

ANITA DESAI AND ARUN JOSHI'S VIEWS ON EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA

Abstract

The prime objective of this research article is to explore nuances and various phases and facets of existential anguish and dilemma experienced by various characters of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi's fiction. Though the modern concerns like the existential situation of man and the East-West Encounter form almost the backbone of the fiction of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi, it is necessary to note that they display in their fiction to no less degree what could be described as 'contemporary consciousness'. In fact both existentialism and the spiritual quest are themselves contemporary matters.

But the contemporary consciousness which includes the social, economic, even the geographical awareness, lends a genuine kind of solidity to their fiction which otherwise could have turned the novels into willed fantasies. Though Anita Desai's first novel, **Cry, The Peacock** (1963) is essentially focused on the psychosis of Maya the protagonist, the landscaping of the story is remarkable; the sense of place is unmistakable.

Many husband the successful lawyer, is not merely a solid foil to the mercurial wife but a man of the world and a man of dignity who knows life and also his **Gita** very well. The Age of R. K. Narayan's novels and of Raja Rao's **Kanthapura** and numerous other novels of the Gandhian age now seems to belong to the archives of history... Anita Desai, and also Arun Joshi have closed the old chapter and opened a new gloomy chapter in the history of post-Independence India. Though they are not 'midnight's children', Anita Desai was born in 1937 and Arun Joshi in 1939, they have

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entered into the dark tunnel of Indian history. The dream of a glorious dawn has melted and they are in the scorching heat of a new age of unsavory fact.

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What is meant by existential dilemma? Camus considered existential dilemma the only serious problem. He considers it as “suicide”. Suicide is the real philosophical problem. The existential problem comes from man’s search for meaning and purpose. When one doesn’t succeed in reaching one’s purpose and meaning of life, as it needs struggle and deep philosophical pondering, one feels dilemma that gives birth to crisis. The prolonged state of dilemma and inability to reach and search the purpose and meaning of one’s life leads one to believe the absurdity and meaninglessness of one’s existence. The literature delineating the theme of existentialism shows this crisis known as ‘existential crisis’ and the protagonist faces the situation of human predicament and questions what is reasonably questionable but unable to get the right answer. Such literature delineates the characters that are put in critical situation and cannot find the way out. This situation can be identified as human predicament or existential crisis. It is similar to Myth of Sisyphus: pushing a rock up a hill that will roll downward again. It is similar to Holocaust: one is gradually succumbed to death and witness suffering and dying of all that one loves. It is similar to The Plague: one is alone alone all alone in a plague ridden city and experiences utter helplessness. It is similar to Sartre’s No Exit: crisis that seems to be a timeless Hell. The characters of existential literature struggle to develop their will and try to create their own meaning and purpose but they have to face to attacks of absurdity and fatalism. They try to live life along with their search and evolve and never make compromise with their internal morality.

All the characters do not win and come out of their human predicament. Some of them attain failure and their struggle never ends. They realize that they are not able to escape from the meaninglessness and absurdity of their existence. Anita Desai and Arun Joshi are the luminous stars of Indo-English literature. They have received much critical acclaim. They have succeeded in portraying the struggle of existential hero, his predicament and psychological complexities and stream of consciousness. They have seen possibilities of the fructification of one’s search for meaning in life. Nothing goes in vain. They believe that one must face the confrontation courageously and it will definitely have positive result at the end. In stead of thinking much about the dilemma and absurdity, one must be hopeful and without getting identified with the trapping of absurdity one must carry on, go on with full gusto.

It is now universally agreed that Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan are the pillars of the earlier Indian Novel in English. After the novels written by them, there remains no question of whether an Indian novel in the modern sense exists or is possible. The Indian novel has come to stay, even more affirmatively than other sister genres like poetry or drama. The Indian novel in English has flourished more freely than other forms since Indian poetry and Indian drama in English are still vexed by the problem of the Indian idiom or the Indian audience for them. The Indian novel on the other hand has grown globally acceptable and has been found more inventive and innovative. If one may grow pessimistic about the future of the other two forms, one has cause to be optimistic about the novel since there is a steady output of novels year by year and a growing legitimacy and even authority admitted to them.

