

CHAPTER VI

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One of India's best known novelists, Anita Desai has written more than a dozen novels and collections of short stories. Most of these deal with the psychological aspects of characters. Anita Desai's novels create evocative and deeply moving narratives of individual lives caught in the throes of socio-cultural and existential dilemmas. The manner in which different groups or individuals react and adjust, or fail to adjust to this change, is the subject matter of Anita Desai. The helplessness and fallibility of human beings form the bedrock of her existentialist philosophy that guides her novels.

6.1. The Concept of Authentic Existence

The concept of “authentic existence” is an offshoot of the philosophy of existentialism, which itself was a revolt against the philosophies of naturalism and idealism prevailing before the twentieth century. While these philosophies propounded determinism and rationalism, existentialism debunked the significance of reason and tradition as manifest in institutions and values. It laid stress on subjective self, will and freedom.

‘Existence precedes Essence’ is the most well-known aphorism explaining this philosophical stance. Jean Paul Sartre, who gave this

catchy slogan was himself preceded in the domain of existentialism by others like Nietzsche. In fact, Kierkegaard can be called the father of existentialist movement. It was he who gave the philosophy of Existentialism its name. Heidegger and Sartre followed Kierkegaard. Another noteworthy point is that mainly litterateurs and people from fields other than philosophy also contributed to the development of the tenets of Existentialism. Thus, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Kafka, Rilke, Hermann Hesse, Proust, Marlraux, Garaham Greene, Jean Genet, Hemingway, Samuel Beckett et al have dealt with the existential themes.

Existentialists are actually concerned about how people exist, i.e., with what degree of passion, seriousness, and responsibility, and with what effort they live by their most cherished ideals and values. Kierkegaard extols these features of what later existentialists call “authentic existence.” This ideal concern not the content of people’s choices and commitments, but the manner in which such choices are lived. Authentic existence becomes especially important if one believes that no objective grounds can be adduced to support fundamental choices.

People, who live inauthentically or in “bad faith”, as the existentialists call them, make their life- choices flippantly, without

wrestling with the alternatives, without really caring about their significance, without realizing they are defining themselves in making such choices. Kierkegaard also challenges Hegel's conception of ethical life. He also criticizes Hegel for claiming that the good life requires living in accord with the duties of one's social life. Such a life can involve impersonal and customary responses. Kierkegaard's notion of authentic existence rejects this depersonalization and awakens people to go for life's true meaning. Similarly, Heidegger defines authenticity simply as being oneself. He suggests that authentic people are the sources of their projects. Instead of taking their cues from others, they bend situations to their own aims. The novels by Anita Desai portray different kinds of quests which may broadly be divided into three:

6.2. Search for Aesthetic Existence

In Anita Desai, we find that the central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which she projects through incompatible couples, very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. The women characters have a vision of life, mostly in the married state, which they try to achieve. There is struggle involved because the male partner is not comfortable with the wife's choice. The existential crisis is, thus, conceptualized as a see-saw, balanced on a central fulcrum, with women sitting on one end and men on the other. She refuses male as a super

power and tries to legitimize female power. However, in Desai's world, no party is winner; both of them lose the battle at each other's cost. Nor does she look for androcentric model which lies beyond sexual stereotypes. Her themes, viz., marital discord, alienation, identity crises, all have been presented with their socio-cultural and psychological ramifications in an existential manner.

Her genuine concern to narrativize existentialist's predilection of women characters is found early in her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* (1963). Maya, the major character, desires her husband to be sensitive to her feelings and perceptions. For her life has to have an aesthetic overtone. There has to be a place for appreciation of nature – flowers, stars, rainbows, etc. Maya is a highly sensitive person who is greatly perturbed over the death of a pet dog. Gautama is, however, built of a different material. Hence, there is conflict and she suffers from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic. She is isolated – first by her own inability 'to see things steadily and see them whole' which disrupts her relationship with others. Bewildered by a world which she does not understand, she feels tragically and pathetically alone. In her retreat from reality, she cuts herself off from the rest of the world.

