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Existential Crisis in Indian Women: A Study of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Introduced by Soren Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus, Existentialism reflects the eternal struggle of man to establish his identity. It was a revolt against reason, rationality and traditional ways of living. It marked the questioning and assertion of one's existence in a world which revolves around the feeling of nothingness. This feeling is prevalent throughout the world among human beings, men and women alike. This article highlights the concept of existential crisis in Indian women as depicted in the novels of Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, R.K. Narayan and Jhumpa Lahiri. The article focuses on the existential crisis in women leading to frustration, mental detachment, murder, mental agony and suicide. The female protagonists of these novels, entangled in socio-cultural intricacies, feel the crisis of identity throughout their life.

Keyword: existentialism, mental agony, frustration, existential dilemma, Indian women

Introduction

Existentialism is a movement that came into the sphere of philosophy through the works of Soren Kierkegaard. Popularized by two French writers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Existentialism developed as a revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and traditional ways of living and portrayal of human characters. It means "pertaining to existence" (Cuddon, 294). It comes out of one's passive and indeterminate condition (Sartre in Cuddon, 295). Existentialism comprises an individual's assertion of subjective self, violating or questioning prevalent established norms, traditions and so called rationality, one's exercise of will and his/her experience of absurdity and nothingness of life, striving to discover one's identity and meaning in a meaningless life.

Identity crisis is present in every person. Indian novels also depict this existential motif keeping par with reality. Literature is a reflection of life and society. Modern Indian society presents a very vivid picture of one's existential dilemma-the eternal question of "to be or not to be" in a society which engulfs an individual in irrelevant norms and values, covering the visages of harshness and meaninglessness. Society has always bound man in the limitations of marriage, family and friendship, leading to interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal emotional conflicts, indecisions and inhibitions.

This article throws light on the quest for identity, questions put on one's life, surrounding and self as depicted through the female protagonists of Indian English novels – Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*, Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Rosie in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. If we delve deep into these characters, we can get a clear picture of a strong craving for identity quest for meaning in life in Indian women as a whole.

Existential characters have a very complicated mentality—they are confused within themselves regarding the circumstances they are in and the persons with whom they are. They are sensitive, moody and are unable to adjust with their environment. They often become victims of alienation, frustration, insanity, murder or suicide. In order to get respite from their intense mental agony, these characters lead themselves to some disastrous catastrophe. So also in the characters in the above mentioned novels are entangled in social, cultural and domestic intricacies and desperately try to establish their own identity and find the meaning of life.

***The Guide* by R.K. Narayan**

Rosie, one of the protagonists of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, presents the predicament of Indian women, who have to undergo a conventional discrimination as the weaker sex, whose only worth in life is measured by her devotion to her husband and her in-laws. In this novel, we also get the picture of how society treats a woman on the basis of her birth or familial background, disregarding academic qualification or any cultural potential. Rosie here suffers from identity crisis in social as well as marital life. Her marital life is tormented by her psychological difference with her husband, which prevents her from establishing herself as an independent individual. Being entangled in social convictions she faces a lot of obstacles in realizing her dreams. Her dissatisfactory conjugal life makes her inclined to Raju, a tourist guide, who helps her build a career in dancing but is betrayed by him later. Frustration, depression, alienation and inability to be in conformity with the society make her a true existential character. Rosie gets married to Marco, a man of academic pursuit, through an advertisement in the newspaper. But they are never mentally attached to each other. Marco goes about visiting caves whereas Rosie is left alone. When she jumps in ecstasy, he remains unmoved.

“Anything that interested her seemed to irritate him.”(76)

When once she goes out with Raju, she wishes to spend the whole night in darkness. She expresses her desire to find her way out of the darkness of her life, which provided her material wealth but no mental comfort. Her unresponsive husband left her no space to live life with vitality:

“I'd have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband.”(85)

Seeing Rosie being neglected by her indifferent husband, Raju tries to increase his intimacy with her. Their closeness seems to rise and he wants to liberate her from her material confinements to help her cherish her goal of being a dancer. But Rosie seemed to be torn apart between her craving for dance on the one hand and responsibility towards her husband on the other.

