



EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS AS PROJECTED IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF ANITA DESAI: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper at the outset alluringly attempts to delineate the existential dimensions projected in the fictional world of Anita Desai. This paper neatly mirrors Anita Desai's aspirations and dreams, her disappointments and disillusionments in her fictional world. Thus, this paper sum up the fact that Anita Desai as a pioneering writer dines deep into the mysterious landscape of the mind whose characters are the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence and the inward journey of Desai is also a journey for existence.

Key Words: *Existential, Dimensions, Aspirations, Dreams, Disappointment, Mysterious, Existence, Ferocious, Inward, Journey.*

Anita Desai, who holds a significant place in modern Indian English fiction, has now gained a wide acclaim from all literary circles both in India and abroad and her novels have created a niche for themselves in the gamut of Indo-Anglian literature for their novelty and technical brilliance. In her fictional world, she is said to have achieved “that difficult task of moulding the English language and idiom to her purpose without a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian known for her sensitivity in structuring of the pattern of her novels, integrity of artistic vision, imaginative mind, keen observation, sharp awareness and competent craftsmanship, she has become a much sought after writer – sought after by publisher and readers alike” (Shyam 15). Her fiction reflects nothing but her aspirations and dreams, her disappointments and disillusionments. In her opinion, a writer has to assume. The role of a critic or a satirist and his business is to reveal truths. In this respect, she said in an interview:

“After all, what a writer is interested in is revealing truths, telling truths. I think a writer has to assume that role although it's not given to him. He has to seize it and cling to it and hold on to it even others would rather relieve him of it. It is considered a patriarchy unseemly role for a woman to play” (John 38).

Mrs. Desai's fiction is a turning loose of emotional and psychical experiences. It is an expression of life, not a form of escapism. She has observed rather clearly in an essay, “literature cannot be torn away from the fabric of life as if it were decoration embroidery upon it” (Desai 27).

Anita Desai who wrote primarily about the functioning of the human psyche in a subtle and inimitable style is known for the symbolic, sensitive and psychological fiction. Her novels being nominated for the Book prize three times further consolidated her international acceptance and reputation, showcasing her immense dexterity in handling complex interrelationships and probing deep into the psyche of her characters. She has got a distinguished place as her works are different from those of such other Indian women writers as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobba De and Kamala Das. Her fiction has become self-analytical and introspective and the individual's quest for a personal meaning in life has become a theme of unavoidable interest for her. She comes face to face with the intangible realities of life, the innermost depths of the human psyche and the chaotic under world of human mind through her novels. Her distinctive stature as a novelist derives primarily



from the fact that she has made extensive use of the stream of consciousness technique in her novels. Her contribution to fiction writing has been quite commendable and substantial.

Such a distinguished and prominent writer Anita Desai was born in Mussorie to a German mother and a Bengali father on June 24, 1937 and she spent most of her life in New Delhi. Growing, spoke German at home and Hindi to friends and neighbours. She first learned English when she went to Queen Mary's School at Delhi. It the language in which she first learned to read and writes, and so it became her literary language. When asked why English remains her literary language, she said:

“I think it had a tremendous effort that the first thing you saw written and the first thing you ever read were English. It seemed to me the language of books. I just went on writing it because I always wanted to belong to this world of books” (Desai 223).

She had her collegiate education at Miranda House, Delhi University, where she took Bachelor's degree with Honours in English Literature in 1957. She worked for a year in Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta and then got married to Ashvin Desai on Dec 13, 1958. Shortly after her marriage, she started publishing her works. She has to her credit publication of such notable novels as 1.Cry, The Peacock (1963), 2.Voices in the City (1965), 3.Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), 4.Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975), 5.Fire on the Mountain (1977), 6.Clear Light of Day (1980), 7.The Village by the Sea (1982), 8.Baumgartner's Bombay (1989), 9.Journey to Ithaca (1995) and 10.Fasting, Feasting (2000). In the words of K.R.S. Iyengar, Anita Desai is “an original talent that has the courage to go its own way”. As a novelist, she is an innovator. She is more involved in depicting the mental rather than the physical experiences of her character. It is their mental anguish rather than pang of hunger that interests her fictional craftsmanship.

In her fictional world, Anita Desai is found skillfully exploring the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she does endeavour to evaluate and examine the various formidable factors that make existence rather uncomfortable and unendurable. Desai's unquestionable existentialist concerns coupled with her commendable craft, have distinguished her from other novelists both of the older and the younger generations. Unlike R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who confined themselves mostly to the portrayal of outward reality, Anita Desai goes to explore the inner reality, or to her own words, not “the one-tenth visible section of iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean but the remaining nine-tenths of it that it is below the surface” Desai's Replies to the Questionnaire 1). She prefers to delve “deeper and deeper in a character or scene, rather than going round about it” (Jain 66).