Maya feels lonely and loveless. "I am alone," is her refrain.

Thoughts about death start haunting her. Even the peacock's call for mating seems the death-wish to her. She is stuck fast to her own interpretation of things. In existentialist jargon, it is the quest for authentic existence that she aspires after and fails to get. She can go to any extreme to secure it. She can even kill her husband and still if she cannot get it, she can dispense with her own life because she cannot accept life which is not in conformity with her own vision, which is, to say the least, an aesthetic one demanding appreciation of all that is beautiful.

Voices in the city (1965) is a novel that deals meticulously with "the ferocious assaults of existence" in the "monster" metropolis, Calcutta, on the three major characters in the novel- Nirode, Monisha, and Amla who all feel tortured by their meaningless, hollow existence.

Nirode is an artist at heart who would like to write plays and edit a literary journal. He has written a play and also published first volume of a literary journal titled *Voices*. He is a self-confessed existentialist influenced by the philosophies of Camus and Baudelaire, who wishes to lead life on his own terms and observing his own value system in which success is not important. What is important to him is a life with aesthetic overtones. He squarely condemns his materialistic friends like Sonny and Jit. But he also criticizes the elderly, "beggarly Bose" for his

bourgeois lifestyle. Clearly, he has a very subjective, a very private vision of life in which aesthetic curiosity is at the top. An artist is also fascinated by ugliness in the world which he portrays in his poetry and plays. Nirode thinks success and reputation – which society values – are only traps. In fact, he is in quest of the nadir of failure. “I want to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start again, towards my next failure,” he says (40). That shows his conception of authentic existence. He is, indeed, different from the other fellow beings, as all existentialists are. He feels neither difference in love, hate and compromise nor is he satisfied with his philosophical discussions, criticism and withdrawal.

Like Nirode, Monisha, his eldest sister, has also a miserable psychic life. Married to Jiban, she is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. She seems to have been transplanted in the wrong soil. Monisha tries to search for an authentic existence but fails like her brother. There is nothing in her life to sustain her. Monisha’s incapacity to bear a child, the absence of communication with her husband, lack of privacy, suspicion of her in-laws that she is a thief -- all torment her to the state where she cries in agony “There is no escape from it” and makes her feel the futility of her hollow existence. As mentioned earlier, the existentialists do not go by the parameters laid

down by others. It is their own whim or caprice which possesses them and beckons them in the pursuit of which they put their all at stake.

Amla, the third major character is also an existentialist one in a somewhat different way. She is lively with youthful excitement that is missing in the lives of Nirode and Monisha. She tries to opt out by attending cocktail parties, dinners and dances in aesthetic conversation with the painter, Dharma, whom she loves the most. But, all her dreams come to an end when she knows that Dharma is a married man who has disowned his daughter simply because she desired her cousin as her life partner. Thus, Amla moves from revolt to the atmosphere of desolation. This hollow observation of Amla denotes not only her futile attempt to live a cheerful and happy life but also her inner existentialist frustration and disillusionment which place her at par with Nirode and Monisha.

6.3. Quest for Identity

Anita Desai's novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) is an authentic study of human relationship overpowered by cultural encounters. Adit Sen, studying in England, has to suffer racial taunts from the English people. This is despite the fact that his wife is Sarah, an English girl. The existentialist issue of identity assumes enormous proportion here and that is what troubles Adit. He had been very confident that with his English education and exposure to England, and with an English wife to boot, he

was an Englishman for all practical purposes and that he would be able to sail through English society with enviable ease. But no, his identity is still Indian to the outside world. Who is he and what is his authentic self is what eludes him and its elusiveness torments him no end.

Adit, over a period of time, and perhaps under the impact of his friend, the rebellious Dev, notes the imperfection of what he considered his authentic life. He becomes more and more nostalgic about his childhood and memories of Bengal. He no more likes the label of Indian immigrant. He tells his English wife Sarah of this nostalgia that had become an illness and her ache.