“After all, he is my husband. I have to respect him. I cannot leave him there.”(119)

Yet in this speech, we find a compulsion in her. It is Raju who admires her art form. But, being devoted to her husband, she cannot cling on to a tourist guide. Her frustration arises out of Marco’s indifference towards her dance form:

“Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time.”(122)

This reveals the crisis of a true artist on the one hand and a submissive, meek housewife on the other. Later when Raju and Rosie engage in an affair, Rosie’s inclination comes as result of his appreciation of her art. She also feels that he gives a new vent to her confined love:

“You are giving me a new lease of life.”(125)

Having been treated as disrespectable due to her background of ‘devdasi’, she tries to acquire an honorable social position by marrying Marco. But her potential is subdued—her dream of becoming a dancer is totally shattered when she is asked to leave dance after marriage. When Raju brings her home to give her refuge, after she leaves her husband, Raju’s mother does not support him. She regards her as ‘a real snake woman’ (154), someone who would trap him, ensnare him to a poisonous end.

However, she moves on to cherish her dream with a new name ‘Nalini’. This new identity gives her a new way of life. This suppressed self in Rosie finds a new, vibrant and passionate outlet in Nalini. But later, when Raju forges her signature to acquire her wealth, she laments having achieved success through his help. It is Raju who helps her to taste fame and it is Raju again who betrays her. This leaves her nowhere. He even conceals the news of Marco’s publication of “The Cultural History of South India”. He even hides a copy of the book sent to her by Marco. Rosie laments having left her husband. A new name brings a new life, a new identity, a new existence for her. But even that is transitory. Raju’s insincerity leaves her life as a mockery of existence as a whole. As her popularity increases, she becomes more and more indifferent to monetary benefits. She loves dance like ‘art for art sake’. When she demands the reason behind Raju’s concealing the fact about Marco’s book, Raju wants to know what makes her moved so much. She replies:

“After all, after all, he is my husband.”(201)

Here we find an Indian woman's inability to extricate herself from mental confinement of respecting her husband, despite his indifference towards her. The Indian wives are traditionally torn between the predicament of being dedicated to their husband on the one hand, and establishing themselves in their profession on the other. Even after reaching the acme of fame, Rosie is not happy. She regards herself as a monkey, engaged for performing in different shows. At first her existential crisis lies in her life as a temple dancer, being an object of ridicule everywhere. Even a sound academic qualification does not improve her social status. Later her crisis lies in leading a loveless life with an unresponsive husband, though she thought marriage would improve her life. She has to choose either marriage or dance. Marriage does not provide her stability though she attains economic security. Later she craves for dancing to realize her dreams, nurture her natural dancing potential. Raju's insincerity results in the loss of her single support in life. When Raju is released from prison, he asks Rosie about her future prospects. She replies:

“Perhaps I'll go back to him.”(220)

Her decision to leave dance and go back to him reveals her unquenched quest for identity. Life never answers women's eternal question of their real identity—a self-dependent life of their own or one in the dependence of a husband. Rosie says:

“...it is far better to end one's life on his doorstep” (220)

But Raju knows, she can carry on well enough without Marco and him.

“Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along.”(223)

***Cry, The Peacock* by Anita Desai:**

Maya, the protagonist, a childless, motherless housewife is engrossed in a baseless prediction of death made by an astrologer. Owing to her mental detachment from her husband, Gautama, she suffers from a strong sense of alienation, frustration and inability to find meaning in life. Desai makes a very vivid portrayal of the hapless condition of Indian women, restricted to the confines of domestic life, having no one to share their grief.

In this novel, we find how women are never allowed to express their free will, which ultimately leads to some violent outburst, resulting in a disastrous end. Maya, a hyper-sensitive, over-emotional, cultured woman is entrapped in the obsession of fear of death. An astrologer, 'the white faced magician' had foretold that either she or her husband would die after four years of their marriage. Her obsession leads to intense mental agony and creates a huge hiatus between the couple. At the very onset, we see that the death of her pet dog Toto makes her excessively sad. Her husband tries to make things normal but she feels he is insensitive to her sorrow:

“Gautama rose immediately ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her woes altogether.”(9)

This makes her feel lonely and estranged from Gautama.

