

ISSN: 2278-9529



# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

May 2015 Vol. 4. Issue III

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

## From Feminism Sensibility to Existential Predicament: A Study of Anita Desai's *In Custody* and *Cry, the Peacock*

**Manusmriti Sharma**  
Research Scholar,  
JK Lakshmipat University, Jaipur  
&  
**Dr. Sanjay Kumar**  
Associate Professor,  
J K Lakshmipat University, Jaipur

### Abstract:

The emergence of women writers during the post -independence period marks a great significance to the Indian fiction writing in English. The appearance of women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Veena Paintal, Nargis Dalal, Anita Desai have added new dimensions and depths to Indian fiction in English. These writers share their experience of Indian women and explore the inner selves by giving voice to their suffering and subjugation. Anita Desai is also one of such luminary of this brilliant group of writers who dives deep into the layers of her characters and explores their real self. Due to her awareness of the peculiar condition of the Indian women, her novels have been examined as the manifesto of female predicament and she has been labelled as a feminist writer which she does not like. The present paper tries to observe a steady shift in her writing from feminine sensibility to the existential predicament of her characters. It attempts to show Desai as a writer of human relation who grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil and chaos irrespective of gender. By a comparative study of two novels of Desai, the paper also tries to delineate whether it is the cry of a woman or a man caught in the purposelessness of life, the predominant note in both of the novels is anguish, aching quest for existence, longing for freedom of choices and conflicts generating from all of these.

**Keywords: Feminism, feminine sensibility, existentialism, anguish, absurdity.**

Feminism is a set of beliefs that propounds that equality should be given to women in all the spheres. Starting from the west, Feminism spread out like a viral to the rest of the world in no time. In India also a great amount of work has been done by Indian writers depicting the subjugation, suppression, surrender and silent miseries faced by women. The journey of feminist literature which set out with the depiction of torments and tortures faced by women halted on many stations as the second generation Indian writers like ShashiDeshpande, Ruth PraverJhabvala, KamlaMarkandeya, NayantraSahgaldived deep into the inner realms of a woman and explored feminine psyche and feminine existentialism with their feminine sensibility and depicted Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity struggling for their own

identity whether through silent subjugation or through violent outlet of their emotions. This journey within a woman opened up new vistas as some of the writers such as Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri have shifted their focus from “Journey within a woman” to “Journey within an individual” and instead of their exclusive feministic concerns they have dealt with cultural, social, political and existential issues focusing on human nature and its predicament.

Anita Desai is also one of such writers whose writing is a spectrum of many vibrant colors and who does not like to be boxed into a particular category as she clears in an interview:

I think every writer dislikes being labeled, because once you've been put in a category you might even start to believe that that's where you belong, and that can restrict your movements. It's nice to know that you're free to think and write as you wish.....what is important is what you make of your experiences, which is what you present to the reader.<sup>1</sup>

Her canvas is not shirked only to the mute miseries of a woman rather it has tremendous depth and intensity to sink deep into the complexity of human existence which brings her close to the existential philosophy that views each person as an isolated being cast into an alien universe, conceives the world as possessing no inherent truth, value and meaning. The key note of existentialism is that ‘existence precedes essence.’ It is normally applied to writing that emphasizes man's responsibility of forming his own nature and that stresses the prime importance of personal decision, freedom and goals. The instinct of revolt and rebellion is at the core of existentialism.

In this techno-savvy uncertain world of shattered values and scattered morals a human being hardly finds any meaning in his life. In this quagmire, howsoever one may feel well connected but he is alone in this world. In spite of all physical pleasures there is a question in an individual's mind about the purpose of life. What does it mean to be a human being? What is the ultimate meaning of life? Then one seems to search more, some deeper meaning from his existence. We answer this parent question of life in the ink of our choices and actions. The existential question leads to an anxiety, anguish and absurdity in life leaving it to move from the nothingness to the nothingness and we feel we are born without our choice and in the same way we will die without our choice. In this senseless world we live a ridiculous life where all choices are possible without any freedom, a situation as Sartre viewed as human being's dilemma.

Man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he didn't create himself yet, in other respects is free, because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.<sup>2</sup> (Sartre, 32)

Anita Desai is a minstrel of the human heart and is concerned with the human existence and its predicament. She has attained a distinguished height by sinking deeper into the psychological and existential concerns of her characters irrespective of their gender. Her exploration of human mind and psyche surpasses the limits of gender and lands her into a world where one does not

see man as suppressor and woman as a victim rather it is the meaninglessness of life which is 'being a human being' the main cause behind the actions and reactions, interests her more:

My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are a part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life-its shapelessness, its meaninglessness.<sup>3</sup> (Cawasjee, 101)

The present paper attempts to probe into the deeper layers of human existence and its absurdity as depicted in "In Custody" and "Cry, the Peacock" of Anita Desai. The paper tries to break free much celebrated novelist Anita Desai from the myopic view of a feminist writer and tries to show much broader aspect of existential struggles engulfing the lives of her characters irrespective of their gender through a comparative study of both of the novels. As a consistent explorer of the tensions between the external world of relations and inner world of emotions she has brought out not only a female's agony for her existence but also a human being's agony for his individuality, identity and existence. Her primary concern is to depict human existence and psyche as she explains that.

