

Anita Desai as an Existentialist
Exploring the Emotional Turbulence and Chaotic Inner World

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Anita Desai

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the emotional turmoil of protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai. The female sex felt oppressed because of the chaotic condition of their life. In order to lead a meaningful and peaceful life, the woman should reach into her own self to bring out her potentiality and lead a life without depending on others. Desai brings out the suffering of women in the hands of men. Men believed that women should follow the rules and regulations, culture and tradition of the society which become as an obstacle for the independence of women. All the leading characters of her novel want to be independent and free from the sufferings both in the inner and outer worlds.

Keywords: Anita Desai, existentialist, sufferings, alienation, self, husband-wife relationship, oppression, emotional world.

Exploring the Emotional Ecology

In contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction, Anita Desai is indisputably a serious artist of a very high order skillfully exploring the emotional ecology of her protagonists who feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in the present chaotic conditions, even while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities in life. Her unquestionable existentialist concerns coupled with her commendable

craft have rather significantly distinguished her from other novelists both of the older and the younger generations. Standing distinctly apart from all the practicing novelists Mrs. Desai stands above many making literary endeavour so as to evaluate the various formidable factors that make human existence rather uncomfortable and unendurable. Earnestly committed to the novel as an art-form, she practices her craft with remarkable sincerity, skill and seriousness.

Born in Mussorie on 24th June 1937, Anita Desai started writing even at the age of seven and published a few considerable pieces in children's magazines. She was educated first at Queen Mary's School and then at Miranda House, Delhi University where she took her B.A. degree in English literature in 1957. Having worked for a year in Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta, she got married to Asvin Desai through whom she had four children. In her writing career she got richly influenced by many factors, especially her poetic imagination being fertilized by diverse influences, out of which her literary creations came to limelight. That is why even her very first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, published in 1963, was considered a trend-setting novel, as it dealt with the psychic rather than with the physical aspects of its characters in sheer poetic terms. This novel was hailed as a significant achievement in Indo-Asian fiction and Desai's "remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience" (Bellappa 25).

Cry, the Peacock

Cry, the Peacock may be termed as a poetic novel. Maya, a spoiled and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin, is married to Gautama, a rather insensitive, pragmatic and rational advocate who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from electro-complex and looks for a typical father image in her husband. In her childhood, an albino astrologer had predicted that four years after her marriage, one of them would die and that prediction makes her feel obsessed by the fear of death. As an afterthought, she feels that one of the two would be Gautama. So, she kills him by pushing him off the parapet and then commits suicide. 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 use 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" (Replies to the Questionnaire 1). She prefers to delve "deeper and deeper in a character or scene, rather than going around about it" (Jain 66). She prefers the private to the public world. For her, 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.

Neurotic Protagonist, Maya

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai skillfully 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" (Prasad 3). In the words of Atma Ram, "The perfect novel achieves the perfect balance, with just as much story or as much fantasy as its structure can bear no more".

R.S. Sharma goes to the extent of considering *Cry, the Peacock* as "the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English" (P 127).

The very opening part of the novel depicts what leads Maya to her neurosis. Maya, a childless young wife married to a reputed lawyer, Gautama, who is twice her age and a friend of her father, is

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described mourning over the death of her dear dog, Toto. The death motif is built skillfully into the very structure of the story. Maya, though obsessed by death from the beginning, is achingly responsive to the poetic beauty of life. The resultant tension in her projects the misery of her existence very well. Maya's death-wish is ultimately transferred totally to Gautama who indulges in a long discussion on death with her. Chapter seven depicts a fierce dust storm reflecting the inner emotional storm of Maya and also describes how Maya leads Gautama to the roof and hurls him down to death.

In the concluding part, Anita Desai depicts Maya's regression to an infantile state, to the world of her father, and her final leap to death which very well balances the structure of the novel.

A Novelist of Moods

Truly speaking, with all her attempts at variety, Anita Desai remains primarily a novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind or psyche. Most of her novels are nothing but extended narratives of states of "Being". She sees the world in terms of experience as it emerges from the encounter of the experiencing self with the world outside. Her protagonists are usually sensitive women who, haunted by a peculiar sense of doom, withdraw into a sequestered world of their own.

Anita Desai dwells on the variety and complexity of this limited world with the sensitivity and imagination of a poet. One reads her novels like longer poems drawn mostly from those corners of life where no poetry seems to exist. Desai seems to be struggling in her art towards the mastery of a violence which seems to threaten not only her protagonists but also her own self.

Right from *Cry, the Peacock*, this violence which has persisted in her work as a kind of inevitability, forces one to conclude that it has some kind of metaphysical or psychological significance not yet explored and analysed. As Madhusudan Prasad has put it, "Desai seriously sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments" (P 139).

Existentialist

Essentially, Desai is a novelist of existentialist concerns, chiefly considering what F.H. Heinemann describes as "the enduring human condition". In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life, detachment, isolation and time as a fourth dimension, focusing on how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life. Her treatment of the basic human condition that remains almost the same, despite the day-to-day changes, bears out what she remarks, in her interview with Yasodhara Dalmia, "the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence".

