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EXISTENTIALISM PREDICAMENT IN ANITA DESAI'S
CRY, THE PEACOCK AND VOICES IN THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism, a quite contemporary doctrine evident in the philosophical and literary work of Sartre, was much in fashion in the European literature dating back from mid-twentieth century. This suitable doctrine started setting its roots in literature since Sartre set up an association between literature and philosophy in his writings. The term existentialism has wide connotation, it embraces various psychological beliefs of human nature. It's complex and comprehensive nature is difficult to understand and deal with. It has been widely discussed, argued and defined by many intellectuals. Existential characters are very sensitive and moody with diverse temperamental changes. They are routed by their own passionate instinctive identity pursuit and they pursue their pursuit in a committed and constant manner irrespective of the consequences. The extremely complicated nature of existentialist is difficult to understand as they do not conform to any religious, social or political school of thought. Lack of understanding of existential characters may result in unpleasant incidents such as alienation, frustration, insanity, murder or suicide. As a novelist, Anita Desai didn't hesitate to exhibit her strong obsession, fascination, and inclination for this principle in most of her novels. But the present study limits its discussion to two of her most astonishing existentialist novels *Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City*.

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INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to trace the origins of existentialism. In the western philosophy, the roots of existentialism have been traced back to Socrates, Saint Augustine, Saint Paul and Pascal. Whereas, modern existentialist movement is believed to have its origins in the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard emphasized the importance of human subjectivity and depth in his feelings. He claimed that the truth lies in subjectivity and not in an objective and rational study of the universe. He rejected philosophical theories based on abstract systems and rational thinking. He stressed on the importance of experience over intellectual abstractions. He was a theist and because of his existentialist philosophy he rejected the institution of

Christianity as an abstract system divorced from actual life. He also stressed on the hard fact that existential man experiences the feeling of 'Dread'. According to Kierkegaard, Dread is the paradox in the man's life which makes him a creature who desires to know his future and is afraid of it at the same time. As a Christian existentialist, Kierkegaard rejects the aesthetic and ethical ways and chooses the religious way. He describes authentic existence as a possibility which man transforms into actuality through a leap of faith. Another existentialist, Martin Heidegger is generally given the credit of formulating the phrase 'existence precedes essence', a phrase which constitutes the very basis of the philosophy of existentialism. He also has his own description of 'Dread'. According to him, Dread represents that turning point in the life of human being, when he shoves off his inauthentic existences and become aware of authentic existence through the experiencing of dread or existential anguish. He also lay stress on that what sets apart the human from other living beings is his consciousness about his mortality.

As Prof.Fuller says, "Man is the being that knows he is going to die. He dies not only at the end of life but everyday of it. Death is certain but indefinite. Because it is inevitable, it marks the contingency of life. Life is cast up between nothing and nothing. Death is its boundary and is its supreme possibility." Jean-Paul Sartre is described as the high priest of the secular existentialist movement in France. Sartre writes, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity"(T P E ,p.36). Since there is no God, Sartre argues, man is what he makes of himself. "Thus, existentialism first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (T P E, p.36). Hence, the emphasis in Sartre's existentialist philosophy is on 'Becoming' and not on 'Being'.

Existentialism in Anita Desai's Fiction

Existentialism is concerned with the unchanging human condition and the different strategies adopted by human beings to deal with their existential dilemmas. In Anita Desai's fiction, the protagonists protest in different ways against their spiritual conditions. In existentialism, man is seen as a lonely and alienated, burdened with the responsibility of choosing between two opposed ways of living, one way is of authenticity and the other is the way of bad faith. Anita Desai's characters have to make similar choices in the similar circumstances. She expresses the existential dilemmas of her characters repeatedly in her novels. She used to explore and inquire into the human situation from the existential perspective. She focuses on alienation, loneliness and routine of her characters. Anita Desai repeatedly tries to explore the existential condition of modern man in modern scenario. She shows her concern about the maze in which man finds himself today. There is a great shift of focus from society to individualism which in turn leads to a change of environment. According to Harish Raizada," the tragic effect in her novels is intensified because the external conditions not only oppress the protagonists in her novels from outside but also flaw their nature from within".

