

Existential Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*

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Existentialism, a philosophical movement emerged in the writings of several nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Man's autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life are some of the existential themes, which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism. The literary works of existentialism insist on actions- including acts of will as the determining things. From this perspective, there are no meanings or structures that precede one's own existence, as one finds in organized religion. Therefore, the individual must find or create meaning for it. Albert Camus felt that meaning in life is to be found in the struggle to be true to oneself and in collaborating with society's collective efforts for peace and prosperity. Absurdity or irrationality of life and the inevitability of death constitute the unavoidable angst or agony of the human condition. Writers like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky had also contributed greatly to the existential notions. Existentialist thought has garnered an unfair reputation for pessimism and even full-blown nihilism. However, nothing in the philosophical train of thought of existentialism dictates a negative view of humanity or reality.

Existentialism has been explored to a great extent in Indian English literature. Among Indian English novelists, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Anjana Appachana, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai are some of the novelists who seriously concentrated on the tenets of existentialism. A study of their perspectives on existentialism provides insights into contemporary issues and themes of alienation, agony, conflict, death, quest for self identity, etc. Anita

Desai dealt with relationships between over-sensitive wives and insensitive husbands and highlighted the mental sufferings and existential angst of her protagonists, mainly women characters. As observed by Singh,

Anita Desai dives deeply, darkly and silently, tries to work out the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the virgin territories of modern life style. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries, turmoil and chaos inside the mind of her characters.¹

Anita Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock* written in 1963 offers an interesting study from the existentialist's perspective. She exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices the silent miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist angst. The problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst. *Cry the Peacock* deals with Maya, the protagonist's psychological disturbances, her neurotic and intensive obsession with death. Maya, the hyper sensitive young housewife is confined in a loveless arranged marriage to a much older man, Gautama who lives only in the harsh realities of the present. Maya on the other hand is full of life, she wants to enjoy all the good things that life can offer. She loves nature, poetry, music, dance, good food and her marriage with Gautama. She prefers to live in the world of the imagination. After the death of her mother, she was brought up with great love and care by her father, like a toy princess, protected from the harsh reality of life. She remembers fondly,

I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens.²

Maya's husband Gautama, on the contrary, is unable to relate to her world, he cannot understand her extreme sensitiveness, her quest for the simple pleasures of life, to be true to herself. Gautama considers her desires as

childish and does not bother to respond to her. Maya's restlessness and anxiety is about the realization that her quest for a fulfilling life with Gautama was impossible as they were distanced by their different sensibilities and attitudes. When all efforts to get Gautama involved in her life fails and he is unresponsive to her desperate calls for intimacy, she realizes the futility of their relationship. Maya's brooding is well conveyed to the readers by Desai in her narrative,

But then he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold...³

Kierkegaard's philosophy of alienation states that individuals are alienated from themselves and their surroundings which are unfavourable and hostile. Philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre also discussed existential alienation. According to Sartre, we are responsible for our own actions and when we refuse to take responsibility for our actions we experience a sense of alienation. This realization leads to anxiety and anguish, which subsequently leads to alienation and loneliness. Anita Desai in *Cry the Peacock* intricately portrays the sense of loneliness and anguish in Maya's mind, her trauma of being caught in two simultaneous worlds, of past and present and her inability to reconcile to the realities of life. Desai very systematically and gradually portrays Maya's existential dilemma, her search for self-identity. The conflict between aspirations and the harsh reality of existence have a crumpling effect on Maya's inner being. Her constant quest to be true to her inner self is the cause of her suffering. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and shows little inclination to take up adult responsibilities even though she has been married for four years to Gautama, a successful and prosperous lawyer. Moreover the prediction of the albino astrologer about the death of her husband or herself in the fourth year of her marriage haunts her. It gradually gains ascendancy in her mind till it becomes an obsessive fear. Maya is afraid to share her fears with her husband and at the same time she cannot cope with the practical world of her husband and feels dejected, lonely and demoralized. Maya's

life is full of tensions, disappointments, anxieties and fears. Subsequently her mental condition deteriorates as her psychological suffering intensifies in the four years of marriage.

Anita Desai uses several symbolic incidents to convey to the readers Maya's psychic condition. Maya's inconsolable agony at the death of her pet dog and Gautama's mechanical response that he would bring her another dog clearly highlights the lack of understanding between Gautama and Maya, and brings out the disparity in their characters. Her extreme sorrow at the death of her pet dog is an indication of her hyper sensitive mind. Her husband, Gautam, on the other hand, was unable to understand the extent of the trauma in her mind. Once Maya had requested her husband to take her to see the Kathakali dancers, which he abruptly refused to do. Her great love for music is also considered inappropriate by her husband. These minor conflicts have a lasting impression on Maya's psychology. She holds her husband responsible for standing between her and her aspirations, a hindrance to the fulfillment of her desires. Maya constantly compares her father's character to that of Gautama, this further enhances her despair.

