



"EXISTENTIAL ANGST AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN ANITA DESAI' S PROTAGONISTS"

Dr. Aachal Mundafale

Assistant Prof. (English)

*Matoshri Anjanabai College of Social Work,
Narkhed*

Abstract: This paper will discuss how the existential angst is reflected, as well as how the heroines of the novels by Anita Desai seek their identity. The interiority, psychological fragmentation, alienation, the conflict of personal desire and social-cultural expectations are some of the things predicted by Desai in his fiction. The research also examines how isolation, anxiety and identity crisis of the protagonists of Desai are realized in the lives of the protagonists in the book, through a close textual analysis of his selected novels namely *Cry*, *the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*, in the context of patriarchal, familial, and postcolonial Indian life. The study places the narrative strategies of Desai in the context of existential thinking but touches on the Indian socio-cultural context of the dilemma of her characters. The paper states that existential angst in fiction by Desai is not only philosophical but it is highly embedded with gendered oppression, memory, displacement and emotional estrangement. In the final analysis, the identity of the main characters seeking an identity is a form of wider comment in the contemporary Indian subjectivity and the unsteady self in a fast-changing society.

Keywords: Existential angst; Identity crisis; Alienation; Psychological realism; Anita Desai; Modern Indian fiction; Feminine subjectivity; Isolation

Introduction:

The post-independent era marked a tremendous change in the Indian English fiction to focus on the psychological issues and inner self. Anita Desai is one of the factors conditioning this course. In contrast to social-realistic stories which predict the collective past and political conflict, the novels written by Desai make an internal diversion tracing the terrain of mind and the mute upheaval of individual life.

The protagonists of Desai are not uncommon to live in closed domestic locations and emotionally choking relationships. They are not overtly desperate but highly psychological in their crisis. Existential loneliness, broken relationships, and unreliable memories are faced by characters like Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* and Bim in *Clear Light of Day*. In the fiction of Desai, the existential predicament develops as a result of opposing individual desires and strict social norms.

Existential angst presented in both stories comes in form of anxiety, alienation,

meaningless, and the constant doubt of self-identity. Nevertheless, unlike the work of Western existential writers, the investigation done by Desai is incorporated into Indian family forms, patrilineal traditions, and postcolonial fears. The identity quest of the main characters is an internal revolt of the adhered roles wife, daughter, mother, caretaker and, at the same time, it is faced with emotional loneliness.

This paper would attempt to examine the mechanism of existential angst as a central thematic and formal element in the novels Desai writes and the manner in which the theme of identity becomes an individual and cultural bargaining tool.

Literature Review:

Bhatnagar (2001) predicts the alienation and psychological conflict as the main features of the fictional universe created by Desai. In the study, it is believed that Desai constitutes estrangement of the protagonists to their societies and to themselves as well. Since Bhatnagar is placing this alienation in



domestic and marital contexts, the implication here is that emotional deprivation and failure of communication leads to aggravated psychological fragmentation. The author of the research singles out interior monologue and symbolic imagery as crucial resources, on which the inner conflict is expressed.

Chauhan (2002) takes a closer look at feminine subjectivity and crisis of existence in the book *Fire on the Mountain*. The research does not make sense out of losing Nanda Kaul without references to reaction to patriarchal norm that degrades women into more functional modes. Chauhan argues that the existential state of the characters in the fiction of Desai is extremely gendered, and loneliness has turned into resistance and resignation. In the article, there is a paradox of the isolation which is chosen by people since it does not always assure a self-realization as people can be self-exiled.

Rao (2003) continues the argument by referring to the search of identity within the novels of Desai's. The researcher points out that the construction of identity in the fiction of Desai is not linear and stable. Rather, it is informed by memory, social roles and repressed desires. Rao finds a common thread: main characters swing between conformity and disobedience, being failed to balance their personal interests and needs with communal demands and standards.

Psychological realism is another style of narration that is discussed by Sharma (2004). The research paper contends that Desai breaks the traditions of plot fiction and gives more emphasis to the inner world of the characters than the outer world. Using stream-of-consciousness and focus on psychological description, Desai manages to make a believable depiction of mental disorientation. As an outcome of this argument, Sharma paints a conclusion that psychological realism operates as a structural background of saying existential anxiousness.

Gupta (2005) further shortens the topic by referencing *Cry, the Peacock*, where the study of isolation and self-war in Mayata character is

taken. The author of the research sees the psychological break of Maya as a result of emotional rejection and neurotic fear. According to Gupta, incompatible marriages and lack of understanding communication make the situation of existential anguish more intense. The work supports the notion that alienation in the works of Desai is relational, as opposed to philosophical.