Sarah, though not the main character in the novel, is also an existential character. Like an existentialist, she wants to know her authentic identity and therefore she questions herself if she is Mrs. Sen who had been married in the Indian way, wearing a red and gold Banares sari or secretary to the head. Her life is a saga of pursuit of an identity. In fact, both Adit and Sarah want the world to accept how they view themselves – that would be authentic existence for them even if the world fails to appreciate their stand.

The author's own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Desai's first language was German. Hugo Baumgartner belongs to the 'insulted and injured', the

‘nobodies’ of society. We often find him buried in the world of subconscious. Existentialism concerns precisely such people who are at odds with the accepted norms in society. An individual bitten by the existentialist bug must respond to the call within. In the story a Jewish businessman escapes in his youth from the Nazi Germany due to persecution there. In pre-independence India, he looks forward to an uninhibited normal life – an authentic existence – but is denied because he is a fair-skinned foreigner for the native people. Since India is ruled by the British, he is put behind bars for no crime of his but because he is a German, an exile from Germany, the enemy state with which Britain is at war in Europe. His umpteen petitions of innocence are dismissed summarily.

After suffering for long in the detention camp, he is let off at the end of the war. As Calcutta is in the throes of partition-time communal frenzy, he migrates to Bombay where the chances of his business seem to be quite bright but Hugo always suffers the ‘pangs of being alone’ (133). He was not accepted in Germany, nor is he accepted in India. He was not the real Aryan German in Germany, nor is he an Aryan Indian in India despite having lived here for fifty long years. ‘Germany there and India here’ (216), both remain an elusive golden fish for him. How he pines for being accepted by the family of friends like Chaman Lal but

is refused is something that he cannot understand. That means he is not considered an ordinary human being – a state which would allow him his authentic existence. It is the same in case of the bar dancer Lotte, another German, by her paramour Kantibhai's family. In case of Baumgartner, even fifty long years of stay in India have not effaced his alien identity. Despite the postcolonial focus on shifting identities, Baumgartner cannot choose his identity and lead an authentic existence! Sartre, himself a Jew, had appreciated the predicament of a Jew in Germany and elsewhere. The Jews had for long been deprecated by the Christians, and as it happens with colonized people, they start viewing their self through the lens of the other due to long periods of propaganda:

The Jew, because he knows he is under observation, takes the initiative and attempts to look at himself through the eyes of others. This objectivity toward himself is still another ruse of inauthenticity: while he contemplates himself with the ‘detachment’ of another, he feels himself in effect detached from himself; he becomes another person, a pure witness. (Sartre qtd. in Webber 75).

Despite the fact that the Jew “through flight from himself or through self-assertion” was forced to regard himself as a Jew, the “the authentic Jew is one who realizes one’s condition as Jew and assumes it despite adversity” (Sartre qtd. in Webber 76). Baumgartner, it can be seen, faces similar treatment and leads an inauthentic life.

6.4. Quest for Self-Fulfillment

Sita, the protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* hangs between married life and her self-fulfillment. She feels no genuine happiness in her marital context. At this stage in her life, when she is awaiting the birth of her fifth child, she feels total restlessness, boredom and loneliness in her existence. Her anxiety makes her insensitive and even cruel (in the worldly sense) to her husband and children. Her cynical but realistic observation cannot be missed out as she summarizes the littleness of human existence saying: "They are nothing-nothing but appetite and sex; only food, sex and money matter" Sita's husband entangled in his business and children moving independent, she finds herself totally in the clutches of home- sickness -- a terrible existentialist problem that besets the sensitive individual in this world.

She is not interested in giving birth to her fifth child and thinks of abortion. Every existentialist is a rebel and this streak of rebelliousness in her makes her flee to Manori. She has a notion that the island has the magic adduced to it by her father and it can even stop the birth of her child. That, of course, is a perverse logic but then when did an existentialist ever listen to the worldly-wise? She attempts for a futile search for some purpose in life – for authentic existence. This search torments her spiritually and does not bring about envisioned existence

but then like a true existentialist she is possessed by a belief and she does try to possess her interpretation of authentic existence.

Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* was published in 1977. It is symbolic of fire which burns in the heart of an old lady, a great-grand mother, Nanda Kaul, the exploration of whose inner emotional world—which is the hall-mark of existentialist literature, is the theme of the novel. In a lonely house, she has been living all these years, all alone, with no one else and nothing much to do. She identifies herself with the lonely pine trees. She likes the ‘barrenness’, the emptiness of the garden of *Carignano*, the name that her house bears. The first intrusion that comes into her secluded life is the postman's letter informing her that Tara's daughter Raka, her great grandchild will come to spend her holidays at *Carignano*. This upsets her no end, for, after all, she had done it all, seen it all, as the wife of a vice chancellor of Punjab University. She had discharged her duties towards her husband, her daughters and granddaughters, and now wanted to lead an authentic existence – for herself only. And this lovely vision was threatened by the impending arrival of her great granddaughter!

But to her surprise, Raka turns out to be a child who wants to be left alone. The attitude of Raka makes Nanda Kaul ‘breathless’ and she looks on her wondering at this ‘total rejection’. Rather than looking at

her mirror image, as Nanda Kaul believes, she can also have a third person perception of herself. As she looks upon Raka, so might the world look upon Nanda Kaul! The search for one's authentic existence cannot be replicated by anybody else. It is to each according to one's nature. Nanda Kaul learns this valuable lesson as the novelist poses it for the readers too – what if two existentialists in search of individual authentic existence meet? The novel makes an interesting case study.

In her novels, Anita Desai has focused mainly on her characters rather than on social milieu. Her characters, independent, agonized, frustrated somewhat domineering combat with angry defiance, their individual problems and predicaments, which are basically existentialist. In *In Custody*(1984), Desai marks the continuation of her earlier themes and narrative tendencies, such as, the quest for authentic existence. Besides, it focuses on the theme of self alienation, the agonies of the wounded self and the irony of the individuals caught in the crises of a changing society. The protagonist, Deven Sharma, aspires for totality of existence. He aspires for an understanding of existence and reality. The alliance between the artist and the critic, each trying to take the other in to his custody forms the focus of the novel. The theme of the novel relates to Deven's quest for scholarship. He becomes the sole custodian of Nur's poetry. Deven thinks that "he had accepted the gifts of Nur's

poetry,” and “he was custodian of Nur’s very soul and spirit”(204). Through the absurdity of existence between poet and the critic, Desai explores how the life at its core is absurd and has no ultimate meaning.

Deven’s great rootless, restless mobility, loneliness, and his paralyzing helplessness are the people who come in contact with him: his wife- Sarla, Murad, Nur and his two wives, Trivedi etc. After sleepless nights, he finally reaches the stage where he can see the perfection of art and imperfection of human nature. He is able to separate the two personalities of Nur- the poet and the man. He realizes that his friendship with Nur is not a trap but liberation. He has received the gift of Nur’s poetry and “It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon any pressure” (204).

However, it was not ‘bad faith’ by which Deven lived. Viewed from his standpoint, it dawns that he had been suitably rewarded, as a critic points out: “Even after encountering failure, Deven of *In Custody* does not complain against others, nor does he regret his own decision. He seeks his authentic existence in being able to achieve some distinction in his career and for this, hits upon the idea of interviewing a famous Urdu poet Nur for a friend’s journal. His repeated meetings with the poet over a period of time, which are beset with unforeseen problems of logistics, disillusion him regarding the private life of that poet. Things do not occur the way he had

envisioned but it is not a failed quest. He is satisfied as life has compensated him by revealing to him the secrets of celebrities" (Batra 50).

