

# Recent Trends in World Literature in English



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# The Theme of Existential Freedom: A Study of Character's Psychological Transformation in Anita Desai's Novel 'Cry the Peacock'

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## Introduction

The impact of existentialism on life and thought is witnessed before and after war. Consequently, literary writers have evaporated themes of existentialism in their literary product by presenting human condition, life and its surrounding. Thomas Becket's play 'Waiting for God to' is the best example of existentialism. We notice impact of existentialism in the works of Indian novelist, Anita Desai. She has made free use of existential thought as a tool of expression in her fictions. The theme of alienation is mainly focused on by Desai which reaches the highest point in agony, loss of hope, fear and death. She attempts to show journey of her protagonists from alienation to existentialism. There is hunt for self-search in man's life. So she projects true state of affairs in life and the real experience Anita Desai's novels also show absolute necessity of human being's life. The self consciousness of man is fertilized by her through the use of teasing of cry of existentialists. There are varied themes like extreme agony of existence, fears and trembling which move around the central characters in her novels. Character's values

faiths and structure appear in the way of individual's self realization. Dr. Shashipal rightly quotes: her forte is "the exploration of sensibility the particular kind of Indian sensibility that is all at ease among barbarians and the pullistines, the anarchists and the moralists" (2002:10)

## Nature and scope

The philosophical term existentialism is framed by adding suffix 'ism' to the word 'existential'. It is an adjective which is originated from a noun 'existence'. The words like 'existentialia' in the Latin, 'existenz' in the German, 'existence' in the French and 'astitva' in the 'Sanskrit' are the synonyms of 'existence'. The meaning of a word is 'being' actuality and reality', and the fact or the state of existing'. According to existentialists the word 'existence' speaks about the act of existing and not about the state of existing. Therefore existence is not a state but an act. Existence is actual passing across from possibility into reality. So it is the living, changing concrete fact.

Existentialism is recognized as the modern philosophical movement during prewar and post war. It lately refers to the cultural activity, political and religious thoughts, and literature. The philosophy of existentialism has been realized by many senses like proponents and opponents. Bestowing dark and depressing scene of it opponents explain it as the 'shocking, sordid or obscure.' They feel the word existentialism has no significance so it is meaningless. The exponents are condemned for misusers and the breaker of images, nihilists and artistic freaks.

How do people look at life? The way they look at life is existentialism. The people who are related to existential philosophy are labeled as existential. Though it is truth, there is no common structure of doctrine to which all existentialists a free unanimously and that held together all idealists. Because of this, existentialism is not named as 'philosophy'



but a 'style of philosophizing'. The people who accept it about the world and man's life are leaded by it. It is essential to note features connected to the style of philosophizing. Initially it is underlined that the style of philosophizing starts from man and not nature. "This is called rebellion against naturalism, rationalism and rationalistic idealism. Its movement is against traditional religiosity. In a true sense it tries to declare that traditional philosophy is obligatory as the rationalism and idealism. It is philosophy of subject and not an object. The subject is the existent. Miguel de Unamuno declares: philosophy is the product of humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself. And let his do what he will do, he philosophizes not with reason only, but the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bones, with the whole soul and with the whole body. It is the man that philosophies" (Shashipal, 2002:15)

This approach pays attention on the themes which occur in works of art and literature. They are different from the traditional. The themes like freedom, decision and responsibility are conspicuous in existential philosophy. Freedom a significant ingredient shapes the future of man. Because of freedom man becomes authentic. The self as agent provides the central theme for existentialism. The traditional Western philosophy focuses on the 'self as subject'. The topics such as finitude, alienation, despair and death are also included in the themes. Existentialists speak of pessimism others optimism. Tragic elements in human life take place. They are aware of them. According to existentialists man is not a part of cosmos only but he stands with tension and tragic conflicts.