“I whimpered I am alone and then gave myself up to a fit of furious pillow beating...”(14)

She gets all the more engrossed with apprehension of a sudden demise. She desires his tenderness as a solace to her tormented heart and mind. But Gautama does not share thoughts similar to those of Maya. Her "belief in frivolities" makes him consider them as ways to bring a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end. The morose Maya tries to establish her point:

"pets ...mean the world to me"(19)

She even considers this trivial incident as an evil omen suggesting someone's inevitable end. Having been treated as an infant, living in a fanciful world of dreams and allusions, Maya cannot accept harsh reality with practical insight. Her immaturity and love for imagination always seeks a guardian in her husband but in Gautama, understanding was negligible, love was insufficient. Simple natural events of a peacock's cry, purple hue of sunset make her create her own interpretation that gradually makes her move into a world of darkness. She confines herself in a world of superstitions, and is unable to do away with the constraints of the society. She thinks of how a peacock seizes a snake and breaks its body to relieve its own pain. She craves for an immediate outlet. Under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama by thrusting him down from the terrace, thereby bringing an end to her anxiety for the prophecy of either her husband or she, had to die. She thus brings an end to her frustration regarding life, unhappy matrimonial bonds, unfulfilled longings and his unresponsive attitude towards her.

Existential characters often suffer from alienation and frustration. In this respect, Maya, the protagonist is truly an existential character. These characters suffer from identity crisis, often failing to find meaning in life and turn to violent cathartic outcomes like murder or suicide. So also Maya murders her husband and later commits suicide. This brings her relief from her intense existential dilemma throughout her life. Lack of affectionate and sensitive association of near ones goes into the making of these characters. Her desperate desire to extricate herself from psychological complications is distinct through her cry:

"Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying."(84)

This reflects the quest of every modern human mind. Desai projects the condition of Indian women, thrust into a world of emotional vacuity. She tries to take refuge in illusory creations.

Maya wants to give a vent to her imagination. She is at the same time, a symbol of growth, life and vitality on one hand, and withdrawal, regression, decay and death on the other.

She could not associate normally to any natural event. The cooing of the doves appeared to her as grudging reminder of leaving this mortal existence. Off and on she feels the absence of her father and lamented that no one else could love her as her father did. Even her in-laws were interested not in love, affection or any soft emotion but of parliamentary discussions, political treaties and revolutions. Coming across women, who are either childless or pestered daily by their in-laws, she tries to extricate herself into a world of illumination. Events of humiliation, debts and dowries moved to question the significance of women in society as a whole. Inability to establish compatibility with surrounding environment or people, Maya gets involved into absurd, unscientific beliefs, which make Gautama say:

"Palmistry? Astrology? What new fad is your sudden interest in them? Must we be so childish? After all, we have both been educated fairly thoroughly..."(67)

Impracticality leads Maya to apprehension and depression. This makes her overall viewpoint pessimistic. She becomes rather fatalistic:

"Fate – fatality...I fingered the flowers sadly, and felt much like them myself-bruised and tired, not quite alive."(81)

Her belief in fate and irrational fears leads her to insanity. Maya wonders she might grow mad. Her insanity makes her move away from wisdom. It makes her imagine the encounter with the astrologer.

"I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad."(92)

She remains lost in hallucinatory visions regarding death that are just creations of her brain. It reminds us of Macbeth's imaginary visions as products of his heat oppressed brain. She feels her insanity can be cured. Thus she vacillates between sanity and insanity. Her very existence seems to be a shadow, a false visage, something transitory or insignificant.

The difference of mentality between Maya and Gautama made her engage in fit of outbursts:

"One of us will win, the other must lose."(97)

When Gautama tried to show her the reality or practical way of dealing things, she considered him a 'traitor', one who has betrayed her. He calls her 'neurotic, a spoilt child,' unable to bear any adverse word. He chides her saying:

"Life is a fairy tale to you"(98)

She is unaware of stark realities of life—living, dying and working. She lacked courage to face the adversities of life. When he tries to make her break her illusion of passion and attachment, her disillusionment temporarily makes her rely on the dryness, the bleakness of his voice, of his theories, which now appears to be her refuge. She considers him as something to cling on, when she is tossed in the turbulent sea of uncertainty, mental agony, depression, absurdity and insanity. This failure in finding any conclusion or solution to her apprehension makes her feel tormented by words or human association:

“Words tortured me now, as memories did, and Murder, that too, followed me, relentless as a well aimed arrow, as I passed through avenues of thought, recollection, doubt and horror.”(139)

