

# *Existential Concern in the Novels of Anita Desai- A Review*

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**Abstract--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 12) 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. Man's autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his experience of the absurdity and 'nothingness' of life are some of the existential themes which are reflected in the writing of the exponents of existentialism.**

## **1. Introduction:**

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'. [5] 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 some 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." [6]

A great philosopher Sartre have very well explained that existentialism is optimistic so far a 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." [7]

Existentialism is a protest against all forms of rationalism. The existentialists have therefore reacted strongly against the excessive claims of reason. Kierkegaard reacted against Hegeliane 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 look 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." [8] 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." [9]

## 2. Literature Review:

Mr. Desai makes each work of her a haunting exploration of the psychic self. The work is executed so thoroughly that her treatment gets the look of a philosophical system which has been familiar to the world in the form of 'Existentialism'. It is said that in the 50s and 60s Existentialism philosophy had become quiet fashionable among the progressive urban intellectuals. Mr. Desai selects this theory as a suitable theme of her novels. "Existentialism" the meaning of this phase is "the one alone". This become the favourite subject of her novels. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone form the backbone of Desai's themes.

Desai' novels from *Cry*, the *Peacock* to *Journey to Ithac* are a study in the depth and persistence of human affiliation, inexorably sensitive and loving and compassionate as her protagonists are. Existential conflict in Desai spring from the self's craving for the fulfillment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness.

"*Cry, the Peacock*" is the first novel of Mrs. Desai. This book, she has won the Sahitya Academy Award. *Cry, the Peacock* has been considered as "the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English." The story of the novel ideally deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonist Maya. She is the heroine of this novel. She is married to an unsympathetic, rational and down to earth man, Gautam. He is a lawyer. He loves Maya, but he can't understand her emotional feeling. Maya's emotional world is surrounded by her childhood memories. She is over sensitive. She has passed a secured, cozy and pampered childhood. She wants the same love, affection and pampered love from Gautam as her father does. But Gautam is a practical man, as he wants to live a life which is natural. He doesn't believe on fantasy. Maya is lost in her own world seeking solace in her childhood memories. In her childhood, an albino astrologer had predicted that four year after his marriage, one of them would die. This prediction makes her obsessed by the fear of death. Here comes the sense of violence. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impassiveness and indifference weaves the story of *Cry, the Peacock*. Her loneliness, her aching heart and progressive disorientation of self make her an existential character.

"*Voices in the City*" is the second novel. This novel is again about existential quest. It portrays the pitiable plight of Nirode, Monisha and Amla in the city of Calcutta. Calcutta presents as the city of Kali, "Goddess of Death". The novel candidly explores the inner climate of youthful despair and is permeated by the established angst. The novel is parted into four sections, namely 'Nirode', 'Monisha : Her Dairy', 'Amla',

'Mother' – Nirode is the first protagonist of the novel, and brother of Monisha and Amla. He settles down in Calcutta, and becomes absorbed into its bohemian life. He is very sensitive and suffers from Oedipal-fixation and has love-hate relationship with his mother. Monisha, the II protagonist is married. She live in a joint family with her husband. The oppressive lack of privacy, her sterility and her in-law's suspicion, the absence of love and understanding in her life make Monisha a pathetic figure- and thus loneliness becomes the reason of her death, because in the end of the novel she commits suicide. Monisha's younger sister Amla, who is an extrovert by nature, is leading a gay life with painter Dharna. But soon she realizes the hollowness and futility of her. The fourth section "Mother" is not so significant in that she (Mother) does not reside in the city of Calcutta and comes here only to attend Monisha's funeral.

The all three characters of this novel are suffering from loneliness and has a quest of existence. Desai's art of characterization is quiet admirable. She presents the characters in a realistic way. To present the character of Monisha, she has presented the use of Diery. This is really amazing. That's why Anita Desai's characters looks natural.