Gautama is impatient and irritated with what he considers to be her 'father fixation' and emotional cravings and Maya cannot understand his involvement in his world of work. Maya constantly compares her father's character to that of Gautama, this further enhances Maya's reminiscences of her past life, of her childhood memories that bring back to her the disturbed incidents of her life and crowd her mind and terrify her into insanity. Basically kind and genuinely fond of his wife, Gautama tries to reach out to her but fails to establish a satisfying emotional rapport because of the diversity in their view points and temperaments. Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude brings out the conflict in Maya. Maya's interior monologue reveals Gautama's detached attitude.

Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me.... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another

thought to me...it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me.⁴

At first glance, Maya's melancholy appears groundless in the face of her having everything that is conducive to leading a reasonably happy and comfortable life. In the usual course of things self-examination normally has a curative effect but in the mental processes of mind under neurotic stress, as it was in the case of Maya, even self-examination ends up as a flight of fancy of the zigzag path of associations and as such it cannot be called 'analysis', it serves only to churn an already agitated mind.

Anita Desai powerfully depicts the inner conflicts of her women protagonists who have been deprived of their basic rights by a male dominated society. Women in general are compelled by societal norms to project an inauthentic self image. However, the intense conflict in projecting that image leads to hopelessness and misery. Women like Maya need to assert their individual need to create a new image thus conflict is inevitable to succeed. This awareness of a new image puts women in conflicting situations. When the existential crisis is unbearable they protest, rebel against the existing power structure. Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude brings out the conflict in Maya.

Maya's love for her protective father and her rebellious brother, her inconsolable grief at the death of her pet dog are intended as indexes of her sensitive and sensuous temperament and present a natural foil to the dry intellectualism of her husband, Gautama. All the main characters in the novel have a well defined attitude to life. Maya's father was content to base his life on the fatalistic creed of acceptance. Gautama believes in detachment. Arjun thrives on 'protest' and rebellion while Maya has no such creed to lean on which could satisfy her yearning to love and be loved intensely and totally. She blames her husband for her existential problems, for her loneliness and suffering and as he prevents her from doing what she wants to do, she harbours an unconscious, unreasonable desire to kill him so that he does not interfere in her life. Her marriage to Gautama was never successful; in fact it is responsible for gradually

turning her into a psychopath as her emotional needs could not be satisfied by her husband, who was too practical.

An extremely sensitive and sensuous Maya rebels against the rationalism of Gautama, against his Vedanta philosophy of detachment. She suffers from anxiety, fear and insecurity, which leads her to insanity, violence and self destructiveness. Maya's inability to understand her husband is the main cause of her suffering. She holds Gautama responsible for. His practical approach to situations was a striking contrast to her emotional approach. Desai uses appropriate images to bring out the emotional ethos of the novel and enhance its aesthetic appeal.

The very title of the novel, *Cry the Peacock*, is an indication of the anguished mind of Maya. A clue to the irony of Maya's fate is hinted at in the title's reference to the 'cry' or the mating call of the peacock. Peacocks are generally said to fight before they mate. Desai uses this significance of life and death, their passion in the face of death symbolically in the case of Maya. Maya in a state of insanity, in a frenzied state kills her husband resulting in the ultimate catastrophe. Later, in a complete state of insanity, she explains the episode very casually thus,

And then Gautama made a mistake – his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshiped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. 'Gautama' I screamed in fury and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom.⁵

Existential angst, an important theme of existentialism, includes feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, fear or agony. The causes of the angst are inexplicable, it is not related to any particular condition, and it can be generalized as the fear of meaninglessness in life. Anita Desai's writings have generated immense interest in scholars. Literary scholars have appreciated her handling of simple, everyday ordinary experiences in a manner which signifies their universal existential appeal. The portrayal

of Maya's character is so sensitive that readers sympathize with her helpless situation, in her struggle to lead a life of meaningful existence. B. Chitra's aptly comments that,

Cry The Peacock is a brilliant study of the abnormal psychology of its neurotic protagonist, Maya. She is an enigma. Her moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormalities are conveyed effectively by Desai.⁶

Anita Desai received critical acclaim both in India and abroad. The western audience appreciated Desai's insights and attention to minute details. She expresses, as observed by Naik, a 'uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the West'.⁷ In the perspective of the concerns and themes of the women writers, Anita Desai occupies a significant position. Unlike the other contemporary women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala or Nayantara Sehgal who focussed on the changing social scenario of Indian society, Desai took the lead in exploring the troubled sensibility of the modern women, in projecting the inner psyche of her protagonists and in bringing to the forefront the existential agony of women.

Works cited -

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