The question of authentic existence assumes greatest significance in case of spiritual quest. It moves from a mistaken and confused awareness of identity to a quiet self-assertion of individuality. Self-realization or identification in Desai springs from the inner urge to strike a balance between the constructive and destructive aspects of self-alienation. It is a defense mechanism adopted by Desai protagonists for overcoming their alienation.

We come across such a quest in Desai's novel *Journey to Ithaca*. The protagonist named Matteo is totally committed to his notion of authentic existence and to achieve it, he dedicates himself wholeheartedly like a true existentialist, albeit of the religious kind. His relentless pursuit of his self-ordained goal pays off.

Then, as he continued to gaze at it, he saw that what was perfectly balanced there in a cleft in the tree was not a stone at all but a circle, and it contained within it another circle, and another, that there was no beginning and no end to them; they were infinite; there was infinity. That circle was the universe itself, containing world within world, ring upon ring, sphere within sphere, and to his dazzled eyes they revolved within each other and yet remained perfectly static, maintaining a

total balance and harmony that could be divine. The stone glowed now, became brilliant in Matteo's eyes, resplendent with what he felt certain divine light. (68).

It is Matteo's body that fails to keep pace with his spirit even as he neglects responsibilities towards his family and loses contact with society. In the eyes of the world, he might be a failure, yet to his own self, he has been utterly sincere and has risen to his calling undertaking the arduous journey towards self-realization which he has set as his goal of authentic existence.

Sophie, Matteo's beloved, is not given the insight that Matteo has. Therefore, she calls it the Mother's 'fake spirituality' to whose charm Matteo has fallen and which Sophie undertakes to uncover. But as we know, the issue of authentic existence is purely subjective and the one pursuing that goal need not conform to anyone else's vision.

Examining the novel *Fasting, Feasting* from the existentialist angle of authentic existence, we feel that whereas the novel *Journey to Ithaca* is suffused with the motive of leading authentic existence, *Fasting, Feasting* presents the opposite picture. Neither Uma nor Arun is possessed by that fervor to lead an independent life the blueprint of which is firmly sketched in his or her mind. Uma sighs sometimes for a small measure of liberty but she is not allowed even to make a telephone

call. That one outing with her cousin Ramu is so frowned upon that she is never able to assert her will. It is a case of total self-abnegation and self-effacement. On the other hand, Arun is never able to come into his own as he has been always over patronized and pampered – this last treatment having been denied in Uma’s case. Uma reaches a state where she is alienated from her own self also. The condition of self-alienation is an offshoot of the throttling of one’s desires. When one’s ideal image of self is shattered, there arises “a gap between his idealized image and his real-self” (Horney 111). The real self is what motivates one to different goals of growth and fulfillment through which one can hope to attain self-identification, but when there is a gap, such identification becomes impossible. Such an individual loses his or her individuality and even his “relation to himself become impersonal” (Horney 161). The vision of authentic existence is not revealed to such a character.

Desai’s novel *The Zigzag Way* (2005) is set in Mexico and Cornwall, in which Desai has uncovered a compelling chapter in Mexican history. Eric is a newly minted historian just out of graduate school, unsure of his future. With no clear direction, he follows his girlfriend, Em, when she travels to Yucatan for her scientific research. There, he starts pursuing his own quest, tracing his family’s history to a Mexican ghost town, where a hundred years earlier, young Cornish

miners, overworked and exploited, toiled to their death. Very sympathetically, Desai depicts the struggles of Eric's grandparents and their community.

Now, in place of the Cornish workers, the native Huichol Indians suffer the cruelty of the mine owners. When he enquires into their lives, Eric provokes the ire of their self-appointed savior Dona Vera, known as the queen of the Sierra "seated by an empty fireplace in a wing chair, with her pugs" (55). Dona Vera is the widow of a mining baron who has dedicated her fortune to preserving the Huichol culture. But her formidable presence betrays a dubious past.

