

Chapter - V

The Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to present comparative study of the selected fiction of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai in terms of the Aspects of Existentialism viz. Angst, Self-Alienation and Bad Faith reflected in them. The novels selected for comparative study are Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1971); *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) by Desai and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) by Joshi, and *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), by Desai and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) by Joshi.

Arun Joshi's male protagonists and Anita Desai's female protagonists are confronted by the questions of their existence, their dilemma whether to succumb to the demands of their mundane life or to escape it and answer the call of their inner self. However, the basic difference between them is that Arun Joshi's protagonists are rich, high-middle class, well-educated persons, while Anita Desai's female protagonists are married women of different age-groups, whose social-cultural milieu is quite different from that of the heroes of Arun Joshi. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi, is not exactly a tycoon, but he is highly educated. He is chronically strange and sad, which is noticed by the friends around him. Orphaned in his childhood, he is estranged from family life and he is deeply concerned about the meaning of life, and realizes that love of things or persons or oneself was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession. He is an uprooted young man, and has developed a sense of detachment. He is Kierkegaardian existentialist in the sense that he feels one cannot know the purpose and direction of life. He wonders in what way he belongs to the world around him. He was begot without a purpose and has been living without a purpose; and feels like a foreigner. In Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* Nanda Kaul is similarly estranged from her family, in which she lived without a purpose of her own. Like Sindi, she also feels alienated and experiences existential angst. But, the cause of Sindi's and Nanda's self-alienation is quite different. Nanda Kaul is

estranged from her family on account of her exploitation. On the other hand Sindi's self-alienation is the result of his loss of family life, his disappointment in early love-affair. But, Sindi is not like the ultimate existentialist hero like Camus's Meursault, in *The Outsider*, who remains an outsider and detached at the end, indifferent to his fate. But Sindi gradually gets more and more involved. His cynicism, the detachment he prophesies gives way to the soft corner or the feeling he develops for the employees of Khemkha and Khemkha's daughter. Similarly, in *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's detachment is challenged by her friend Ila and by her great-grand-daughter Raka. Her isolation, her alienation, give way as Raka enters her life of seclusion, and she tries to connect with her emotionally. She feels guilty of having neglected Ila and feels herself partly responsible for her sad death. Both the novels show the initial detachment and sense of alienation in the life of their protagonists, and how they find themselves involved willy-nilly.

The other part of comparative aspect is Bad-Faith revealed in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. Billy finds himself immersed into Bad-Faith, in the sense that he suppresses the call of the other world of which he has become aware since his adolescent days. He detests the high-middle-class life he lives. He is consciously against the bourgeois life in which he feels stranded. Billy, while in America, was fitfully aware of 'a great force, urkraft, a primitive force' but he tried to suppress it. But finally it exploded. Billy has psychic attraction for the forests, for the drum beats and the tribal dance. Billy is in search of the meaning in life. He tells his friend, Romi, that his becoming primitive was only a first step, it was only a means to end. But Billy does not say what that something else is. His embracing the primitive culture of the Dhunia and his union with Bilasia were only a step in the direction of his objective. In this quest for something, Billy becomes a refugee from civilization. His existential quest, his effort to get rid of Bad Faith in which he lives, finally result into his tragic death. His search for meaning, his hankering after something, is his existential quest, for which he pays a heavy price.

In Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, also portrays the protagonist, Sita, who tries to escape to an idealistic world of her memory, the

island of Manori, where she can keep her child, unborn, with the help of the magical influence of her father, who is no more. She too is a refugee from civilization, like Billy. She wants to escape the mad, violent world which is driving her mad. She, too, wants to say 'no' to the civilization where there is lack of feeling. She hankers after an ideal life sans violence. She would not like her child to be brought into this world. Sita feels like an outsider in the family of her husband, Raman, who is a businessman in the metropolitan city. Her withdrawal to the island life signifies her rejection of the complacent, routine of life. She is a very sensitive woman. The violence around her and the violent things taking place in the world upset her. Her going back to Manori is her existential decision to escape to the world of her childhood. Like Billy, she too feels attracted towards the primitive life at Manori. She feels the need to withdraw to the island life to preserve her own wholeness and sanity. But, the island of her memory has vanished. The magic of the island is lost. What Sita really wanted was an unquestioning love. In the Hanging Gardens in Mumbai, she saw a Muslim woman, her head in her husband's lap, he was looking down at her and caressing her gently and tenderly. She hankers after such love, which she does not get in her life. After giving birth to four children, she realizes how she had lived in Bad Faith, and takes a momentous decision to leave this life in the city and go to Manori island. But, in the end the world catches up with her, as it does with Billy Biswas. Billy comes to a tragic end, and Sita, even though she is alive, she has to go back with her husband, who comes because his daughter, Menaka, asked him to come.

The Existential aspect of Self-alienation is reflected in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* and Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. The protagonist in *The Last Labyrinth*, Som Bhaskar, is the young affluent businessman; who is a rationalist and has no faith. He wants to find the meaning of life. Som experiences 'boredom and the fed-up-ness' on account of the complex experiences he has. He complains that he is dislocated and his mind is out of focus. He is troubled by mysterious voices only he can hear. He tries to stop these voices by possessing an object, a woman or a business he can grab. He is tormented by a feeling that he wants something. What he gets or possesses does not satisfy him. There is lack of relevance in his

life, which upsets him. For him life is full of complications – a labyrinth within labyrinths. He feels as if he is running a race of hurdles. He is vexed by the voids of the world, voids within and without. The greatest reality of life is the inevitability of death. He hates the sight of death. He ardently desires to peep into the mystery of life, the secrets of the universe, the mystery of Man being burdened with strange sensibility. Som's problem is that his rationality does not allow him to accept any solution to his problems. Som's problem lies in his desire to bring together the two worlds, the world of matter and that of spirit. His restlessness would end only if he learns to believe, but he does not know how- because he needs evidence for it.