Existentialism became prominent between two world wars when the whole world was under social and political

change. Atmosphere in Germany was full of despair because of defeat. The same wind was blowing in France. Human freedom and dignity were in harm and human existence was in danger. So the whole world during this period was full of tension. The battle goes on for freedom and responsibility. The crisis of freedom, choice and decision were visible indications of culture. They were the requirements for the development of existentialism. Every novel and every play is labeled with existential. To the existentialist the world remains meaningless when it is used loosely. This movement expresses collapse in time.

A change from tradition to modern time makes man to feel uprooted and insecure. It is alienated from the society. The two world wars, destructions, gas chambers and efforts to focus light on man's meaningless existence are responsible for man to think of himself and about his relationship with others. The existence of man is futile Kafka views man's fate in the words "I am separated from all things by hallow space and I do not reach to its boundaries." (Shashipal, 2002:17) In the western countries people who possess keenness of feelings lead a life of disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness. They are very serious about an unpleasant situation of the modern man. Modern fiction explains man's problems. Existentialism is concerned with man's feelings, his freedom, his moral behavior and his possibilities.

### Definition of Existentialism

Existentialism results from various complex political situations, extreme control of naturalism and absolute idealism in philosophical area. Existentialism do not consent danger to the freedom and dignity. So they strongly stressed on man's individual freedom and responsibility. According to Fernando Molina existentialism is a kind of philosophy which strives to analyze the basic structures of human existence calling "Individuals to an awareness of their



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existence in its essential freedom". Roger Troisfontaines says, "Existentialism is a passionate return of the individual to his own freedom, in order in the unfolding of its processes to extract the significance of his being". (2002:17) Frederick Copleston understands importance of existentialism in "Drawing attention in a modern context to the human person as a free and responsible subject". (2002:17)

### **Thinkers of existentialism**

Existentialism makes people to relate philosophy to the personal life and experience. The thinkers of Existentialism have differences of opinion. They primarily have accepted human existence and man's freedom and responsibility. They hate severity of the great intellectualism and cruel use of power which submerges system. These thinkers attack formal habit of the mind and traditional thoughts. Focusing on the basic principles Kierkegaard asks people to free themselves from illusion of subjectivity. According to him it forces human being to get particular rules and doctrines which shape their conduct and intellect. Consequently, a person does not care his own free will and internal life.

Human being shapes his life. His existential freedom is considered in terms of socio-economic, political and theological thoughts. There is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom. Sartre says 'man is condemned to be free.' Man has not created himself yet he enjoys freedom. It is not philosophic concept. His sincere desire brings change in himself and the society around him. According to him unconditional freedom is enjoyed by human beings. Freedom and responsibility are related to other human beings. He says "My original fall is the existence of the other. It is before the other. I am guilty. These lines indicate Biblical line that Adam and Eve 'Know, they are naked.'" During modern time man has lost his faith in God. So he turns to other people for solace and comfort. Existentialist believes in identity. The society



describes the world from his outlook. It is essence of existentialism.

Man's individual existence is real and not abstract. The first one does not generate. It can't be substitute for the actual existence. So the existentialists add more values to the individual and not universal. Individual felt enjoyed, suffered, willed and lived are valued and not class, society, or state or community. The crowd inclines to end true existence, freedom of individual. So Nietzsche hates crowd. According to him all institutions tend to suppress individuality. Existentialists are more interested in human freedom. To them man must have freedom of choice. He must know what to value and how to live. The existential individual has relationship with another and God but not to the crowd.

The existentialist are concerned with problems of man his existence, freedom and choice and responsibility. They feel that the man in modern time is dehumanized. His freedom is taken away by force. They have strong will to bring man to his existence by giving him freedom, chance to choose and decide. The existentialists promote human existence where they have choice, decision. Anguish, anxiety, despair, dread, death, choice and freedom are all facts of life.

What is death? Everybody fears death. It comes to man from the outside and absents him from this world. It frees him forever. Freedom offered by death is dreadful freedom. The existentialist views that death is the fundamental concept. To Kierkegaard death provides another occasion for living. Sartre finds death in absurdity for Heidegger death is a liberating goal.