Existential Concerns in *Cry, the Peacock*

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai designs the stories of contrasts between opposed modes of perception and contradictory attitudes towards life. The protagonist of the novel, Maya, is alienated from her husband, family and society. The story presents a continuous conflict between the inner and the outer worlds of Maya. Maya's unique nature of the sensibility is illustrated in the middle section of the book. Maya's language reflects the way in which she is able to respond to the beauty and the variety of life. She often talks of the beauty of sunrises and sunsets. Maya is aware of beauty as well as ugliness. For example, she responds to the odour of dead flesh" once sweet, once loved, then, suddenly, rotten, repulsive" (CP, p.8). The novel explains or defines a sharp contrast between two characters, their attitudes towards life and totally different responses to the experience of death. The death of Maya's pet dog, Toto, is seen with two different perspectives by Maya and her husband, Gautama. Maya's attitude towards death is frenzied and sensitive whereas her husband is in total contrast to her attitude. He cannot understand Maya's compassion to death. Maya is frequently haunted with the fear of death. She is continuously thinking of the images which indicate death. The peacock's dance is a symbol of both life and death. "How they love the rain- these peacocks. They

spread out their splendid tails and began to dance, but, like Shiva's, their dance of joy is the dance of death and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end"(CP, p.95). The fear of death in Maya's mind overshadows her sensitivity to the beauty of life. On the other hand, Maya's husband is totally ignorant to the fear of death. Death appears imaginary to him. The Kathakali dance represented in the image of the Nataraja is a haunting fear of evil and rhythm: "demonic creature, the fierce dancer... It was the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, masked, with heavy skirts swirling, feet stamping, eyes shooting beams of fire"(CP, p.28). Maya is bearing this fear of death and all these images haunts Maya which leads to the tragedy at the end.

The novel presents the conflict between the heroine and the outside world. It highlights the struggle of Maya to overcome her fear regarding death. The story represents struggle between Maya and her husband but in reality, it is a struggle between life and death, between passionate attachment to life and the indifference towards life. Maya is confronted with an existential dilemma. Her dilemma goes to such an extent that she kills her husband, Gautama, as he is coming between her and her intense existential experience. The contrast is the attitudes of the two characters leads to the ultimate tragedy. It is a contrast between the authentic and the inauthentic modes of living. Anita Desai's vision is raised and sustained through a diligent effort at unscrambling the enigmatic mystery of a woman's mind which journeys from the psychological state to the mist of metaphysical illusion. This movement is a complex process that signifies the ingrained sorrows of feminine mind. In Anita Desai's novels, there is hardly any interest in political or social reality. It is the interior landscape which is her stated stance, the landscape characterized by mayhem and confusion. We find uncertainty and vicious assaults of existence in Anita Desai's novels which can be seen in Virginia Woolf's writings, where as Jane Austen have a well-defined world-view and a clearly stated social milieu. The common factor among Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai is that they are women capturing the instability of man-woman relationship, and the culture-specific life at the same time. They view feminine issues from varied standpoints. What binds them together is the concern for feminine dilemma and their dreariness verging almost on negation of womanhood and sense of purpose.

Existential Concerns in *Voices in the City*

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, is the character whose obsession with death leads her to murder her husband. Anita Desai's second novel *Voices in the City*, is the story of an alienated woman who has the potential to rebel but cannot stretch to its logical end. The writer dramatizes the adverse relationship between the voices in the city and the city itself. Meena Belliappa in her book *Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction* has observed, "in *Voices in the City* an attempt is made, perhaps for the first time in Indian fiction, to relate the subjective world of the individual to the spirit of a locale" (p.26). Anita Desai observes that the important element basic to our lives is the human conditions itself. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Anita Desai delves deep into the remarkable existential predicament of an individual confronting "the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence." In the novel *Voices in the City*, the flurry of the city is described in terms of adjectives and adverbs, which convey feelings of dread and disgust. The words 'murderously', 'maniacally', 'recklessly', all refer to the city as a threat to the susceptible individual. Nirode is covetous of his brother Arun, who is evasion from the city and the writer tries to represent the city as an image of prison which has been contrasted with the open country side representing freedom. Nirode feels that he is trapped into the anonymity and is forced to lead an inauthentic existence in the city. He feels to be surrounded with an existence dominated by routine. Nirode seems to be lost in his existential predicament and thinks his life as an everlasting nightmare of a journey, a journey without any precise goal or aim. Nirode is typically Anita Desai's character. His actions and attitude is the natural outcome of his clear recognition of the existential predicament. Thus the novel shows the existential crisis in the lives of Anita Desai's protagonists. Anita Desai dramatizes the conflict between the protagonists, Nirode and his two sisters on the one hand and the city as an antagonist on the other. Nirode believes that the sole natural condition of a human being in modern society is "loneliness". "He himself knew by instinct that he was a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring" (VC, p.24). Nirode finds himself

