattered, as her father continues his habit of drinking, he mother inhabits various nursing homes and she herself suffers nurse a lot. Raka is solitary but she finds her mother to speak to explore and set fire to the mountainside.

Conclusion:

This particular phase of existentialism “the one alone” the man who has no record –seems to be a favorite subject of Desai. Loneliness is not something unique, but is in fact, a characteristic of the society of our time. Today many individuals feel alone unrelated to others, unable to feel at one with them. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of Desai's themes.

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