The existentialists have their own views about freedom, choice and decision. Existentialists believe that in order to understand man there must be freedom. The main aim of them is to search for human freedom. Man is born free and



remains free for his choice. Sartre's thought of freedom is based on ontology and Heidegger gives intellectual base to his freedom. To him human freedom is not meaningless but it is limited because the person is burdened with particular inclinations and intelligence. Heidegger opines that the freedom man enjoys is limited by fate. Existentialism burdens a man with unlimited responsibilities. Man is the architect of his future. He is responsible for what he is. Man is not responsible only for his individuality but for all men. Man has to fight against all kinds of forces and uncertainties. Existential being enjoys full freedom. Choice and decision are in his hand. They are personal things but difficult to implement. Sartre is of the opinion that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. His action is a response of all mankind. What is better for himself is selected by man. The atmosphere which is created by man is not only for himself but for the others also to choose freedom.

### **Transformation of character in 'Cry, the Peacock'**

Anita Desai is an existentialist Indian novelist who handles the theme of existentialism in her novels. She mainly focuses on the situations in human life. Anita Desai explains intentions behind the man's action. She reveals man knows himself and problem of existence. The novelist's role in the growth of existential novel is very significant. She pays attention on the human mind and invites the reader's participation in certain consciousness. Anita refers present crisis of man in the novels. The existential themes like freedom, decision, guilt, alienation, anxiety, boredom, death, and destruction are explored by the novelist Anita Desai. The novels mainly deal with extreme attack of existence.

Anita Desai projects character of Maya in 'Cry, the Peacock' as a sensitive and suffering woman which results from disharmony in her married life and neurosis. Due to father fixation relationship Maya realizes Gautama, her

husband an infertile substitute for her father and not a loving husband. The situation of Gautama is responsible to have space for her father in her inner consciousness. On finding Gautama's reflection in the mirror Maya attempts to kill him. It shows step by step transformation of the character, Maya into criminal. One may underline author's skill of dramatization of character and situation that shapes the inner self of Maya.

Maya herself tries to find change in her life. Due to Maya's conscious dramatic turn Gautama's efforts to cure her inner suffering fails. Her eager desire for something is unsuccessful to establish communication with reality in actual life. She ceaselessly suffers from feeling of suffocation and distracted thoughts. Maya's mind is haunted by the thought of foretell of danger. She desires company of her husband after the death of Toto.

She sat there, sobbing, and waiting for her husband to come home. Now and then

She we went out into the verandah and looked to see if her were coming up.

(Desai, 1980:5)

In order to get relief from the present situation Maya goes back to her childhoods memories. She desires to seek change in life. In all those attempts Maya's consciousness catches sensations like color sound and smell. Her perception of whiteness is indicated white flower, white Toto against darkness. Maya and Gautama are separated by loneliness and darkness. Maya tries to find meaning in a dark universe. Gautama quotes Urdu couplet in order to cure her internal suffering, "Even if each star in the sky were an heart, what of it? Give to me one heart that which that is capable of sorrow." (Desai, 1980: 23)

Her heart is tortured by the same hopelessness. Maya accepts that one silent night she lined cry which sharply



affected her flesh and she felt that the knife entered in her heart. 'Lover I Die'. I understood their calf. I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine' (Desai, 1980:97) Maya controls herself. She feels the dance of peacock has made her restless. She has lost roundedness of mind. Maya is wounded by uncertainty and fear. She feels subhuman existence. Due to psychic transformation in Maya she reveals her quality manners that the death sentence has been caused by her wish to be alive.