The zigzag paths of these characters converge on the 'Day of the Dead', bringing together past and present in a moment of powerful epiphany. Eric learns from an inn-keeper that people come on the occasion of the festival *Dia de los Muertos*, to pay homage to the dead relatives. He sets out to visit the mining area. He has no idea of the grave of his grandmother but the intensity of his passion results in a mystical meeting with her apparition. Anita Desai is known for keeping the veil of mystery intact and so, contrary to the common belief in the omniscience of souls, this grandmother's apparition mistakes him for Paul (his father).

Seeing Eric standing by the low wall that ringed the

cemetery, she lifted her hand, holding a small bunch of grey leaves and pale flowers, and to his amazement, waved to him. He could not imagine why she acknowledged him or who she might be or why she was there, but his mind had ceased to pose questions, they were all obliterated by the wave of her hand and the pure scent of the flowers. (175).

Eric and the ghost of her grandmother have a lengthy discussion about sundry things, among them about the cactus plants, the Indian pilgrims visiting the place, Eric's grandfather's family origin etc. Finally, the unreality of the ghost is revealed when she beckons Eric to follow her but he cannot get through the wall like the ghost does and misses her trail altogether in the light of the dawn. Nevertheless, he has succeeded in paying homage to his ancestors and locating the missing link in building his identity.

Thus it is seen that by and large, Desai's characters, pursue different goals in life which would satisfy them and bring them as reward a kind of authentic existence. It could be an aesthetic life, a chosen identity or any other goal set by them for self-fulfillment. They follow such goals with the zest of a zealot. According to a critic, "The conception of their authentic life is not conditioned by any social ideology, creed or religion. The calling comes from within. The obstacles en route their quest is aplenty and the end result is failure by worldly standards. But they have taken their own decisions and would

not blame others. There is no whining and whimpering on their part. They are heroes and heroines of modern day epics called life” (Batra 52).

It is in striving authentically, that is, with complete consciousness as being-for-itself that existentialism values most. One must live authentically even while acknowledging that there is no relief in this world. The reward that comes one’s way is the enrichment of self-consciousness. Man is all the time projecting himself beyond himself. It is by pursuing transcendent aims or seeking to surpass the self that he is able to exist authentically.

Critics have often found fault with Desai protagonists and dubbed them psychologically fragmented individuals who fail to get what they want. Hence, the individual in Desai novels is both emotionally and psychologically disturbed. But the fact is that they respond to a different call that comes from within. They do not go by the worldly criteria of a sound mind or character. No one can fault them for their sincerity in pursuing their chosen goal even if they do not always succeed. They do form a vision of life and try to live by their philosophy. They must be credited with what is their due when they launch themselves on a journey that should take them to their goal of authentic existence. They do try to live by their conception of life which is different from the run-of-the-mill notion of society, culture or religion. The characters in Anita

Desai are true existentialists committed to leading authentic existence.

The Desai characters do not tend to live by what is called “bad faith” in existential jargon. This is the state when they deceive themselves into thinking that their actions are determined by their circumstances or their own natures. Thus, they do not want to own their responsibility for their choices. To achieve an authentic human existence, individuals must overcome this tendency. They must recognize their freedom and own responsibility for the decisions that they make without holding society and traditional beliefs responsible. This is truly reflected in Desai characters.

However, there is no text-book pursuit of the ideals of existentialism. Existentialism is no mere following one’s whims only; it lays equal stress on responsibility, for what you do should be something that you desire the world to do too. For Sartre, responsibility is “consciousness of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object” (553). Existentialists hold man responsible for his actions because he has no guide either in God or in an a priori realm of values. While the atheistic existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre clearly deny God’s existence, the theistic ones refute the a priori world of values. The later feel that since existence precedes essence, there is no given or specific human nature by which our actions can be explained. There is

no legislator but himself. Thus abandoned, he must decide for himself, but as mentioned earlier, they should be aware of the fact that they are laying down standards for others too. The trouble with Desai characters is that they remain confined to their own quest for authentic existence and do not think of creating models for others. Had they thought of this act of social responsibility, they would probably not have felt alienated in their individual quests.

6.5. Works Cited

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