*Bye- Bye Blackbird*, is the third novel of Mrs. Desai's novel is about Indian immigrants, who settled in London focusing attention on three character 'Dev', 'Adit' and 'Sarah'. The book is divided into three parts e.g. Arrival, Discovery and Recognition and Departure. Dev arrives in England for higher studies, where he stays with Adit Sen and his English wife Sarah. Adit is his friend Adit and Dev both belongs to Calcutta, but Adit lives in England with his wife Sarah, who is an English girl. Adit has settled down in England and enjoying the freedom. Dev comes here for higher studies. He disgusted the Britishers because of their rude behaviour towards the Indian. Dev and Adit all the time makes a discussion with and Adit all the time makes a discussion with different point of view towards England. Adit appreciates British and Britishers and Dev dislikes all this. But in the last section, Adit decides to go back India, to find his real existence and Dev, who criticize him and other Indian immigrant decides to stay in London to make his career. It is ironical. Anita Desai has presented the change of attitude of these character Sarah, the wife of Adit, is also suffering from loneliness, because of her marriage. She has married with a black Indian, and the people of her native country teases her for this. They taunts her and that's why, when Adit ask her to go to India with him, she is agreed.

*Bye-Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai talks something more than life. She set the background of the story of England, the feelings and sufferings of the Indian at that place. All through she has shown some sort of identity crisis, which the characters of the novel suffers.



"Where shall we Go this Summer ? 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 remain 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.

"Fire on the Mountain" lines out the existentialist problems and predicaments of the middle class people particularly women. In this novel, Anita Desai depicts the psyche of Nanda Kaul, who has withdrawn herself from all movements and echoes. She is the wife of Mr. Kaul, who worked as a Vice-Chancellor in Punjab University, but now he is dead. The story is narrated through her point of view. The other important character of this novel is Raka, the great grand daughter of Nanda Kaul. Tired of a life of duties and responsibilities for so long. Nanda Kaul decides to live her life alone in Kasauli at Carignano. This novel is obviously a study of feminine sensibility about Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The bare mountainous terrain and a desert burnt-out bungalow at hill top, which fascinates Raka, symbolizes her psychic void character which is an outcome of her emotional deprivation since she comes from a broken home with a sick mother and an alcoholic father who beats his wife. This atmosphere ruined her childhood. She like to live alone to search the meaning of her life. The third character is Ila Das, who is the friend of Nanda Kaul. She wants as a social welfare officer and tries to stop the child-marriage of Preet Singh's small daughter, whom he is going to marry with an old man. And Preet Singh feel insulted and at the end of the novel he rapes Ila Das and kill her. This is the tragic end of the novel. But the title refers to the last act in the novel. Raka when she sets the forest on fire. Through the murder of Ila Das, Desai repeats the animalistic

existence of the contemporary society despite the progress of civilization. This creation of Anita Desai is again a marvelous once. The intricacy of human relationship is illustrated beautifully in this novel.

In 'Clear light of the Day' Anita Desai portrays the pangs of a sensitive woman Bim. It is also a family drama covering two generations of Das family, but mainly dealing with second generation, that is of the children – Bim. Tara, Raja and Baba. Bim sacrifices for whole lite for her brothers and sisters. She educates them and marries them. She is the eldest member of her family, so she takes cares of her family members after the death of her father. Bim wish to live in world of fantasy. Tara's deep obsession with her childhood is suggestive of her initial inability to comprehend the passage of time. Time plays an important role in the novel. Anita Desai has used the poetry to portrays the characters. In the case of Bim, which poems Mrs. Desai quoted are related to her character and they reflect her feeling and thoughts. But the most significant use of poetry is to be found at the end of the novel when two couplets of Iqbal, set to music, provide the ultimate vision of the novel and by implication this is the clear light of the novel and by implication this is the clear light of the day that dawns upon Bim making her way clear, dispelling all her confusion and giving her a philosophy of life. Clear light of the day breaks new ground in the sense that it dwells on a existentialist theme of time in relation to eternity. The novel is about time as a destroyer and a preserve and about what the bondage of time does to the smooth and unruffled existence of human beings.