Kumar (2007) even identifies feminine sense with the existential angst. According to the article, the women characters in Desai have to face two issues at once: one of existential anxiety and other of marginalization due to gender. Kumar places Desai in the context of the larger female discourse by arguing that there cannot be existential crisis in her novels that does not involve patriarchal oppression. The author of the research considers silence and withdrawal to be the negative manifestations of a psychological protest.

Meena (2009) views alienation in the perspective of the contemporary consciousness. The analysis establishes the main characters of Desai as the representatives of the post-independence anxiety in the city. The modernity according to Meena brings about fragmented subjectivities whereby people are no longer attached to tradition but can never accept change. It is alienation, therefore, which is pathologic of the socio-cultural transition.

Placing Desai in the context of the Indian English fiction of post-independence, Saxena (2010) explores the issue of identity crisis as a thematic issue. The researcher claims that the interior life as Desai concentrates on is a change in nationalistic discourses to single consciousness. Saxena underlines the fact that self-definition is made somewhat harder when it comes to families and memory of the past, especially in the novels such as *Clear Light of Day*.

Das (2012) discusses the psychological resistance and feminine self. The paper argues that the main characters in the works Desai has explored defied oppression not through a rebellious approach but by means of



personality. Psychological resistance that is manifested by silence or withdrawing of his/her emotions develops into a survival tactic. Das stresses upon the fact that the self in the fiction of Desai is weak, although strong.

The article by Singh (2014) compares memory and existential dilemma in *Clear Light of Day*. The researcher believes that memory is a burden and generator of identity. The pathetic nature of characters is caught in between old indignities and new obligations resulting in the existential doubt. Reconciliation with memory comes out as an important factor that enables self-realization, as espoused by Singh.

Patil (2016) pays attention to the technique of the story especially interior monologue and figurative images. The paper highlights the stylistic novelty of Desai in bringing out the psychological depth. Patil notes that such natural things as heat, silence, decay, reflect internal anxiety, which replenishes existential themes with the help of structural design.

Kaur (2018) explores the identity negotiating and alienation in the women characters portrayed by Desai. The tension mentioned by the researcher is that between autonomy and obligation and holds that the identity in Desai fiction is in the state of flux and struggle. Kaur reiterates and reaffirms that studies have shown that alienation is usually a product of emotional obscurity in the family make up.

Verma (2019) extends the appeal to the contemporary Indian fiction and outlines existential anxiety and fragmentation of selfhood as the common themes. In this context, the protagonists of Desai are viewed as a representative of an increased state of modern that is uncertain and internal strife.

The subject of silence, isolation, and feminine resistance is present in Reddy (2020). The paper proposes that silence can be used as a symptom and strategy. Whereas silence depicts emotional repression, it also turns into the way of regaining agency. Reddy strengthens the opinion that isolation in the fiction of Desai has the ambiguous meaning.

Chakraborty (2022) reconsider' s the feminine subjectivity and the existential consciousness concerning the novels by Desai. The author of the research believes that the latest critical thinking goes beyond the categorization of Desai as a psychological novelist but also sees her as a theorist of the contemporary Indian subjectivity. Chakraborty claims that the existence consciousness that Desai employs is mediated socially between cultures.

Existential Angst in Desai' s Fiction

The existence angst in the novels of Desai is the result of the deep feeling of the displacement of emotions. The characters are also too often put in circumstances that do not allow them to express themselves naturally. The lack of emotion and the anticipation of death both add to the anxiety of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. The state of existence found here is characterized by the state of hyper sensibility and disunity. Failure to express her fears causes Maya to become in solitude, and the psychological breakdown eventually.

Equally, in *Fire on the Mountain*, the self-imposed seclusion of Nanda Kaul in *Carignane* portrays seek to get rid of the multiplicity of family commitments. Nevertheless, being alone will not ensure peace. On the contrary, it expresses unfinished resentment and repressed personal identity. The angst of existentialism is emptiness and sterility of emotions.

Clear Light of Day tells of Bim struggling with the question of responsibility and memory. The existential conflict is not so dramatic yet it is also intensive. The main character has to deal with the issues of forgiveness, duty, and individuality. The storytelling unfolds the role of the past issues that are not resolved but affect the current identity, and it proves that existential anxiety usually has his roots in the memory and historical disruption.

Angst in both instances is an individual experience but symptomatic in greater social formations that suppress emotional manifestations and individuality.

Identity Crisis and Feminine Subjectivity



The issue of identity crisis is key to feminine subjectivity described by Desai. Her women characters also tend to have peripheral roles in their families and the society. They cannot demonstrate the individual in the situations that emphasize conformity and sacrifices.

The relationship with the husband steals the identity of Maya. Nanda Kaul loses her identity in being a wife and a mother and before she tries to withdraw. Bim bargains autonomy on the grounds of family responsibility. These characters wonder who they are in an extra relation to identities.