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for writing such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends on observation rather than private vision.<sup>4</sup> (Dhawan, 225)

In her depiction of existentialism there is no fix pattern or system. She seemed to be inspired by many existentialist philosophers like Dostoevsky, Camus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Sartre. The ups and downs in human life sow seeds for concern about the nature and meaning of human existence as Martin Heidegger speaking about the distinctive nature of the human being or *Dasein* asserts that

What makes *Dasein* unique is that it, alone among existing things, not only lacks a nature in this sense but also takes its own existence (being) to be an issue of it...humans do not exist as rocks do but they are also aware of themselves as existing.<sup>5</sup> (Waternberg, p 7.)

The moment when one becomes aware of his existence he also becomes aware of thousands of questions sprouting from existence. Desai knows this germinating point and weaves a thread of existential concerns in both of the novels. In 'In Custody' the main protagonist Devens suffers existential absurdity, dilemmas and a sense of isolation which bring him into a state where he wants to know his true self. While on the other hand Maya in 'Cry, the Peacock' is torn between her inner world of existential dilemmas and outer world of real existence in spite of being conscious of both the worlds. Her consciousness is charged by her intense involvement with life and its fear and her longing for freedom- freedom from fears, pains and sufferings of life as well as from life itself. Freedom is explored as essential feature of human life in existential contention as common to both the philosophers Sartre and Heidegger is

their recognition that human being is a unique entity in the world in virtue of its freedom. Their emphasis on human freedom as something that is essential to our natures, making us the distinctive type of entity that we are. In the same way in the process of pursuing her desire for freedom of existence Maya becomes a distinctive type of entity.

Maya's outer life which as a wife of a lawyer, Gautam who is earning good and is capable of fulfilling all materialistic needs of Maya seems satisfactory but when her inner depths are plunged we find that she is split in her personality and is a victim of internal conflicts always willing to be heard, spoken to and treated as a child rather than as a mature person as she has been reared in the protective guardianship of her father who always tries to fill the loss of her mother by fulfilling every possible needs and wishes of her daughter but gets married to a middle aged lawyer whose intellectual and practical outlook of life is sharply in contrast with Maya's emotional and physical needs and calls her 'a spoilt child' while Maya finds him 'understanding was scant, love was meager' this emotional vacuum in their relationship can also be felt :

Nothing was hidden, all was revealed and it was not what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all but across a river, across a mountain and more.(97)

This vacuum is further deepened in her life by the hunting prophecy of albino. She is baffled by her past memories and prophecies and chooses to run from the reality into psychic dimensions. Her psychic dimension is further aggravated by her past sorrow of Toto's death and further fear of albino's prophecy about her husband's death. She is tightly imprisoned from head to toe in the chains of false beliefs as well as false fears, tormented by the baggage of past and burden of future but without any present where she calls for help-

Father!Brother! Husband!

Who is my savior?

need of one

I am dying, and I am

In love with living

I am in love and

I am dying...

The quest of Maya for her existence is not only a quest of a woman but the quest of a human being who is tormented by the existential problems, who despite of being conscious of the practical world around herself, despite of knowing the realities of all relations in her life carries a sense of loneliness,pessimism and alienation with her.The absurdity of life and her helplessness tortures Maya more than the passive response of Gautam. Maya's cold pessimistic realization about life is felt by her more as an individual in existence than as a female. Whether it

is the cry of a woman or a man caught in the purposelessness of life the predominant note in both of the novels is anguish, aching quest for existence, longing for freedom of choices and conflict generating from all of these.

On the other hand the helplessness, loneliness and isolation of Deven in the novel 'In Custody' is no way different from the one faced by Maya. Deven, who is professor of Hindi in Delhi and has a married life suffers existential absurdity and complete sense of isolation and dislocation from his normal life which puts him on the path of search for true self, search for freedom from shackles and manacles of life. His romantic dreams for his life which he always nurtures and his real life which is full of harsh realities are sharply in contrast with each other and unsettle his mind to such a level that he feels frustration and restlessness. He, also as Maya suffers marital disorder and fails to be the desired husband for his wife Sarla by lacking in his duties. Deven also proves to be a professional failure as he fails to maintain a rapport with the students in college. In college also he is surrounded by such students who cast an aura of meaninglessness of life by giving him the expressions of boredom, amusement and defiance which make him focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room for space, for freedom as Desai writes:

