Existentialism in the Women Characters of Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*

B. Sreenivasa Reddy
Assistant Professor,  
Department of S&H,  
Lakireddy Bali Reddy College of Engineering,  
Mylavaram, Krishna Dist., Andhra Pradesh, India.

&

Sujit Kumar Rath
Associate Professor,  
Department of CSS,  
Lakireddy Bali Reddy College of Engineering,  
Mylavaram, Krishna Dist., Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the tumultuous, pathos-filled subaltern existential struggles invariably engulfing the lives of the characters in Anita Desai’s ‘*Fire on the Mountain*’, the worst sufferers being the women characters. This wonderful tale of tragic dilemma, set amidst the spectre of a painfully frightening rubric of life, is symbolic of her sublime literary sensibilities in delineating believable situations and characters. The woman characters end up as the bugbears of the utter maze of confusion, an odious offshoot of the dilemma slicing through the broken lives of the victims of a clash between pronounced values and actual values, between modernity and orthodoxy. Marital bliss results from an understanding of mutual complementarities and indispensability of trust in personal relationships, which forms the crux of conjugal life. The theme, marital discord has been presented in all its socio-cultural and psychological ramifications ala existential way. Anita Desai towers over others in her ilk for creating a unique space for infusing psychological insight and existential concerns into the hyphenated lives of her women characters. Desai’s sensitive portrayal of the personal struggles of anglicized, middle-class women in contemporary India amidst prohibiting societal customs bequeathed by a retrograde patriarchal culture deserves special mention.

Key words: Post colonialism, displacement, existentialism, alienation, feminism, pessimism

Anita Desai’s Women - epitomizing existential moorings:

Anita Desai has always revelled in exploring the deeper recesses of human subjects and tried to bring out the grimmer and challenging aspects of their lives. Anita Desai has inarguably made yeoman service in adding new vistas in thematic treatment of existential issues dogging the common strata of society. Her novels create evocative and deeply moving narratives of individual lives caught in the throes of socio-cultural and existential dilemma. The helplessness and fallibility of Human beings form bedrock of her existentialist approach to work. She lends her women characters a voice and an audience by dramatizing ‘mute miseries and helplessness of married women’. Desai has created a virtual storyboard of feminism by capturing for posterity, the emotional upheavals of women, encompassing the varied strains of feminine sensibility. Her characters embody the bland absurdity of life. Her women wilfully choose the sterner options and the darker alleys in abject rejection with little choice whatsoever, bringing to life a ‘tragic vision’. Desai further positions her women protagonists as individuals who are pitch forked into unhomely
backyards, left to fend themselves against unseemly odds. Her genuine concern to narrativize existentialist’s predilection of women characters found early in her first novel, ‘Cry the Peacock’, which grew into a torrent in subsequent works. Her characters embody existential predicament in gross marginality of common lives, with caricatures of incompatible couples- very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. Her searching gaze never misses anything. Anita Desai’s characters possess an overwhelming sense of their own existence, fallibility with special focus on loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She turns a new leaf probing the deeper recesses of human psyche to fathom the baffling mysteries and chaos clouding the minds of her various women characters. Needless to emphasize as critics have heaped encomiums on ‘Fire on the Mountain’ as “the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism” . In ‘In Custody’ Desai’s existentialist moorings are viewed as an external trap and the epitome of pessimism, as the character Nur, who finds it very difficult to escape from his cage “… a cage in a row of cages. Cage, Trap, Trap” (p.31).

**Marks of Existentialism in Fire on the Mountain:**

Her novel *Fire on the Mountain* has come to be glorified as “the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism”. This novel brings forth the existential angst and the utter fatalism as reflected in the marginal and challenged life of the protagonist, Nandu Kaul. Ila Das comes to personify the plight of hapless women whose lives are torn asunder under the unbearable weight of internecine conflict and tragic eventualities. The novel espouses the universal human struggle for survival, especially in the face of a never ending spiral of human failures and misfortunes. ‘Fire on the Mountain’ deals with the elegiac life of the main protagonist in the early part, which later enjoined by Raka’s character coming on to the scene. The novel begins, with Nand Kaul who is a leading a life of solitude, surrounded only by the servants who don’t dare to disturb her privacy; in fact, she shows little patience to bear any human presence around her. “She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (p. 3). Her days were best spent in long spells of isolation, intermittently reminiscing her past in nostalgic overtones. The author dexterously unfolds her past in the form of interior monologues by Nanda Kaul, who had only to contend with insults, betrayals resulting tragically during the passage of time before she retreats to Kasauli after her retirement. A soul tormented by the sordid saga of spousal betrayal, she could never excuse her husband for his extra marital transgressions; the pain only to be accentuated by the memories of her children. As a mother of several children, Nanda Kaul found it difficult to accept her miserable solitude in her old age, only to console herself by accepting that loneliness constituted the fabric of human life.

