



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English

A STUDY OF MAIN FACTORS RELATED TO EXISTENTIALISM IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

KEY WORDS: Existentialism, Factors, Novels, Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to find out if Anita Desai women really assert themselves or somewhere in their assertion process conform to endurance. For the purpose of this study, all her novels have been considered, but the thrust of this research is on three of her major novels viz., Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City and Fire on the Mountain. Her five novels have won awards and have been translated into a number of foreign languages. In this paper A modern philosophical movement, Existentialism deals with man's disillusionment and despair. Originating in the philosophical and literary writings of Jean Paur Sartre, it was more on attitude to life, a vision, or what Kaufman calls a "timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there is the past." (Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, A philosophical idealism, existentialism in due course of time developed into a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosophers portrayed man.

Existentialism, taken as a whole, undoubtedly a philosophical movement. Existentialism, broadly defined, is a set of philosophical systems concerned with Free will, Choice and Personal responsibility. Because we make choices based on our experiences, beliefs, and biases, those choices are unique to us – and made without an objective form of truth. There are no "Universal" guidelines for most decisions, existentialism believe. Instead, even trusting science is often a "Leap of Faith". Existentialism is, at its core, individualistic. It deals with man's disillusionment and despair some thinkers have presented a very gloomy picture of it. They have described it as 'the shocking the sordid, the obscene'. To them existentialism is "nearly meaningless." They hold that it is mostly negative, morbidity, individualistic and devoid of values of any kind. They attach to it such charge of extreme subjectivism, pessimism and even nihilism. Despite a strong pessimistic note, Existentialism does not aim at plunging man into despair it rather prepares him through disillusionment and despair for a sole purpose, sense and meaning. Such a concern is quite pertinently expressed in 'Albert Camus' play 'Caligula'.

"To love one's life is a little thin and I shall have the courage to do so if is necessary, but to see the meaning of this life dissipated, to see our reason for existing disappear that is what is unbearable. One cannot live without meaning." A great philosopher Sartre have very well explained that existentialism is optimistic so far as it is doctrine of action: "Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusion from a consistently atheistic position. Its intention is not in the least that of plunging men into despair. And if by despair one means as the Christians do- any attitude of unbelief the despair of the existentialists is something different Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstration of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference for its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist; but we think that the real problem is not that of his existence, what man needs it to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception by confusing their own despair with ours that Christians can be describe us as without hope."

Existentialism is a protest against all forms of rationalism. The existentialists have therefore reacted strongly against the excessive claims of reason. Kierkegaard reacted against Hegelian idealism. Marcel reacted against the idealists like F.H. Bradley and Brushchving. Heidegger and Sartre, too, reacted against the age of reason. The existentialists actually

think passionately. He sets forth the dictum "existence precedes essence."

The existentialists assert that man first exists and then he looks at the world, thinks of it and then acts as an individual. His contemplations and his actions are possible only because of his existence. "Existence, thus, is the first principal from which all else flows. It is only later, by living, thinking, and acting that man defines his nature and forms what is called his essence – that he is and will be." The essence of man is pre-determined. Jean Paul Sartre has thus posited his view point: "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exist, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him, is not definable. it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then, he will be what he makes of himself."

Aims and Objectives

- * To study existential philosophies in literary context.
- * To discuss the main factors of existentialism in the novels of Anita Desai
- * To highlight existentialism in the novels of Anita Desai.
- * To trace Anita Desai as an Existentialist with a different vision.
- * To trace the inter-relationship between existential philosophy and the themes of the novels of Desai.
- * To find out alternatives for human existence through literary study.
- * To discuss husband-wife relationship and to bring out the existential predicaments of women protagonists in Indian cultural set-up.

Hypothesis

The researcher assumes while studying the later novels of Anita Desai.

- 1) Existentialism is a philosophy related to self-discovery and the purpose of life through freedom of choice, and personal commitment.
- 2) Existentialistic ideas emerged at a time when society had a deep sense of hopelessness following the Great Depression
- 3) The existentialists basically agree that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying.
- 4) Anita Desai's writings reveal the inner realities and minds of the characters. She also faces the issue of 'Perfect Personality.

Methodology

The methodology will be used in the study is mainly descriptive, interpretive and analytical. The main focus will be on reading closely and analyzing selected novels from an existing perspective, at the same time, in order to better understand the depth and better understanding of the second different sources referred to.

In *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) the protagonist, Maya is alienated from her husband, Gautama and feels estranged from her entire surroundings she lives as a virtual outsider in her home, in an environment where love is scant and understanding meager. As she is living under the constant shadow of death, the husband is engrossed in the materialistic pursuits and rational hair-splitting of the wisdom of the Gita. She discovers utter meaninglessness of life in the entanglement of what is 'gross' and 'useless' matter of fact and rational. She scorns a system that preaches 'must accept'. Under the lucidity of absurd existence, in a fit of rage, she kills her husband and immolates herself, Physical suicides is a way of pointing out the agony of the absurd and symptomatic of deep urge for freedom.

Voices In the City (1965) deals with the three important characters-- Nirode, Monisha and Amla who feel almost detached or disconnected from the society. They are involved in deep spiritual crises. They seek ways and means by which they may protect their identity against the onslaught of meaningless existence. They are ill at ease in the general environment of dreariness, brutality and absurdity of existence. Nirode's life consisted of one rejection following another. He loathed the world that could offer to crusade no pilgrimage and he loathed himself for riot having the true, the unwavering spirit of either within him. He knew by instinct that 'he was a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition'. Monisha, too, feels alienated in her family and rebels against the traditional philistinism of Bengali community. She considers her life a virtual 'waste' and immolates herself. Amla is tormented by the chaotic life of Calcutta. The three characters— the three voices—fell that amidst meaningless chaos of existence they are born like strangers as if they were in exile. A sense of rootlessness and loss of identity results in a haunting sense of meaningless existence.