For Mrs. Desai, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social religious and moral ideas, but an exploration and an inquiry. Her Cry, The Peacock is an externalization of the interior of Maya's Cocoon. Voices in the City are the reflection of the rattling reverberations of her sensitive characters under the tyrannizing force of the city of Calcutta. Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain are lyrical outbursts of women seeking peace and quiet in life. Clear Light of Day is the story of the slow and reluctant maturing consciousness of a woman wrapped up in the world of fantasies and visions. Since M.R.Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya were writing her life's sake, they chose their characters from amongst the economic and social victims and the victimizers. Anita Desai is concerned with the portrayal of a psychological relativity and as such prefers characters that are peculiar and eccentric rather than general. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:



“Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters” (P464)

Anita Desai, in contrast with other women novelists, is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities. Writing for her, “is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things” (Interview with Yasodhara Dalmia). According to her, her novels “deal with what Ortega y Gasset called the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (4) Her protagonists are none other “persons for whom aloneness alone is the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring”. They are mostly women and for them, the emotional traumas sometimes lead to violent death in the end” (Singh 4). The inward journey of Anita Desai is also a journey for existence, a search for identity and a struggle for self-expression. Her Mayas, Monishas, Sitas, Bims are all in search of existence. The wavering of the volitional powers of Maya, Niroda and Monisha are wish-fulfilling projection of a side of the human psyche making Desai a subjective and psychological writer. The spectacle of suffering among human beings, animals, moths and insects draws Desai’s mind and heart. The sight of human sorrow lacerates her heart as much as that of the insects snapping under the pull of the beak of a sparrow or any small bird. Therefore, she is more preoccupied with the Sombre than with the frivolous side of life.

Maya, in *Cry, The Peacock*, is a tender clinging creeper. She cannot absorb herself in totality in the personality of Gautam, who preaches to her detachment and warns that attachment leads to destruction. But she wants love to satisfy love. She wants expression of emotions and affections to drench her love thirsty heart. She says:

“You know nothing of me – and how I can love.
You have never loved and you don’t love me” (Cry, the Peacock 112)

Maya’s emotional alienation is the existential problem of the novel. Though *Cry, The Peacock* is noted for Desai’s luscious lyricism, deep down the surface of lyricism, there is an undeniable swift current of Desai’s existentialist concern rendering the novel uniquely powerful. No doubt, Desai seems to be deeply obsessed by existentialist dimensions. According to Heinemann, “The problems of existentialism are, in a narrower sense, expressive of the present crises of man, in a broader sense, of the enduring human condition” (P 178). In an interview with Yashodara Dalmia, Desai means the sense “enduring human condition” referred to by Heinemann as she observes, “There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself” (The Times of India 13). While Meena Belliappa considered *Cry, The Peacock* a remarkable attempt to “fuse fantasy with perpetual experience”, (P 25), R.S.Sharma has regarded this novel as “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English” (P 127).

Cry, The Peacock is Maya’s story, the story of her married life with Gautama, and almost the entire story is “remembrance of things past” (Iyengar 465). Here in this novel, Anita Desai ably explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, verges on a curious insanity. In chapters one and two, Desai successfully tunnels into the chaotic world of Maya’s consciousness and her psychic states caused by her morbid preoccupation with death and transcribe them with a remarkable infidelity. Maya’s neurosis also denotes a collective neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of a woman in our contemporary society dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.



The husband-wife alienation engendered by the temperamental incompatibility between the two is an important existentialist theme forming the very core of the novel. Gautama and Maya stand in sharp contrast with each other as opposed archetypes and as such constantly remind us of their counterparts, Rama and Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Gautama is pragmatic unimaginative unromantic man who believes in “detachment on every count”, as the Gita preaches. Maya, on the contrary, is a highly sensitive creature gifted with poetic imagination and neurotic sensibility. The very first chapter of the novel highlights the essential contrast between Gautama and Maya. The sight of dead Toto, her pet dog, is one Maya cannot stand. She thinks “she saw the evil glint of a blue bottle, and grew hysterical” (Cry, *The Peacock* 5). And the sinking sun in the evening appears to her to be “swelling visibly like ... a purulent boil” (P 6). These intensely impressionistic, hysterical responses of Maya set off Gautama’s casual and somewhat cruel remarks such as “The sweeper will do it” and “It is all overcome and drink your tea, and stop crying. You mustn’t cry” (P 6). When he is told that a visitor wants to see him, he indifferently leaves her to herself and then forgets all about dead Toto. The death of Toto which means something traumatic to her means, in fact, nothing to him, suggesting the lack of any possible emotional communication between them.