One may underline that Maya's loss of hope is not personal but universal. Disorder of her nervous system is collective which may be danger of woman's identity as a whole. In the society woman's desire for love forces her to the act of suicide. Initially Maya is haunted with the thought of death. Maya's distressing existence is presented by her severe mental pain and the strain of mind. This pathetic existence of her marginalizes the poetic beauty of her life. Maya's strong desire for love and life and meeting with the astrologer and her husband, Gautama are responsible for her restlessness during whole life. Psychologically she is under the impression that she has been imprisoned. The contrasting nature of Maya and Gautama is noted by the novelist. Gautama is unimaginative, less emotional and overbearing. Maya is hysterical and indifferent to the outside world. Maya herself passes remarks on her unsuccessful married life in the words: 'It was based upon nobility forced upon as from outside, and therefore, neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon. With which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not sear to part'. (Desai, 1980:45)

Maya desires to go to South to dances. She knows about a group dances which are arranged in the villages for a number of days. 'The dancers are all men, and they wear

such fantastic masks and the drums... The masks they wear- you must have seen them? And their customs. And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight and perhaps they have torchlight. Yes, I suppose they dance by torchlight.' (Desai, 1980:42-43) But Maya's desire has shown dustbin. Her willingness for watching the Kathakali dance is not taken into account. She is told by Gautama that the kathakali dancers group is going to arrive to Delhi which she can enjoy. Because it is less expensive.

Maya's willingness has not been given significance by her husband. Their approaches towards life are different Maya loves beautiful, the colorful and things which are full of very great joy. Gautama approach in these things is completely negative and contrasting. Maya's mood of mind changes according to the change of place. She is of the view that nobody is with her. Therefore there is no possibility of communication between Maya and others. She says 'I spun around, clutching the baby, to stare at my relations, whose names I knew, whose moods I sensed, whose hands I touched, and found there was not one amongst them to whom I could cry. Look, look – there is a moon in the sky.' (Desai, 1980:51)

Gautama does not respond feeling of Maya which she expresses from bottom of heart. He hates her by using words like 'neurotic', a spoiled baby. Her life is like a fairy tale. He condemns her richness of life. Gautama does not spare his time for her. He does not feel pity on the pathetic condition of Maya. She says "Poor Gautama, not to be able to notice the adour of lives, not to hear the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, not to have time to count the stars as they came out one by one too Gautama, My poor, poor husband". (Desai, 1980:237) Maya's life has become meaningless entity in absence of her husband's support. She deals with lonely and helpless life and tries to investigate her existence. She is made an existential character by



loneliness, continuous heart pain and growing worse in life. Her attempt of establishing right link with her husband Gautama does not find meaning in her life.

### Conclusion

Maya does not dare to act directly like Savitri in R. K. Narayan's '*The Dark Room*'. She does not allow disturbing peace and harmony by imposing her old opinions and views. By presenting Maya as an existential character Anita Desai focuses on the inner emotions of the women community. She gives more emphasis on the character and not on social milieu. Anita Desai allows coming out feelings of despair from the characters who are existentialists. Being a husband Gautama has to into considerations Maya's feelings. But it does not happen. It is true that human beings mood of mind changes according to the change of place. Maya tries to find change in her life and also attempts to establish communication with reality of life. She wants to make herself free from suffocated and distracted thoughts.

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## Sarchitnis Message

It is a matter of pride and appreciation that the Department of English, G.M.D Arts, B.W. Com. and Sci. College has organised a two day National Seminar on 'Recent Trends in World Literature in English' on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2016. I welcome all the dignitaries, teachers, scholars and participants for this seminar and give my best wishes to all. I hope there will be positive academic discussions on various aspects of recent trends in world literature in English.

Literature plays a crucial role in development and progress of humanity and mankind. This seminar will meet the objective of creating the platform for knowledge upgradation and exchange of ideas on recent trends in world literature in English. The scope of seminar appears to be quite vast and will surely help to add insights to the knowledge of all. For sure this seminar will really impart new knowledge and research oriented views to the researchers, academicians and aspiring students.

I congratulate all the teachers of the Department of English for bringing out this book which compiles research papers of the contributors who will be presenting at the seminar. On behalf of the institution, I thank all the participants for participating and contributing to this seminar. I render my best wishes to the entire team for the grand success of the seminar.

**Smt. Neelimatai Vasantrao Pawar**

*Sarchitnis, Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj,  
Nashik.*

