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PLACE OF ANITA DESAI'S IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE IN MODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism as a philosophy is historically and culturally of European origin. Ever since it was recognised as the dominating philosophy of the West in the mid- twentieth century, it has left “its impact on literature has both been substantial and significant (Chatterji 10). Existentialism does not offer a set of doctrines or a single philosophy system. It has been diversely defined and interpreted by various thinkers over the years. As a result, as a philosophy, existentialism by its very nature defies and abhors systematisation” (Ahmad 10). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain traits of this school of thought. All the existentialists “emphasise the importance of the individual as well as his freedom and responsibility for being what he is.

INTRODUCTION

These tenets of existentialism have been widely reflected in the literature of the world since the advent of Sartre who established an interaction between literature and philosophy in his writings. John Macquarrie sums up the essence of existentialism as, “On the whole, it has been the tragic sense of life... that has been prevalent among the existentialists” (Macquarrie 164). Almost all great writers of the present generation have handled the doctrines of existentialism in their works. This is the main reason why “man’s alienation, dread, absurdity, bad faith, responsibility, commitment to freedom, anguish are the very hallmarks of 20th century literature” (Ahmad 5).

As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices “the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments” (Prasad 139). A woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life. This draws her attention to the darker side of life. She projects a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in hostile situations. Desai further examines her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves forced into uncongenial environments, fighting against the odds. This problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst [1].

Starting from her first novel *Cry the Peacock* to the latest Baumgartner’s *Bombay*, all her novels highlight the existentialist’s predilection for portraying the predicament of man. Many critics have traced shades of existentialist thought in the novel of Anita Desai. Time and again her themes and characters have been interpreted in the light of existential philosophy. In this regard it has been pointed out: Desai’s chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is she

existential predicament of an individual, which she projects through incompatible couples- very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. She is a minute observer and perceives everything minutely, minutely and delicately. Whenever she creates a poetical situation, she gives it a perfect poetic treatment to every detail (Singh 12) Anita Desai's characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. 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 and chaos in the minds of characters. Particularly *Fire on the Mountain* has been identified as "the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism" (Gupta 185). A close study of the texture and theme of the novel in relation to the tenets of existentialism justifies the above observation. It has been noted that "*Fire on the Mountain* displays skillful dramatisation of experiences of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life" (Choudhury 77). This novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel [2].

Fire on the Mountain falls into three sections, each further divided into several short chapters of unequal length. The first section titled "Nand Kaul at Carignano" runs into ten chapters. This section deals with Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist's lonely life in Kasauli. "Raka comes to Carignano" forms the second section and it contains twenty one chapters. It portrays Nanda Kaul's change of attitude towards Raka, her great granddaughter. The final section "Ila Das leaves Carignano" is divided into thirteen chapters. This section presents the tragic end of Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. In all, the book runs to 145 pages. The structural unity, as suggested by the section captions is offered by Carignano, Nanda Kaul and Raka, running counter to one another complemented by that of Ila Das also provide unity of structure. Like the other works of Anita Desai, the present novel contains neither any story value nor events that are interesting by themselves. The entire novel revolves round the existential angst experienced by the women protagonists [3].

In this novel, "the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end" (Indira 96). The story revolves round the inner lives of the two female protagonists, Nand Kaul and Raka. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr.Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She is leading a life of isolation and introspection. She shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. But this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano to convalesce after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. But as days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself

drawn towards Raka, something she had not expected. But the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude.

The sudden shift from the interior monologue about her bitter past to the present observation of the jackal crying, the latter superimposed on the former brings out Raka's predicament. By doing this, the novelist likens the haunting memories to the crying jackals. So Raka's life is a close encounter with things that are wild and frightful- be it the memories of her mother beaten to pulp by a drunkard father or the chilling cry of the jackals. Instead of trying to escape from this harsh and unnerving experiences and memories, Raka goes farther and deeper into them as if to fathom the bottom of such wild realities. After some initial hesitation, she ventures deep down the ravine to the Monkey Point- a place not frequented by others and from where the cries of the jackals are heard: No one ever came here but Raka and the cuckoos that sang invisibly. These [the cuckoos] were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in gray.

By an elaborate expression of her free will and demonstration of her ability to choose and act, she sets the forest on fire towards the end of the novel. The fire created by her is the result and manifestation of her existential angst to destroy the old and meaningless to make room for the new and significant. It is an affirmation of her search for values in an otherwise futile existence.

Ila Das is the third female protagonist of the novel. Unlike Nanda Kaul and Raka who are central to the story, her role is only marginal. Nonetheless, Anita Desai has projected yet another aspect of the existentialist philosophy through her character.

"Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence". She is first introduced to the readers, when she calls Nanda Kaul on the phone and informs her of her intended visit to Kasauli to meet Raka. She speaks in a "hideous voice" and is rather plain in her looks. Through a long interior monologue in Nanda Kaul's mind, the readers are informed of her past. She was Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. She had also served in the university as a lecturer, thanks to Nanda Kaul's good offices. But soon after the death of Mr.Kaul she had been ousted and had struggled a lot before finding the present employment as a social welfare officer. A poverty stricken loner of aristocratic of child marriage, a practice rampant among the tribals. This lands her in an unenviable situation. She finds herself fighting a lonely battle against a mindless multitude. But she is not cowed down by adversity. She remains steadfast in her conviction and refuses to make any compromises. Though she is aware of the dire consequences that she might be forced to encounter, she remains faithful to her cause. She succeeds in stooping several such child-marriage, the prominent one being the marriage of Preet Singh's seven year old daughter. Sustaining herself on a meagre pay and putting up with the inevitable condition of loneliness, she wages a valiant battle against the dictates of the society. Finally, she pays a dear

price for her convictions and refusal to compromise. She is raped and murdered by Preet Singh who has been dying for revenge.