trapped in the existential predicament that he cannot meaningfully relate himself either to the city of Calcutta or to its inhabitants. He criticizes everything, his mother and her lover, his friends and their families and the wives of ambitious industrialists turning from social work to Indian culture. His attitude is of an individual who attempts to discover for himself an authentic way of life. He confesses that he cannot believe in anything. He says to his friend David, "That is my undoing- this lack of faith and this questioning" (VC, p.39).

On the other hand, Nirode's sister finds herself equally trapped in the routine of existence. She feels as if she is in prison like a caged bird in the house of her in-laws which seems to her "shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well water" (VC, p.109). Monisha tries to protect herself from the intrusions of the inauthentic into her life by withdrawing spiritually from the world in which she is living. The city becomes a symbol of death for her as she cries out, "Do you hear me, city of Calcutta? City of Kali, goddess of Death?" (VC, p.138). She describes her life as "traceless, meaningless, uninvolved- does this not amount to non-existent" (VC, p.140). She is not able to resist the pressures of our daily routine and existential dilemmas, Monisha commits suicide. Her younger sister, Amla, also feels that the city is like a monster which keeps on engulfing everyone who comes in its way. She describes Calcutta as the "monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality" (VC, p.150). Hence, the three voices in the novel feel so frustrated in the city Calcutta that they had an urge to return to their mother. As Usha Bande observes, "... as Nirode's basic needs have been frustrated, he alienates himself from his essential nature, his value system is damaged. He accepts neurotic values, there by developing neurotic wants which are destructive, both for self and for others" (Bande73). Anita Desai very artistically points out the conflict between the urban consciousness and inner consciousness of an individual. Such a conflict leads an individual towards an existential void and disillusionment. Their dilemmas and predicaments abound in mystery; their agony has perhaps no reasonable cause. Anita Desai, to use K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar's phrase, is interested in "the exploration of the sensibility". Her concern is with individual men and women. In Anita Desai's words:

Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest. One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate. The moment of dilemma seeks its own explanation whether it is weariness or the sense of being alone. The novel *Voices in the City*, thus, dramatizes the conflict between conformity and freedom, inauthenticity and authenticity, death and life. On the whole, Anita Desai presents the valor of eccentricity as well as the tragedy of conformity.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai has contributed a lot to the modern Indian novel in English. All the protagonists of Anita Desai's novels face the same existential crisis. Her style of writing is entirely connected to her concern with existential problems. She comments, through her protagonists, on the violence and aggression which occurs in the society. She also comments on the confrontation between inner and outer reality, but her primary concern remains with the absurdity of human condition, with the existential search for meaning of human life and an analysis of the challenges and the choices that human beings face in life. Anita Desai's every work is a search for meanings, for values and for truth. The protagonists of her novels protest in different ways against the spiritual condition. Existentialism is concerned with the unchanging human condition and the different strategies adopted by human beings to deal with their existential dilemmas. The man is lonely and alienated, burdened with responsibility of choosing between two opposed ways of life. The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from the various quarters. The existential encounter with nothingness is typical of modern man's life. The modern man suffers from inner problem- a conviction of isolation, meaninglessness in his way of existence. The existential problem is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of life. It has been treated in considerable detail in American and European literature. Anita Desai seriously sets herself to voice the mute miseries of married women fortified by existential problems and predicaments. She is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in social and political realities. In her fiction, there is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the significant ones. Her protagonists are persons for whom aloneness alone is the treasure. Desai's incontestable

existentialist concerns have distinguished her from other novelists of her generation. Anita Desai's novels are psychic extravaganzas with dense drama with in its outline on existential dimensions. The central characters of Anita Desai's novels also have to make similar choices in similar situations. Thus the works of Anita Desai plays a significant role in the modern scenario where man has to face so many challenges and problems for their successful existence.

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