Som's Western education and his rationalistic approach cannot help him in understanding the meaning of life. Only institution and faith can help to unravel the mystery of the labyrinths. But Som's alienation results from his failure to achieve unwavering faith. Aftab, the owner of the Haveli of the labyrinths, tells him that he must sacrifice before he is given. He cannot have faith and at the same time the right to challenge it. This is the existential predicament of Som. Sindi Oberoi and Billy, both feel the angst and the feeling of alienation, but they are able to resolve it by embracing the life of action. Som cannot do this. He tries to commit suicide, but his wife stops him.

Anita Desai's protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock* experiences herself as alienated. In her married life she is not at the centre because, all the members of the family are preoccupied with politics and social, intellectual problems, while she is a bundle of emotions. As a result of her alienation she develops fear-psychosis. She is disillusioned in her married life. A Peacock's cry symbolizes her own cry for love. She wants to live life passionately, but Gautama with his philosophy of detachment does not realize her emotional and physical needs. He is sexually cold, which drives Maya to frustration and alienation. For Gautama, Maya is childish, ignorant and even silly. The cry of the peacock is really Maya's cry for Gautama's love, her need of physical union and emotional fulfillment. In her loneliness and emotional starvation, she is haunted by the albino astrologer's prophecy, which predicts her or Gautama's death in the fourth year of their marriage. She broods over question, who should die. The prophecy drives to schizophrenia. She is driven

to the thought of death. There is gradual disintegration of her mind. She shows symptoms of gradual depersonalization. But she does not grow completely neurotic. There are moments of clear thought when she can examine her past and present life. In these clear moments, she realizes that Gautama would never meet her physical demand. She craves for attachment while Gautama values his detachment. After receiving the letter from Arjuna, her brother, about the horoscope, Maya shows too much interest in Gautama's talk on death and life after it. Maya increasingly becomes aware of the problem of existence. *Cry, the Peacock* underlines the idea of death. Maya, in her self-alienation, cannot talk to Gautama about it, nor can she share her obsession of death with anyone. She broods over Gautama, lying undisturbed by her side, a man who has no contact with the world. His death would not matter to him. But, she is the one who has heard and felt the cry of the peacocks. Maya is alienated from him, from his family and the world around her. In this state of mind she is obsessed with the idea of death predicted by the astrologer. She chooses death for Gautama because he is not involved in life.

Like Som, Maya also has an obsession. But, there is great difference in the nature and cause of their obsession. Som experiences alienation being unable to find answers to his metaphysical question. Maya suffers alienation as she can connect neither with her husband nor with his family. Besides, she is obsessed with the idea of death. Som, unsuccessful in his quest, would like to welcome death. Maya, on the other hand, would like to live, and pushes Gautama off the parapet. Som and Maya, both are preoccupied with death. Som is saved by his wife, Geeta, but Maya, who is utterly alone in her father's house, screaming jumps from the balcony, thus ending her life.

The characters in the novels of both, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai, face existential problem in their own way. Arun Joshi's heroes are alienated but, except for Som in *The Last Labyrinth*, they settle their existential conflict positively by affirmation. In the case of the protagonists of Anita Desai, all of them face existentialist predicament. Being a woman places them in a doubly disadvantageous position in their life. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* feels self-alienation, and yet he is a free agent in his life, and lives it as he feels right. He

might marry Sheila and come to terms with his feeling of alienation. But, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* is permanently alienated from her family and lives the life of a recluse. Sita, the Romantic protagonist in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is utterly defeated in the end and meekly follows her husband and children back to squalor and violence of the life in Mumbai where her sensibilities are threatened. But Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* escapes to the forest of Satpura hills, and lives among the tribals. Though, he is killed in the end, he is able to live his life relinquishing 'Bad Faith' and embracing authenticity. In *The Last Labyrinth* of Arun Joshi, his protagonist, Som Bhaskar, is almost driven to commit suicide on account of the existential angst he feels. Yet, he is saved by his loving wife Geeta. On the other hand, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is driven to madness and commits suicide as she feels utterly alienated in her married life.

It is seen from the study of these two novelists, that women protagonists, not being free agents in a male-dominated society, have to face tragic consequences in their existentialist predicament.

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Pedagogical Implications:

The analysis of fictional works involves deep study of characters involved in their socio-cultural situation in life. The writers of fiction are very much the product of society in which they live, and the realistic fiction they produce presents a cross section of the contemporary society bringing the light the significant aspects of life. Students of literature become aware of socio-cultural tensions and problems in the society, through creative literature. It enlightens them making them aware of what people feel and do, and prepares them to face problems in their own life. Arun Joshi in his fiction has highlighted the tensions in the life of western educated young men, who become socially and culturally estranged from their family, their society, and being the product of two cultures do not know how to come to terms with their own life. Apart from this, the India English writers like Arun Joshi and Anita Desai use sophisticated English, which can serve as a model for the Indian students as they get exposure to it studying their fictional works.

In conclusion I would like to state that I am aware of the limitations of my research. I have tried my best to trace the influence of the aspects of Existentialism in the portrayal of the characters and incidents in the selected fiction of these two writers. But I do not claim that I have done full justice to this task. I have only tried to show how the aspects of Existentialism can be trace in life of these realistic fictional characters.

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References

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