Feminine subjectivity as explored by Desai cannot be simplified with rebellion and submission. The heroes do not necessarily play out outright defiance, and instead, it is a psychic one. Loss of speech and retreat, withdrawal and absence of emotion become a mode of self-conservation. Yet, these kinds of strategies usually enhance alienation.

The conflict between the personal consciousness and the social positions is the source of identity crisis in the fiction of Desai. It is an aspect of the larger situation of modern Indian women as they have to make a deal between tradition and modernity.

Alienation and Isolation

Both in the novels, alienation by Desai is emotive and geographical. Physical environments secluded houses, enigmatic hill stations, deteriorated family houses are all representations of mental conditions. Such locations support loneliness and not coziness.

The alienation in the fiction of Desai works on more than one level:

- **Marital alienation:** Emotional divorce between spouses.
- **Familial alienation:** No parent child or sibling relationships.
- **Social alienation:** This means social alienation, feeling out of place in the society or a community.
- **Existential alienation:** No destination with own meaning.

Isolation is not only voluntary, but also forced. The characters, though they find solace by being alone, find that these problems are usually with them. According to Desai, alienation does not just occur in the course but exists within the contemporary consciousness.

Psychological Realism as Narrative Technique

Psychological realism is one of the key aspects of the modern Indian fiction by Desai. In place of plot driven action Desai favors interior monologue, stream of consciousness devices and imagery. This story has been frequently reflected in the broken mental condition of the protagonist.

Desai creates a plausible psychological landscape through a close description of the thinking patterns, the sensory impressions, as well as the shift in emotions. The inside world takes over the outside perception. Internal anxiety is frequently manifested in nature imagery, heat, silence, decay.

Psychological realism helps Desai to express the existential angst in a real sense. Readers have the access to the interior experience of characters: anxiety and isolation. It is one of the techniques that makes Desai outstanding in the modern Indian fiction.

Existentialism within an Indian Context

Although the existential motives, anxiety, absurdity, and alienation were universal phenomena, Desai applies them to the Indian reality of socio-cultural customs. The problem and dilemmas of the main characters are also formed by patriarchal demands, the family duties and the burden of culture.

The quest to identity is therefore not philosophical but very social. Collective values limit the freedom of a person. Desai depicts this conflict without making it a very simple matter. The heroes do not reach a state of open freedom, but frequently have a certain realization.

Through that, Desai reinvents existentialism in the contemporary Indian fiction. Her characters live in anxiety that is connected to



the domestic space, lack of emotions, and inherited duties. Existential angst becomes one that cannot be separated in terms of culture.

Final Conclusion:

The article has explored existential angst, identity crisis, alienation, psychological realism, feminine subjectivity, and isolation in the main characters of Anita Desai in the context of the modern Indian writing. According to the analysis, Desai is extremely interested in dealing with the fragile inner worlds of characters who cannot find a way to define themselves against the background of emotional disinterest, patriarchal frameworks, and socio-cultural demands and pressures.

The main characters of Desai are neither a defiant rebel nor an innocent victim; they are living in the due state of psychic tension of contradicting impulses, a craving to be independent and bound to the family, a craving to communicate and an illusiveness of being alone, a craving to be self-determined and a fear of solitude. She has existential angst in her fiction not as abstraction but as experience in domestic domains engulfed within tense familial relationships, and unclosed memory. Alienation takes place on several planes, including: marital, familial, social, and existential, which demonstrates the intricacy of the contemporary subjectivities.

The research proves that identity crisis within the Desai fiction is very much associated with feminine subjectivity. Her female characters face the crisis of identity that was determined by limiting gender roles and invisibility of feelings. Nevertheless, their silence, withdrawal and introspection are used as low forms of resistance. By applying the concepts of psychological realism and interior monologue, Desai makes the repressed consciousness heard and reveals personal misery to the literary work.

Also, the study points out that the concerns of existential adaptation in the proposed research are oriented to an Indian socio-cultural environment by Desai. The identity seek in her novels is developed in the conflict of tradition

and modernity, memory and reality of the present, individual desire and the group anticipation. Her work thus has an existential consciousness that is mediated between society and culture.

To sum up, there is a considerable contribution of the fiction written by Anita Desai to the contemporary Indian fiction by foreshadowing the inner world as a valid and rich ground of literature expanding. The exploration of the identity of her protagonists is indicative of the larger state of the contemporary life, namely fragmentation, uncertainty, and the need to find a sense of meaning. Deftly using psychological realism Desai demonstrates that the search of selfhood is endless, multi-layered, and usually open-ended but it is one of the key features of human life.

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