Anita Desai and Arun Joshi occupy a special place in the history of Indo-English novels. It is necessary to focus on the two novelists in the post-Independence era since they redefine the Indian novel after the novels of the Gandhian age. It is true that the social problems tackled by Mulk Raj Anand or R. K. Narayan’s representation of the social and moral subtleties of Indian life, Raja Rao’s philosophical insight into the East-West encounter do not suffice or cover the entire gamut of social-economic, psychological, moral and

spiritual aspects of the post-colonial India. Though the problems of colonial India, before Independence, were grappled by the panacea of truth and non-violence, the entire transformation of the social situation and the revolution in the world-view had to be faced in other ways, in other modes of art and other attitudes and perspectives. Though Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) belong to the new age, Narayan still seems to be occupied with his comic mode of a subtle perception of human incongruities and not oppressed by the weight of the new issues like the nature of the complex psychology of the modern mind, the inescapable East-West interaction, or the existential situation of a world with diminishing traditional value systems. Though Raja Rao's celebrated novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is a bold and unique creation it appears to be a diffuse, garrulous book as M. K. Naik rightly notes.¹ It could stand respectable as a unique but sublimely idiosyncratic artefact a stunning fusion of metaphysics and poetry. There are other things that nag the new generation and an adequate response had to be made in artistic terms. Anita Desai and Arun Joshi move in with entirely new of its to both the substance and the form of the Indian fiction in English. R. S. Pathak rightly observes the new situation of the novel :

After the 1950s however, Indian novelists' interest moved from the public to the private sphere. They began to delineate in their works the individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms along with his problems and crises. Most of them in their eagerness to find new themes "renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man" and engaged themselves in "a search for the essence of human living." Novelists like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and Nayantara Sehgal have altered the face of the Indian English novel and their works contain seeds of 'future development.'²

Especially Anita Desai and Arun Joshi are the major voices in the new phase of Indian fiction since their work is fired with a new purpose and a new resolve.

Anita Desai, unlike the famous three forbears, has her own 'masters', though she confesses to English literature as a 'major influence' since 'it is historically a fact that this is how we were taught and brought up.'³ Though she is normally compared with Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf, she proves herself to be so different from either. She has a subtler influence than that of the European, and Russian novelists:

In addition to what I studied in school and college, I found Russian and European writers particularly fascinating. Writers like Rilke, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus. I find Russian literature very powerful. It has many levels - it tends to have deeper psychology, philosophy, and mysticism that's particularly revealing to an Indian writer. It can be read as social history.⁴

In Dostoyevsky, she must have found how there is a whole iceberg of inner in the human personality and how that inner life cannot be divided from the social psychological, metaphysical or mystical dimensions of one's life. Probably the Russian model came closest to the situation of India where it is not easy to compartmentalize aspects of life or self and one has to find his own equation for existence. An Indian, for example, simultaneously exists

on several levels, the temporal and the eternal. The personal and the social, the modern and the traditional. He is as vexed as a Russian. He is even as fascinated as a Russian by the European and his own Indian heritage. Camus belongs to the modern consciousness and we can not imagine a character like Nirode in *Voices in the City* without being reminded of his kinship with Camus's Meursault. Rilke, of course, is yet another influence, not from the area of fiction, but poetry. But he is very significant. Rilke himself was greatly influenced by Paris and Russia and thought Russia to be even his spiritual home; his monk 'is an adherent of the peculiar faith... a in a God remote from the August if being Father of Western Christianity, a Godfather, who was waiting to be born of the artist's aler and sensitive consciousness.,⁵ Sartre began as a phenomenologist and grew to be the most outstanding existentialist of the atheist type, who also wrote fiction and drama. Anita Desai must have benefited greatly from all of them since, with a German mother, she was half European herself. The fiction that she has produced is sp unlike that, which went before her, and she marks the point of departure for new fiction.

She also does not believe in any particular 'tradition' to conform to or enrich or extend. A tradition has to emerge from an amalgam of various forces. She is frank about her concept of tradition. When she is asked a question about her affiliation to any particular tradition she frankly says :

But traditions have lost their identity just much as countries have. Tradition that I belong to is that of literature that carries, that travels. It is not strictly regional After all I to have borrowed my tradition from several literatures.... My work must have taken from them.⁶ She is not tied to a tradition, not even Indian literature, as she frankly says, 'As for Indian literature we were taught very little of our own literature. We had to discover it on our own,⁷ That does not mean that she is an exile and her heart is abroad : It's too large a generalization to say one is at home here and not so in India. Wherever I go I am quite aware that I am creating my own landscape.... There is a great deal you reject and you feel not your own Even in the West there are certain elements I accept and some that I reject.