This gap of communication between husband and wife is well developed throughout the novel. Maya and Gautama always disagreeing tiff with each other even over trifles. Although their marriage has been an utter fiasco, they continue to be together, leading an explosive life of communication. Maya herself reflects upon her unsuccessful marriage:

“... it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility force upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon with which, out of the potties superstition, we could not bear to part” (Cry, *The Peacock* 5)

The alienation between Maya and Gautama is noted basically in his philosophical detachment and imperviousness to “the beautiful yet tremulous” beauty of the natural world. Although he talks of the “basics in life” he remains absolutely untouched by the basics conducive to a successful man-woman relationship. Walking along with Maya, Gautama quotes a beautiful Urdu couplet; but he remains altogether impervious the tender feeling inherent in it:

“Even if each star in the sky were a heart,
What of it? Give me one heart that this
capable of sorrow” (Cry, *The Peacock* 25)

The emotional alienation and the temperamental gulf between Maya and Gautama is well reflected in chapter V.

Standing near Gautama in the moonlight, Maya thinks she is far away from him:

“... Nothing was hidden. All was revealed and it was not what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river across a mountain and would always remain so” (Cry, *The Peacock* 131).

This temperamental incompatibility and the resultant emotional alienation creates in Maya acute mental tension which keeps on mounting page after page in the novel. In the hour of crisis, Maya not only reverts to childhood memories to escape the present but also resort to behaving like a child – crying and bursting into a fit of furious pello-beating – which “sweetly exhausting” releases her pent-up emotions. Maya herself observes:



“The world is like a toy specially made for me,
painted in my favourite colours, set moving to
my favourite tunes” (P 41)

Gautama also calls her “Neurotic”, “A spoilt baby” to whom ‘Life is a fairy tale’.

No doubt, in *Cry, The Peacock*, Anita Desai does explore the turbulent emotional world of her neurotic protagonist, Maya. Neurotic Maya smarts under an acute alienation and insanity. Her neurosis indicates a collective neurosis which ties to shatter the identity of woman in our society as it is dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or she is left to commit suicide. Quite unable to establish rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her arid existence, Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature. The loneliness, corroding her heart and deteriorating her psyche is undoubtedly existentialist. It makes her aware of the loneliness of time and impossible vastness of space. She broods over her awareness:

“For there never was a doubt in my mind, now
that I remember, as to the definite truth that
I did indeed have a place in it. Not only I but
my small dog, whose journey I followed with
my mind, even as my eye traced pattern
after majestic pattern amidst the proud
Constellation” (CTP 29-30).

Her love-wish remains unfulfilled in both the cases. Her neurosis is heightened by her awareness of her horoscope and the macabre prediction of the albino astrologer. She is obsessed by the morbid sense of death which continues throughout her life. She hurls Gautam down to death and ultimately she commits suicide. She has also in her mind the astrologer’s prediction:

“.... my child, I would not speak of it if I saw
It on your face alone. But look at the horoscope.
Stars do not lie. And so it is best to warn
You, prepare you ... Death to one of you. When
You are married and you shall be married young.
.... Death – an early one – by unnatural causes” (CTP 33).

Thus, the astrologer’s prediction assumes the existential dimension and an ominous obsession in Maya. Maya’s moods, obsessions and agonizing abnormality are portrayed effectively as existential dimensions in this novel *Cry, The Peacock*. Maya is “torn between the two worlds, the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness” (Kumar 18). Her insanity prevails over her common sense and ultimately she murders Gautama. Thus, the tragedy of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* results not from the reality of her surroundings or Gautama’s detachment but from her own over-wrought consciousness. The inability of Maya to accept life and death as the two sides of human existence results in her catastrophe.

Monisha in *Voices in the City*, like Maya, is a young wife who is unable to adjust herself to the demands of marriage. She is a sensitive soul oppressed by the stifling city atmosphere of Calcutta. She can no longer tolerate being part of a joint family that leaves her with no privacy. She rebels inwardly against the servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. Monisha, like Nirode, wants to be free, but unlike him, she finds it difficult to free herself of her appurtenances of duties. She longs for privacy and solitude. She longs for the free air of Kalimpong,



“The solitude of the jungles there, the
Aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves
And the earth laid with great fallen
Leaves” (Voices in the city 116)

Silence, solitude, privacy, and her friends – all these are lost to her in Calcutta. The image of a caged tiger, the “proud, glorious beast” in the zoo is suggestive of Monisha’s predicament. In Calcutta, life follows a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. Looking at the woman around her, she asks herself:

“Why are lives such as these lived?
At their conclusion, what solution,
What truth falls into the waiting palm?
Of one’s hand, the still pit of one’s heart” (VIC 121).