Though Ila Das plays a minor role in the novel, she is also an allegorical figure. She not only lives in isolation but also braves the brute majority with conviction and commitment as her tools. True, she meets with a tragic end but has made her existence significant in exhibiting courage and determination in the face of stiff resistance and threat to life. "Her real involvement in people's welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance "(Jena 30). She epitomises the existentialist concept of struggle against the odds of life [4]. "For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities of tragic conflict" (Macquarrie 17). She stands for the thinking individual who dares to exercise her free will and act according to her choice rather than submit meekly to the odds of life. The mindless tribal society in general, and Preet Singh in particular, represent the malevolent aspect to human existence-forces that are bent upon thwarting the individual's purpose and undoing her. "One of the many ways of defining tragedy sees it as a clash between the aspiration of human freedom and creativity with a cosmic order that is stronger and defeats man "(Macquarrie 189). Though Ila Das loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle with such brute forces, her life has nonetheless become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a cause, fights for it and sacrifices herself in trying to accomplish her task [5].

In keeping with this concept, Anita Desai resorts to the effective employment of imagery and symbolism in *Fire on the Mountain*. Her predilection for prey-predator imagery abounds in this novel also. Images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation are consistently used in order to reflect the existential tone of the novel. An atmosphere of solitary introspection is created with the help of several images. For example, when she receives a call from Ila Das, Nanda Kaul "turned her head this way and that in an escape. She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation ". The same is continued in the next page also: "Still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach.. " This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is suggestive of Nanda Kaul's present inner turmoil. Her past suffering at the hands of the adulterous husband and her present awareness about the harsh realities of life are both successfully established by this image.

Another important image employed recurrently is that of the pine tree that stands burnt and alone, which is often an object of attraction for Nanda Kaul: "She was grey, tall and thin ... she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was prepared to undertake". Again, this image also contributes to the existentialist theme of the novel [6].

The critic S.Indira sums up the significance of imagery in *Fire on the Mountain* quoting D.H.Lawrence and the novelist herself:It is the charming mosaic of imagery woven so skillfully

by the novelist that makes the Novel a work of art. Quoting D.H.Lawrence who said 'If I eat an apple, I like to eat it with my senses,' Anita Desai herself stated that the novel in which she attempted this closeness of man and beast, earth and vegetable was *Fire on the Mountain*. Imagery alone makes it possible and, in the process, the novel gains a richer texture and greater depth. As a critic says, "this novel deprived of its imagery, would be an ugly skeleton, chilling the reader" ... The significant house imagery, the images of plants, colour, atmosphere and moon- all contribute to the textual density and symbolic centrality of the novel. (Indira 96) Another important aspect of this novel's narrative technique is its symbolism. There are several symbols that deepen the philosophic implications of the novel. To start with, Carignano, Nanda Kaul's present abode, is symbolic of the loneliness and barrenness of human life in general and Nanda Kaul in particular:

The forest fire scene has symbolic overtones. Like the "The Fire Sermon" in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the fire in *Fire on the Mountain* "... is a destroyer. It is also a purifier" (Brown 557). By making use of the universal fire symbol. Anita Desai endows Raka's character with allegorical implications. Raka, the invalid restless little girl who is the product of a broken home, becomes the symbol of the existentialist's perception of the individual who finds herself in this hostile and futile world. Yet out of compulsion, she strives to find or create values and significance for her existence. In this regard it has been observed that the symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is highly significant from the thematic point of view. The mountain symbolises Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka's wild nature. "Nanda is the 'rocky belt', dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like forest fire... The novel, thus [sic] may be noted as a story of inability of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another's position"(Choudhury 79).

Another factor that adds to the philosophical implications of the novel is the frequent allusions to books and poems.

This is miniature adventure like the one Marco Polo undertook in search of something new and promising. Thus, the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in isolation. Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anita Desai examines three important aspects of this school of thought through her protagonists. The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. These three aspects are epitomised in the lives of three female protagonists. Nanda Kaul is a study in alienation and existential angst. Raka symbolises the individual's quest for meaning in an otherwise futile life. Ila Das stands for the eternal conflict enacted in the human drama between the individual and the forces of determinism. One common ground for these three characters is that they are women who live in isolation both out of choice and compulsion. Desai has examined the predicament of women in wilderness by placing these three characters Kasauli, a place surrounded by hills and valleys, far removed from civilisation. She has consciously done it to examine the predicament and psyche of women in isolation. By placing her female protagonists with nature herself as the backdrop,

Anita Desai has endowed a symbolic and universal significance to the plight of her protagonists. In this regard it has been pointed out:

To sum up, *Fire on the Mountain* invites comparison with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In this great tragedy, when he dramatises the agony of betrayed father, Shakespeare removes Lear from the palace and places him in the wild heath- a hostile place- to suggest that the plight of Lear is identical with the suffering of every wronged father. Shakespeare employs animal imagery to indicate the rotten and corrupt world of the dramatis personae of *King Lear*. Images of ugly and evil animals like jackals and wolves are recurrently used creating an animal imagery that reinforces the thematic concern of the play, namely the tragedy of human life, personified in the life of Lear, a victim of indifference in old age. Anita Desai's use of imagery of *King Lear*. By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Desai hints at how her female protagonists despise the absurdity of their existence. They either withdraw into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, long for something new or is made miserable by the environment as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the location of her novel, Desai has endowed it with a wider appeal where the boundaries of region, religion and time cease to exist. This novel contains the core of the novelist's existential world-view in that all the three characters are nothing but the manifestations of her alter ego that gives expression to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to say that *Fire on the Mountain* merits a place in the galaxy of existential masterpieces like Kafka *Trial*, Camus' *The Plague* and Sartre's *Nausea* [7].

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