Focus on Characters

In her novels, Anita Desai has concentrated strictly on characters rather than the social milieu. She has never created common characters; instead, she has written about individual 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 of life.

Husband-Wife Alienation

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The husband-wife alienation engendered by the temperamental incompatibility between the two is an important existentialist theme. It forms the very core of the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*. Gautama and Maya stand in sharp contrast with each other as opposed archetypes and as such constantly remind us of their counterparts, Raman and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The communication gap 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. Maya herself reflects upon her unsuccessful marriage:

“... it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forces upon us from outside, and therefore neither true or lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon with which, ... we could not bear to part” (*Cry, the Peacock* 5).

The clash between the irreconcilably different temperaments of Maya and Gautama is highly significant throughout the novel which teem many episodes denoting the lack of communication between them. One such trifling as Gautama’s inability to distinguish the smell of lemons from that of petunias surprises Maya, indicating that they do not share any common sensibility or understanding:

“... the blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different: of much stronger, crisper character they seemed cut out of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, into curving, scimitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent too, was more vivid – a sour, astringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxiety, for now, when his companionship was a necessity, I required his closest understanding” (CTP 21).

Impossibility of Any Communication

Another episode, denoting the impossibility of any communication between Maya and Gautama, is one in which she expresses to him her desire to go south to see the Kathakali dances. She says:

“I want – I want to see the Kathakali dances. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages. They say they go on for days and days. And the dancers are all man and they wear such fantastic masks. And the drums.... The masks they wear – you must have seen them? And their costumes. And the special kind music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight – and perhaps they have torches. Yes, I suppose they dance by torch light” (CTP 48).

But Gautama dismisses her desire in a matter of - fact way, without caring for the intensity of her desire. He remarks:

“I suggest, you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi, as it is bound to sometime – perhaps in winter. It will be less expensive” (P 49).

Alienation Between Maya and Gautama

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

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relationship. Maya's obsessive love of the beautiful, the colourful, the sensuous and the picturesque in life, standing in sharp contrast with Gautama's philosophical detachment in life, serves an essential purpose in *Cry, the Peacock* where Maya, stifled by the loss of her freedom, feels lonely but not free. Unable to establish rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her arid existence, Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature writhing helplessly in an indifferent world. The loneliness, corroding her heart and deteriorating her psyche is undeniably existentialist and it makes her aware "of the loneliness of time, and impossible vastness of space" (TP 29).

Maya's obsession with death, coupled with her insanity, leads her to think that "it was now to be either Gautama, or I". And finally, she opts for Gautama who, when killed, will not miss life, as he is admittedly "detached" and indifferent to life.

Cry, the Peacock* and *Voice in the City

In this respect, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai skillfully explores an "enduring" existentialist predicament with her profound understanding of human psychology. Though apparently a realistic novel, *Voices in the City* deals meticulously with "the ferocious assaults of existence" of the "monster" mega polis, Calcutta on the three major characters in the novel – Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The novelist delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters in *Voice in the City*. An uncrowned queen of the inner emotional world, especially of women, Anita Desai is an excellent adept in externalizing the internal and portraying the memorable movements of quiet tortured musings. She is at her best in delineating the silent introspections and retrospections of the angst-ridden characters in her fictional world. In this regard, K.R.S. Iyengar aptly observes:

"... in Anita Desai's two novels, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lighting, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility –" (P 464).

According to Madhusudan Prasad, "Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters in *Voices in the City*" (P 22). For R.S. Singh, in *Voices in the City* "the theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship" (P 171). Nirode, Monisha and Amla all appear to be trapped in the coils of "the monster city", Calcutta. They all gaspingly grapple with the monster for their survival – and this constitutes the main motif of this novel. Without meaning any exaggeration, *Voices in the City*, is in a way, an epic on Calcutta. Desai in this respect surely reminds us of Charles Dickens, James Joyce and Lawrence Durrell who have written epic-novels on England, Dublin and Alexandria respectively. In a nutshell, *Voices in the City* is unquestionably a powerful novel of Anita Desai and is in no way, less significant than her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai's effective existentialist approach, her successful attempt to bring to life a crowded metropolis like Calcutta in all its disgusting ugliness and sordidness, her deep probing into the inner dim domains of her major characters, her striking symbolism, her telling imagery and the resultant textual density of the novel – all reveal her genius. In a word, *Voice in the City* is a good addition to the fast-swelling corpus of Indo-Anglian fiction.

To Conclude

To conclude, her characters, independent, acerbic, agonized, frustrated, somewhat dominating and combating with angry defiance their individual problems and predicaments, make any reader feel that he has noticed them all in his neighbourhood – and herein lies the charm of Desai's art characterization. One of the important elements in his fictional art is that in her novels, Mrs. Desai is found painting ornate, engrossing portraits of the outer world with its rich peripheral details, projecting the turbulent chaos of the inner world of her protagonists. This is true of *Voices in the City* and *Cry, the Peacock*.

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