'Where shall we Go this Summer (1965) is Desai' "Shortest existentialist novel." It is once again a family drama focusing attention on Sita, a house wife who is pregnant but hates to deliver the child. She is hypersensitive and is emotionally so charged. She has passed her childhood is an island under the magic spell of her father. She feels alienated from her husband and is not able to understand at time the behaviour of her children. Sita and her husband Raman both are of different nature. Raman is practical man but he cares for her and that's why he leaves his joint family and live-alone with Sita and his four children so that he could make her happy. But Sita is over emotional and she does not want to come out of the fantasy world of her childhood. That's why, when she becomes pregnant again, she decides to go to the Manori Island, to keep her baby unborn. She thinks that though her father is dead but his magical effect still remains in the island. But when she goes there, she finds nothing. When his husband Raman arrives the Island to take them back to the Bombay, she refused. But then Raman introduces her to the reality of the world and then she comes out from the world of fantasy, accept the world of reality and come back to her home. This novel is divided into three sections, namely "Monsoon-67" "Winter-47" and "Monsoon-67". The first one describes her present life in Bombay, second is connected to her past, her life in Manori Island before her marriage and the third part described her present and uncomparing future, because in this section she returns to the world of reality and thus the novel go to the happy end.

Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971) of Anita Desai adequately

highlights the cultural tension experienced by the protagonists Adit, Dev and Sarah in an alien soil and reveals their loss of identity amidst racial hostility. The novelist powerfully underlines the dawn of lucidity among Adit and Sarah to discard the yokes of slavery and cruel misdemeanor of the whites. Adit and Sarah are in quest of their 'natural condition' or 'true circumstance' and ultimately, they secure it in their willed departure from a land which was steadily devouring their conscience. The novel embodies profound appeal for authentic maturity and spiritual growth and invokes human beings to imbibe the truth that the sublimity of conscience can't be compromised by the lure of loaves and butter.

The existentialist dilemma and the resultant alienation are further accentuated in the character of further accentuated in the character of Sita in the novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). Sita feels extremely bored and lonely although she is materially well off. Her dilemma lies in her isolation caused by her inability to accept values and attitudes of the society around her. She is expecting her fifth child but wants to keep it unborn in a world that is not fit to receive this new comer. The reality of her life with her husband becomes oppressive and she hastens to Manori Island. But her hopes are short-lived and she is brought back to Bombay. Her courageous 'No' is demolished in the face of harsh reality.

Though totally alienated she has to swallow the pill of compromise. Yet Sita's rebellion reveals her courage to launch on a quest for authentic selfhood and adequate existence. *Fire On the Mountain* (1977) is a narrative of a lady, Nanda Kaul, who sought withdrawal in a solitary mountain villa of carignano in the foothills of Himalayas. She resigned to the self-imposed loneliness because 'she was forced to do, reduced to doing'. What she cherished throughout her life was solitude and serenity in the close proximity of Nature but this desire was thwarted at every second step. But, no, while she was at carignano every interruption would be an unwelcome intrusion upon her. She would not tolerate it. But the anticlimax reaches at the moment when Raka, great grand-child of Nanda comes intervening in her nectar full bliss. The liberation so fondly cherished by her evaporates into the thin air. The intrusion of Raka and death of Ila Das in a rape-episode explode the last refuge of respite and release of an enlightened lady like Nanda Kaul. There is no soothing ground in the world. Perhaps boat moves to ultimate shipwreck. Absurd nullity of existence does not let one's experience one's fulfillment.

From the comprehensive analysis of Anita Desai's novels, it can be established that her protagonists experience to the full the sense of alienation mainly caused by the absurdity of existence. This they experience not only on the physical or materialistic level but also on the level of spirit. The constitution of the world is such that 'aloneness alone' becomes the only reality and the person in aloofness is in relentless quest for identity and authentic selfhood. It is also abundantly clear from a close scrutiny of her novels that there is a deep philosophical connotation in the problems of existence that she has highlighted in her protagonists. What her protagonists confront in their daily lives is not simple issue of their individual concerns but fundamentally cankered problems of the whole human race. In Anita Desai, the inner crisis develops from the failure of human relationship and lack of emotional stability. Her characters originate and exist because of the incompatibility of their temperaments. Maya is hungry for love, and Gautama is cold Nirode Monisha and Amla are also not ordinary characters but sensitive artists, having feelings of individuality and selfrespect. Adit, Dev and Sarah have their own crisis. Sarah is psychically lacerated. She is 'silent volcano, not dead, yet not bursting.' Sita suffers from her inner crisis to check the delivery of her baby. Nanda Kaul languishes in her soul for

personal reasons. Bim lives in her dreamy world. Thus, the inner crisis in the characters leads them to the complexity of existential problem which they have to face time-to-time. The protagonists of Anita Desai are highly sensitive and terribly bewildered of the burden of living helplessly in the society with absurd realities. She is essentially a novelist of existential concerns. There is reverberation of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Marcel Proust, Camus, Sartre and Virginia Woolf in her novels.

CONCLUSION

The novelist's language and theme reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic condition of the characters. Mrs. Desai is primarily concerned with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today. Her women become victims of the traditional modes of existence without a strong terra firma, which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Indian girl a woman is brought up to be passive, meek and obedient. With this kind of orthodox background, she tries to depict the oppressive and unfeeling conjugal bond. Hence, Mrs. Desai presents the unhappy situation of women in Indian society. She has handled the issues of violence against women artistically and veraciously.

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