The expression he saw-of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance-made him look away quickly and focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release.(p.5)

He feels everything so ordinary that he counts them as nothingness but this ordinariness is thrown out of his life when his friend Murad, the author of magazine. The novel also presents a crucial relationship between Deven and Murad who are childhood friends. Deven views Murad as editor of a leading Urdu journal, as a part of the world Deven longs for but contrary to this the idealized world of Murad exploits the innocent world of Deven. Murad's reference to the "glorious tradition of Urdu Literature" (15) and the need to protect it in this era of "that vegetarian monster, Hindi" (15) makes Deven "shrink back and shrivel in his chair for Hindi was what he thought"(15). His frustration is further aggravated when he gets an opportunity interview Nur, a veteran poet and "his hero" (25) and "the life of his mind"(34). He projects Nur's world as

...another realm it would surely be, if his God dwell there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination, a wondrously illuminated era in contrast to the meanness and dross of his past existence.(40)

His dreams take a new flight but his very dreams shatter soon after his two visits to Nur's home as he hears the voice of his god 'Nur' it is a great jolt for him to see Nur in the semi darkness and grayish gloom

The room in which the poet lay resting, like a bolster laid on a flat low wooden divan, was in semi darkness. Not only the bamboo screens hanging in every doorway let down to keep the sun that beat upon the top floor of the building most

fiercely, but the walls were lined with dark tiles that added to the shadowy gloom.(37)

Nur's present condition tears Deven further and he feels disenchanted and disillusioned his visits to Nur further affirms the collapsing world of Nur as idealized by Deven as he "scrambled to his feet, and turned away and fled"(90). All dreams and notions in his mind come to his feet and he feels pricked and pierced. He wants to free himself from all these but his nightmare pulls him back again and again. He feels meaningless of human existence where his expectations and dreams become small by his circumstances and stark reality which drags him in the deeper mire of existential crisis.

Whether it is Maya or Deven both are entrapped in the swamp of human existence and its absurdity to such an extent that they fail to settle their inward queries. Maya's inward quests make her cast an eye on her outer life that she neurotically reacts because of her unhealthy introspection and in the process of this introspection she moves far away from the normal cause of life where the cry of peacocks make harmony with her own inner cry and to escape from her past burdened present and broken future. She cries within along with the cry of peacock. She admits this "by my insane passion, my weakness and lack of control, was – to perish." (102) and in the agony to free herself from all these she goes insecure and kills her husband as well as herself. She goes enigmatic and eccentric after her failure to balance both the worlds saying "Our marriage was an empty one, a failure"(167). Whereas though Deven's initial sense of frustration is traceable in his escapist's tendencies as he yearns for liberation from circumstances and from reality because he finds hard to combat with them *as the dichotomy between the real and the fantastic generates tension in the mind.*<sup>6</sup>(Pathak, 99) Desai shows the growth of Deven during the course of novel. The realization of his escapes gives another dimension to his understanding where he learns the kind of freedom for which he was aspiring for, is nothing more than temporary illusion. Reality may be challenging for him but that has the crucial significance for his actual existence. This understanding helps Deven's transition from dependence to self-reliance and fills in him a courage to find meaning in authentic life. As Anita Singh states *between his boyish expectation and Nur's grim reality he discovers a new lease of life, dignity and the way of fulfillment of his dreams.*<sup>7</sup> (Singh, 149)

Anita Desai's characters are full of boredom, isolation, alienation, meaninglessness which reflect her existential temperament. In an interview she agrees that she is chiefly preoccupied with the essential human condition

Most things are so very ethereal ...they pass and change so very quickly. To make a report on some general events is not of so much importance. There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day to day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past

centuries...with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And that is why it interests me.<sup>8</sup> (Dalmia, TOI)

It can also be observed that both May and Deven find it difficult to connect themselves with others authentically as they find even very intimate relationships hostile to them as:

Anita Singh's characters often suffer from a gnawing sense of disintegration within and a disjunction from the world around. They are actually conscious of their inability to connect the fragments of their experience of time and selfhood in an integrated whole, by an antithesis in emotion and thinking in reason and imagination within themselves.<sup>9</sup> (Gupta, 236)

Desai, in her venture towards human condition also shows an optimistic shade of human nature in 'In Custody' where in spite of deciding and retreating thrice Deven finally realizes there is escape from Mirpur but no escape from Nur. His devotion to the great poet and his reverence for the noble language Urdu make him survive through all the fatal burdens very robustly and confidently after realizing that his problems will not end even after the death of Nur. If Nur is in custody of Urdu language Deven is also in custody of deep feelings and devotion for his ideal poet and feels that the burden he faces, has condemned himself to carry, is also his highest honor and his love and respect for Nur :