Her seclusion makes him gaze at the tall pine trees that stand out separately outside her garden which makes her to liken her own aloofness with that of the pine trees. She paves a way exactly conscious of what she is waiting for; nonetheless, she is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. She is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice (like Nanda Kaul), she was born to it, simply” (p 48). Desai’s curt observation about Raka’s character brings at once conflicting strands in Nanda Kaul’s mental condition. Thus we can very well notice an unmistakable strand of existentialism permeating the convoluted lives of both the protagonists. Desai’s preoccupation with solitude seeking characters goes a step further in Raka, whose own experience stands as a stark reminder of the brutality and futility of human existence. She is haunted by the recollections of the many threatening nightmares etc. Desai employs various imageries and symbolisms to highlight the enormity and immediacy of the existential pathos afflicting the lives of the characters. The cry of the jackals symbolises the sudden shift of inner
state of mind filled with monologues from past to present and also the mystery of life. The image of Monkey Point is symbolic of her search for something which unknown, yet inevitable and indispensable. However, Lonliness in the character of Raka is truly representative of the existential theme of quest for meaning and contentment. "Her (Raka’s) childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficient and now, young girl up here in the mountains... her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting ‘I don’t care, I don’t care, I can’t care of anything” (FM 73).

Raka’s predilection for the forest fires has been put to analysis more keenly in the latter parts of the novel for its rich symbolic overtones. Her obsessive engagement with forest fire shows in some certain measure a shade of her delinquent behaviour. Her sudden obsession with forest fire soon after reaching Carignano and her knack of easily relating to her own disturbed rumblings of mind are highly suggestive of existential pedigree. Thus the fire envisioned by her emanates from and also manifests her existential angst to signal moving over the debris of an old life of emptiness towards a life of fresh promise and substance. It also shows the affirmation of her longing to search for values and truthfulness in an otherwise futile existence. Ila Das, a significant force in this novel essays a role bordering on the margins unlike Nanda Kaul and Raka who share the centre stage, standing tall amidst all the existential trials and travails. Nonetheless, Anita Desai projects her epitomising an important facet of existentialist philosophy through her with all her sordid date with brokenness and weariness.‘‘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” (p 21) Nanda Kaul’s recalls and then realises that she was her childhood friend and had served in the university as a lecturer. But soon after the death of Mr.Kaul she had juggled with struggle before finding a job as a social welfare officer. The character of Ila Das has been portrayed to carry lavish overtones of allegory. She lived her life on the margins of isolation and solitude. She had the gumption to counter the formidable dominant forces with her ability to profer steadfast resolutions and commitment. However, tragic her untimely death might have been, she had succeeded to make her existence felt, that she could muster through a brave display of her fortitude and determination in the face of stiff resistance and threat to life.

Her loss of chastity seemed to be a small price, Ila Das had to pay in the all consuming struggle with brute forces. She redeems the sanctity of her life by the very espousal of the cause and her indomitable spirits while taking the fight on its head.

Use of imagery in enforcing existential crisis:

Anita Desai makes profuse use of a number of imageries and symbolisms to heighten the intensity and irrefutability of existential experiences. The cry of the jackals symbolises the sudden shift in the inner workings of the mind peppered with monologues from past and also the mystery of life. The use of symbolism and imagery in the novel undoubtedly captures the elevated existential concerns of her female characters. The image of Monkey Point reinforces her frantic search for some weird, yet inevitable and indispensable force. Thus by conjuring images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Desai makes an attempt to decipher the stark realities of fatalism and absurdity permeating the mundane existence of her female characters. The author captures every facet of their lives, be it camouflaging pleasure hunts in the garb of solitude as is wont in the case of Nanda Kaul or Raka, while exhibiting rugged absurdity of human life in the life experiences of Ila Das. Similarly, the discerning reader should identify the author’s deliberate designs in making Kasauli full of symbolic overtones as the perfect place almost pandering to a wider constituency subsuming boundaries of region, religion and time. Thus the novel, Fire on the Mountain makes the most representative attempt at showcasing the novelist’s existential angst, that is elucidated through the pan continental view espoused by all the three leading characters in the novel. These characters suggest truer images 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, Sartre’s Nausea Camus’ The Plague. “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. “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…”(P.22,21)

Conclusion:

Thus, the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in the utter
maze of isolation and ennui. Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anita Desai examines
certain pertinent facets of this school of thought through her protagonists, treating the
predominant themes like, alienation, quest and conflict with all her mature and sensitive story
telling panache. Nanda Kaul makes a classic study in epitomising alienation and existential angst,
while Raka comes to symbolise the individual’s futile quest for finding meaning in an otherwise
hopeless life. Ila Das’s life stands as a testimony to the eternal conflict enshrouding the
individual’s dogged fight with dominant forces of oppression. However, the author pulls out a
masterstroke by cleaving these three disparate characters in a common thread of life in isolation.
Desai has examined the predicament of women in wilderness by placing these three characters
Kasauni, a place surrounded by hills and valleys, for 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.

She creates a believable set of a small world populated by a marginally smaller milieu. Things and
objects, however small and insignificant, acquire larger proportions in her novel. Anita Desai
takes her turns at being reflective, going deep into the psyche, going to these places in the heart
and mind where things acquire, a different form, a different hue, a different character. She then
delves on moods, on feelings, on emotions, on all those things that impress the mind and leave
their imprints there. 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 gaze towards the starker aspects of
life. She portrays a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in inhospitable
terrains.

Works Cited:

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