All these pettiness, the trivialities of a mean existence overwhelm her. She is aware that most women survive, pretending to forget, pretending to believe in these trivialities, in this meanness of stifling existence. For her, the choice is “between death and mean existence” (P 122). She has no alternative but to stay in the joint family, nor has she the ability to attain detachment. Dr.Jasbir Jain observes:

“But the detachment she achieves,
Like the detachment of Nirode, is not born
Out of experience, but out of fear and
Attachment” (P 33).

Monisha’s suicide is an attempt to rebel against this meaningless death – like isolation. It is an attempt to give a meaning to herself at least in death, she realises that the drama of life has gone by, neither birth nor death had touched her and that there is complete alienation, “an empty white distance’ between her and her fellow beings. “In a flash of visionary intuition, she realises that her action to end it all would be the most courageous, magnificent of all her acts in an uncompromising, unconventional life” (Krishnaswamy 26). Her suicide is preceded by self-knowledge and it asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice. Completely alienated; she sets herself ablaze and dies before help could reach her. Amla’s emotional affair with Dharma manifests her most shattering experience Dharma is unable to offer Amla or promise her two things – permanence and tranquility. Madhusudan Prasad, commenting on their relationship says:

“This relationship has not been given
Stereotyped treatment; instead it
Has been manifested through the medium
Of painting with a striking subtlety” (P 29)

In the words of Prema Nandakumar, “Amla is willing to listen to the call of life’, the voice of sanity. She is the forerunner of some of Mrs.Desai’s future heroines. In Voices in the City, Nirode’s Monisha and Amla make journeys – spiritual journeys. From doubt, frustration and disillusionment, they travel through suffering and stumble their way to solutions of their own. If Nirode accepts it, Amla abjectly surrenders to it and Monisha annihilates herself. They are not concerned with the simple problems of mere existence, but preoccupied with the essentials of existence.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Anita Desai explores the existential dimension of adjustment, belonging and ultimate decision in the lives of three major characters Dev, Adit and Sarah. These characters brood over



their existential problems of loneliness and hollowness, adjustment and sense of belonging that torment them. In Part II of the novel, Dev begins to wander about it London like a tourist, observing a slow change in his attitude towards England:

“And so he walks the streets and parks of the city grateful for its daffodil patches of Sunshine, loathing its sooty, sodden dampness ... It is a strange summer in which he is the bewildered alien, the charmed observe, the outraged outsider thrilled sightseer all at once and in succession (Bye-Bye, Blackbird 95-96).

As the slow change in Dev’s attitude takes place, he feels a strange sort of schizophrenia in him. The symptoms are expressive of his existential dilemma as to whether he should stay on in England or return to his homeland. Standing in the middle of busy Oxford Street Adit burns with longing to see one bullock-cart wander into the fray:

“A slowly meandering, creating bullock-cart,
He prayed, or a monkey wallah with his frocked
And capped monkeys jingling the bells on their
Delicate ankles or a marriage procession
Proceeded by a brass band” (Bye-Bye, Blackbird 218-19)

Adit, like an existentialist, comes to consider him to be a stranger, a non-belonger. Sarah is also an existential character and she wants to know her real identity and therefore she questions herself:

“... They were roles – and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Staring out of the window at the chimney pots and the clouds, she wandered if Sarah had any existence at all and then she wondered with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth” (P 38).

In the final pages, Anita Desai describes her female protagonist Sarah who has no choice and so she surrenders to the decision of her husband. The blackbird in the novel thus stands both for the temptation and the gloom that this temptation creates for the ex-colonial. The novel therefore rightly bids the blackbird a ‘bye-bye’. Mrs. Desai has gone to the extent of calling Bye-Bye Blackbird, “the most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation”. The novel is built upon the theme of crisis of identity. The novelist focuses on the disturbing aspect of loss of identity that immigration necessarily involves. Anita Desai’s account of Sarah’s inner struggle as an existential figure is almost sympathetic to a high degree.

Thus, Anita Desai has projected existential traits in the portrayal of characters in her fictional world. Truly speaking, Desai has never created common characters. Instead, she has written about men and women – the solitary beings who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current life.

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