‘Murder’ seems to pierce through her flesh. She then thinks her name ‘Maya’ means an illusion. Thus she herself is an illusion and is thus meaningless. The frenzied cries of peacocks searching for mates, tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in acts of love, screaming with agony at the death of love refers to a way to get rid of a strong emotion. This moves Maya to try and find a way out of her claustrophobic environment. She conjures up horrid visions annihilating everything around her. She loses her mental balance:

"Past, present, future, Truth and Untruth.They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade;" (149)

She imagines some warnings in waves, in the mountains of some impending 'danger' as if asking her to 'run and hide'. Her 'innocence turning to guilt' and she wondered about a world where 'guilt, sin, crime, punishment, all stood stock still, struck into threatening immobility by a ruthless force of fate'. Maya became desperate for liberation of her mind. Then, one day she made Gautama pause on the parapet of the terrace in a moonlit evening. His figure seemed to cast an ugly shadow between her and the moon and she thrust him down. She killed Gautama to bring an end to her depression, frustration, alienation and anxiety. After this incident she turns completely mad:

“It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn't really matter. He didn't care, and I did.”(182)

She finally commits suicide, being unable to get respite from immense trauma of identity crisis.

***God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy**

Arundhati Roy's famous Booker Prize winning novel, *God of Small Things* deals socio-psychological issues amidst which human beings are entangled. Through these themes, Roy presents a vivid portrayal of intricacies of human relationships—love and betrayal. The exploitation of women and caste prejudice, along with social baseless conventions are brought to the limelight through the sufferings of Ammu, one of the presiding characters of the novels. It is through the various experience in Ammu's life, that Roy depicts the existential crisis among Indian women, always engaged in a frantic search for identity. She protests against the patriarchal system of society and tries to secure herself a sound position for herself.

Ammu is ideal existential woman. She suffers from identity crisis from her childhood in the shelter of her parents, and her marital life in the company of her husband to her life after her divorce and her affair with Velutha, a man belonging to a lower caste. She feels an identity crisis when she is marginalized by her parents. Being a girl, she is deprived of love and affection. A stereotype patriarchal family leads her to suffer from physical torture. Being a girl child, she is considered a burden in the family. She is denied higher education:

“Pappachi insisted that college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl.”(38)

This develops frustration and seclusion in her life. She desperately craved for liberation from her familial bondages waiting aimlessly for marriage proposals. She then gets acquainted with her future husband in a wedding reception. She marries him willingly with a hope to put an end to her intolerable atmosphere at home. She felt she would find liberation from claustrophobic hold of a patriarchal society and a rigid family. But her husband turns out to be a ‘full-blown alcoholic’. She proves to be a true example of a woman who gets married to free herself from her parental bonding only to submit herself to a new master—the husband.

However, she learns to smoke, placing herself at par with the males in the society, challenging their dominance. Her desperate desire for castigating masculine superiority projects her utter feminine suffering. Her unsuccessful marriage ends when her husband forces her into prostitution to satisfy the lust of his English boss to improve his career. However, the rebellious Ammu does not surrender to this heinous deal. She is a woman of self-respect. She does not accept any atrocity towards her and prefers divorce. She thus frees herself from the bondage of a mechanical, loveless and materialistic marriage. She returns to Ayemenem, confused about the manner and validity of her acceptance in her family with her twin children—Rahel and Esthappen:

“In Ayemenem, a divorced daughter had no place anywhere at all.”(45)

Her husband is responsible for her physical and psychological sufferings in their relationship and social suffering out of their relationship. She breaks off from him for the injustice towards her

but is not welcomed in her own family. She is tormented, abused, stigmatized and chastised in her parent's house, where she comes for comfort and starting life anew. Meaningless social conventions make her despondent and torn apart between keeping her identity intact on the one hand, and getting compatible with the society on the other.