That friendship still existed, even if there had been a muddle, a misunderstanding. He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that even if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too.(232)

He realizes that Urdu is more than anything very optimistically musing that poetry will live and that will not die. The long span of around two decades between the writing of both novels has certainly showed a gradual shift in Desai's treatment of theme as well as its final shade. Though both of the characters Maya and Deven are equally baffled in the insurmountable depths of meaninglessness of life yet in the end both take quite opposite steps. Maya goes eccentric and gives a pessimistic ending to her life whereas Deven strides optimistically. As Usha Bande finds out:

Desai's later characters realize that acceptance of existence will lead to fulfillment through affirmative self-abandonment not through destructive self-abnegation.<sup>10</sup> (Bande, 69)

In case of both Deven and Maya, they come to realize that they are solely responsible for their decisions, destiny and dooms and therefore angst and anguish rise in the face of freedom. Both of them take a journey inward but reach to extremely opposite goals Maya is more

baffled and a complete failure in balancing her life while Deven steps confidently after her realization. They both become the sum of their own actions as Sartre in his existential works points.

Man is nothing else but what he proposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore, nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.<sup>11</sup> (Kaufman,358)

Both the novels seem attempt to *unravel miasma of society's expectations from individuals sandwiched between desires and denials*.<sup>12</sup> (Mishra, 86)

Anita Desai's characters reach to a stage where there is hardly any battle for equality rather they seem equal in their journey of life where they are equally victims of human existence and its absurdity. In her probing she has developed a kind of existentialism. She has rendered life into existential frame. Her novels are existential in tone for they deal with the contradictions and predicaments faced by the individuals in the struggle of life. Her tone, imagery, language all are interwoven together to give sense and meaning to the meaningless and senselessness of life. With her unique individual penetration she has explored the deeper layers, deeper recesses and deeper forces in the disturbed human psyche. She frees herself from the label of shackles of "feminist writer only" by epitomizing the dynamics and spiral of human existence. Although Anita Desai works beautifully in depicting the female sensibility but her real strength lies more in the rich portrayal of human being's existence and its predicament. Her presentation of man woman relationship as well as man and woman. It is human relationship as individual which reveals her broader understanding of a human mind and existence. Being a woman novelist though she paints the different shades of her female characters yet she studies her male characters also very intensely. She doesn't associate herself with any feministic movement as she clears that her exploration of human mind and psyche of her characters concern as an artist is with individual man and woman. As one delves deep into Desai's writing one can feel that her creation are grounded in lived experience. She does not confine herself to wipe the tears of her female protagonist rather she delineates the existential polarities of dilemmas, traps, confusions, conflicts, choices and absurdities very artistically. On the basis of findings it can be asserted that Anita Desai is a gifted writer whose canvas of writing is much kaleidoscopic and it cannot be restricted to a particular category. There seems a shift from feminist perspective to existential predicament in her works which takes her to the new pinnacles of writing.

### Works Cited:

#### Primary Sources:

1. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2013, p. All the subsequent references for *Cry, the Peacock* have been taken from the same edition of the novel, hereafter cited in text, within parentheses, with the relevant page number(s).

2. Anita Desai, *In Custody*, New Delhi: Random House Publications, 2012, p. 5. All the subsequent references for *In Custody* have been taken from the same edition of the novel, hereafter cited in text, within parentheses, with the relevant page number(s).

Secondary Sources:

1. <http://jaiarjun.blogspot.in/2007/12/conversation-with-anita-desai-and-some.html>
2. Sartre, Jean Paul. *Jean Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest, London: Routledge, 2001, p.32
3. Cowasjee and Kumar. *Modern Indian Short Stories*, Delhi: OUP, 1983, p. 101.
4. Dhawan, R.K.eds. *Exploration in Modern Indo-English Fiction*, New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1982, p. 225.
5. Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Existentialism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford: Oneword Publications, 2008, p. 7
6. Pathak, R.S. *Modern Indian Novel in English*, New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999, p. 99.
7. Singh, Anita. *Existential Dimensions in the Novels of Anita Desai*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2011, p.149.
8. Dalmia, Yasodhara, "An Interview with Anita Desai", *The Times of India*, April 29, 1979.
9. Gupta, Santosh. "Bringing the Polarities of Imagination and Reason in Clear Light of Day" *Indian Women Novelists in English*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006, p.86.
10. Bande, Usha. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1998, p. 69.
11. Kaufman, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre Jean Paul Sartre* (Existentialism is a Humanism ) New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975, p. 358
12. Mishra, Binod. "Communication Chaos in Anita Desai's *In Custody*" *Studies in Women Writers in English*, ed. Mohan K. Ray and Rama Kundu, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006, p. 86.