Thus Anita Desai strikes a fresh path for herself and so there is a different stance and a different atmosphere when one goes to her fiction. There is a growing richness and complexity on the one hand, and a clarity and simplicity accompanied by a genuine sense of humour on the other. From *Cry*, *The Peacock* to *Journey to Ithaca*, it is a long journey and the journey marks a new trail in Indian fiction.

Similarly, Arun Joshi also belongs to another age, like Anita Desai herself. The very fact that he belonged to the M.I.T. and then later became an industrialist, itself is enough to show that we cannot readily work out a pattern of literary influences, or tradition and tie him down and label him. He defies easy classification. His novels also remind one of the early English and European novelists who were not professional men of letters but who wrote since they had the instinct in them. The very fact that his novels were published solely in India with the Indians as primary readership shows that he was not tempted to sell himself abroad, as any number of his own contemporaries and successors have been suspected to have been tempted and succumbed. Since he also does not confess, in any of his few interviews to have

been influenced by any novelist of England or Europe or even India, we could begin with a clean slate as far as the influence studies are concerned. But that doesn't mean he was working in a vacuum, he confesses:

I did read Camus and Sartre. I liked *The Plague* and read *The Outsider*. I might have been influenced by them Sartre I did not understand clearly or like. As for existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood anything except odd statements. So we should guard ourselves against building up an existential castle in the air of Arun Joshi's fiction. Of course, that does not mean that we rule out completely the profound modern impulse generated by the complex modern Indian culture which includes the strong strain of the existential in it. But what is most certain is the essentially Indian self of Arun Joshi.

He is frank about it: "Joshi feels that his ethos is essentially Hindu."¹⁰ He is also reported to have told that he believed "Hinduism is highly existentialist - oriented philosophy since it attaches so much importance to the right way to live (to exist)."¹¹

That is the general way of finding everything in the *Bhagavad - Gita* and does not necessarily mean that Arun Joshi was reading the holy book as an existential text. One is not very sure whether he was cutting a light-hearted joke when he is reported to have told Sujatha Mathai, that it was because of the existential leanings that he was led to Hinduism and the *Bhagavad - Gita* which is "existential "expresses the absurdity of things - you are dead anyway."¹² Arun Joshi being so brilliant could not have felt that was the message of the *Bhagavad - Gita*. But he must have felt that there was no need to go to Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and a host of others to know the existential reality.

The *Bhagavad - Gita* can tell an intelligent man that unless one validates one's existence by right action, one is as good as dead and that Karma yoga is superior to any other path simply because it is the only way of authenticating one's existence. Though Aristotle's definition and interpretation of tragedy where he makes 'action' crucial, the *Bhagavad - Gita* reveals action as a key to all living, including the ultimate life with God. The kind of existential dilemma that he formulates in his words, "I strongly believe that individual actions have effects on others and oneself. So, one cannot afford to continue with an irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at some point,"¹³ is his own and should be the creed of any responsible novelist. He is also reported to have affirmed the same to Sujatha Mathai that the law of Karma is the central law and that there is no intervening agent between you and God. What do you sow you reap?"¹⁴ It is extremely necessary to note that Arun Joshi emphasized non-literary influences, which have shaped his imagination. As he confessed to Sujatha Mathai, he was really influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan for the purity of their spirit, J. P. Narayan was uncontaminated, and because of the charisma / of his honesty and simplicity.¹⁵

Thus it is necessary to study two such independently spirited novelists who in a way occupy the interesting space between pre - Independence and post-Independence, the colonial and the post-colonial, the modern and the post - modern. Though the several dualities overlap, they do help the Indian novelist come out of his personal obsession with the colonial domination, social revolt, the Gandhian Movement, on the one hand, and the modernizing Western bewilderment on the other. The two novelists carry the past in their bones inevitably

but they are not fevered by it. Nor do they glorify the past as Raja Rao might tend to it. Nor do they discard the Indian tradition and embrace the new-fangled culture. Their novels are marked by stunning freedom of spirit. wrote after them or even with them, could write without any sense of guilt. In a way, they celebrate the freedom of the novelist as perhaps a few others of their predecessors did. They pave the way for the new fiction in India. Here is an attempt to study both of them together so that their historical and literary importance in the march of Indian fiction in English is better realized.

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