Ammu's love with Velutha, a man of lower social strata is considered illicit and sinful. However she wanted to 'love by night the man her children loved by day'. She develops a liaison with Velutha, an untouchable, thereby violating the conventional social order. Ammu's desperate urge for finding love is materialised in Velutha. Severe frustration in familial ties makes her break all boundaries of society to enter into a world that is her very own. Her affair with Velutha provides an opening into illumination out of darkness of her parental home. Her children spend quality time with him. When their affair is disclosed, Velutha gets arrested and killed on false accusation of rape. Ammu is also humiliated by the police as being a prostitute with illegitimate children. Even her mother does not stand by her and considers it to be Ammu's destiny to suffer. It was a convention to not allow a woman any freedom or opportunity to improve her life. Ammu then tries to find a job for her to establish her "self". But she fails to secure one. Exhausted and sick, she succumbs to her physical and psychological trauma in room in a lodge. Even the church refuses to bury her. Thus, Ammu suffers all through her life in quest for identity and real existence.

***The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri**

The crisis of identity, frustration, depression and alienation is also very prominent in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Lahiri probes into the socio-political, cultural and psychological vacuity of the Indian diaspora in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Namesake*. The protagonist Ashima, moves from Calcutta to America after marriage. She not only enters a new country but also a new culture, new populace, new society, totally unknown to her. She is unable to shed her origin, the Bengali culture. She also cannot accept the American lifestyle. All through her life, she is always in an identity crisis. She thus leads a hyphenated existence. Cultural, social and personal alienation leads to her existential crisis. She feels alone during her pregnancy—so much unlike the Bengali community, when a pregnant woman is looked after at her parental home. Here she has no one but her husband by her side. As an immigrant, she feels a sense of loss and agony. The estrangement from her near ones leads to her depressions.

“Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has left normal at all.”(5)

She feels awkward at the thought of motherhood in a foreign land, which is so much unfamiliar to her. She often feels queer and lost all together. When in hospital before her delivery, she wishes the curtains on her three sides were open. The curtains shut her from the exterior world. This is also symbolic of her being separated from her family and even her husband. She is thrust into a solitary refuge which is very asphyxiating. After the baby's birth, she decides to go back to

Calcutta but decides to stay back for Ashok, her husband. Gradually, she tries to get herself into the lifestyle of the foreign country. But when they move from the apartment to a suburb, things become all the more unmanageable for her. A strong sense of loneliness and displacement engulfs her. She feels over-burdened with the thoughts of being a misfit in the surrounding society:

“being a foreigner...is a sort of life-long pregnancy—a perpetual wait , a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.” (49)

Previous acquaintance, warmth and simplicity of homeland and family are displaced by unfamiliarity, coldness and complexity of a foreign land. Her physical displacement results in her mental displacement and dissociation from herself. While christening their son, the practice of nickname for home and a goodname for formal purposes, is something unconventional in America. Their son Gogol is teased by his friends for his name, which he changes to Nikhil to establish an identity of his own. While Ashima, along with her husband try to make adjustment between Indian and American culture, Gogol, their son is desperate to practice the culture of his birthplace, America. They try to make Gogol and his sister Sonia gets acquainted with Indian culture, customs, rituals and practices. Ashoke and Ashima face challenging situations when their children try to assert their own identities.

After the death of her husband, Ashima feels lonely, suddenly, horribly and permanently alone. Thus alienation again gains hold over her. Unable to adjust with the new social, physical and cultural environment, Ashima and her children, adopting the foreign culture and practices do make her different from them. They adopt a different lifestyle. Ashima remains confined to her own practices and thoughts—leading to her alienation. This distinction of Ashima from American life makes her an existential character in the true sense of the term.

Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion we find that Indian women always suffer from existential crisis in family as well as society, irrespective of their societal status. Whether marital, professional, conjugal or familial life, women are always engaged in constant search for identity. Social stigma, practices, culture and traditions entangle them in sophisticated or ordinary servility. Psychological confinement prevents them from coming into the forefront. From the discussion of existentialism in Indian women as depicted in Indian novels, it is evident that the ‘fairer sex’ has always struggled to establish her identity. Their willing or imposed subjugation compels them to pass through traumatic periods of frustration, depression and alienation—be it husband or children or society, a woman’s psyche is always lost in a seething turmoil of compromise, sacrifice, surrender and humility. They are subject to abject misery, humiliation and torture at home and in the society. However much they try to break the old-age, obsolete rituals and customs, they somehow get lost in the doldrums of impractical hindrances. They are thus, in the

words of Simone de Beauvoir, not born but made women. Socio-cultural and psychological darkness submerge the world of illumination.

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