Existence in Custody is viewed as an eternal trap. The story of the novel is dealing with two characters – Deven and Nur. Deven is a teacher of Hindi but he is very fond of Urdu poetry and a great fan of – Urdu poet Nur. His friend Murad, an editor, advised him to interview Nur. He promised him that he will publish it, but later he betrays him and Deven feels cheated. Nur, the famous Urdu poet is a very simple and greedy person. When Deven meets to him he become surprised that is he the poet, whom he like so much ? Nur has two wives and both are selfish. When first time Deven meets to Nur he insulted him for being a Hindi teacher, and Deven feels very bad. But when he return to his home he get the letter of Nur, in which Nur called him to give his interview. But Deven is again and again cheated by Murad and Nur, and feel helpless. There are authorial comments about the title meaning that Nur's poetry would be in safe custody of Deven, but the irony is that he is in the custody of Nur's personality and his unending irrational demands. The novelist presents two aspects of his social being, as a husband and as a lecturer, and he is a failure in both of them. It is the story of Deven's struggle for existence. In a limited sense only the novel is open to interpretation of existential philosophy.

In village by the sea existentialism – occurs rather

thinly. Here, through the life of a young village boy Hari, Desai captures the existential predicament of the ruralities undergoing the pangs of a society in transition. Anita Desai describes the village life beautifully in 'Village by the Sea'. It gives the readers an insight into Indian culture and tradition as reflected by the people of Thul ..... Tradition, cultural value and rituals are found almost everywhere in the country, be it the busy cities or the quiet village. In this novel, Hari can do something for his family. The existential theme in his novel takes on a Marxian undertone.

Her Baumgartner's Bombay belongs to the genre of the novel of the 'absurd'. Baumgartner is a rootless Jew who is wandering in the search of his existence. But neither his native country, Germany nor his adopted country India accepts him. He has to leave his own country due to the rise of Nazism. He is a Jew and that's why he is not accepted by Germans as his own citizen and he lives in India till his last breath, but here also people treat him as an outsider. The novel covers a long period of time beginning from Baumgartner's childhood in Berlin and coming down to his murder in Cirea, the late 60s or early 70s. Though Baumgartner is the hero of the novel, but there are many other characters who are connected with him. So we can say that it is the story of a man who always trying to belong. Wanting to be accepted but never accepted. The novel is about Baumgartner's suffering. He has a quest for existence, which he could not get till his death.

Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca is a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. The novel presents the lives of European couple and Egyptian "Mother". Matteo is the hero of the novel. He has a quest of spirituality. He comes to India in the search of divine love. Sophie is the wife of Matteo. She came along with Matteo in India. Sophie is pregnant and Sophie admits in the hospital, and Matteo, after wandering hither and thither, arrives in Bihar at the Ashram of 'Mother'. But one day Sophie finds the diary of 'Mother' and get all secrets of her. She tells him about 'Mother' that she was a dancer in her previous days, and after a long time she becomes 'Mother' and attains sainthood. It commences with Sophie's effort to disillusion Matteo about 'Mother'. After the death of mother Matteo leaves India and becomes a Monk and Sophie thinks that without Matteo her life is meaningless and when she doesn't find Matteo in hospital, she shatters, and starts her journey of quest. Mrs. Desai symbolically presents that Sophie makes her psychic journey in quest of mundane rapture. Whereas Matteo, in quest of divine light.

The novels of Anita Desai reveal her unique world view, but at the same time confirm to the existing tendencies in modern fiction. Her novels are technical innovation which "combine features of both novel and lyrical poetry and shift the reader's attention from men and events to a formal design." She herself prefers the world "pattern" to plot.

"I prefer the world 'pattern' to plot as it sounds – more natural and even better, if I don't use it, is Hopkin's word 'inscape' – while 'plot' sounds arbitrary heavyhanded and artificial, all that I wish to avoid."

Mrs. Desai makes her each work a haunting discovery of the inner psychic self. Desai's female characters are generally neurotic, highly sensitive but alienated in a world of dress and fantasy, separated from their surroundings as an oral come of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. These characters are always differ in their ideas from others and venture on a long voyage of contemplation in order to trace out the meaning of their existence.

As the epigraphs to the chapter suggests technique in fiction includes almost everything that goes into making the novel. Simplistically speaking, technique includes everything that the novelist uses for narrating his story. On finer level it means imagery, symbolism, point of view, chronological order of events, stream of consciousness, schematization of chapter division or some other basis of division of the novel etc. Dialogue, language, characterization and plot are some other aspects of fictional technique.

### **3. 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 becomes 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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