



Existential Dilemma In Indian Women With Special Reference To Identity Crisis: A Study of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock And Fire On The Mountain And Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake And Interpreter Of Maladies

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ABSTRACT: Introduced by Soren Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus, Existentialism reflects the eternal struggle of man to establish his identity. It was a revolt against reason, rationality, traditional ways of living. It marked the questioning and assertion of one's own existence in a world which revolves around the feeling of nothingness. This feeling is prevalent throughout the world among human beings, men and women alike. This results in **identity crisis** among individuals. This article highlights the concept of existential crisis in Indian women as depicted in the novels of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, leading to frustration, mental detachment, murder, mental agony and suicide. The female protagonists of these novels, entangled in socio-cultural intricacies, feel the crisis of identity throughout their life.

KEYWORDS: existentialism, mental agony, isolation, identity crisis, Indian women

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I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a movement that came into the sphere of philosophy through the works of Soren Kierkegaard. Popularized by two French writers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, *Existentialism* developed as a revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and traditional ways of living and portrayal of human characters. It means "pertaining to existence" (Cuddon, 294). It comes out of one's passive and indeterminate condition (Sartre in Cuddon, 295). Existentialism comprises an individual's assertion of subjective self, violating or questioning prevalent established norms, traditions and so called rationality, one's exercise of will and his/her experience of absurdity and nothingness of life, striving to discover one's identity and meaning in a meaningless life.

Identity crisis is present in every person. Indian novels also depict this existential motif keeping par with reality. Literature is a reflection of life and society. Modern Indian society presents a very vivid picture of one's existential dilemma—the eternal question of "to be or not to be" in a society which engulfs an individual in irrelevant norms and values, covering the visages of harshness and meaninglessness. Society has always bound man in the limitations of marriage, family and friendship, leading to interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal emotional conflicts, indecisions and inhibitions.

This article throws light on the quest for identity, questions put on one's life, surrounding and self as depicted through the female protagonists of the novels – *Cry, The Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai and *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. If we delve deep into the aforesaid novels, we can get a clear picture of a strong craving for identity quest for meaning in life, not only in the protagonists but also in Indian women as a whole. While in Desai we see the existential characters are tormented by identity crisis, without any way out, in Lahiri, the characters try to find their way out of this crisis, in search of a better life.

Existential characters have a very complicated mentality—they are confused within themselves regarding the circumstances they are in and the persons with whom they are. They are sensitive, moody and are unable to adjust with their environment. They often become victims of alienation, frustration, insanity, murder

or suicide. In order to get respite from their intense mental agony, these characters lead themselves to some disastrous catastrophe. So also in the characters in the above mentioned novels are entangled in social, cultural and domestic intricacies and desperately try to establish their own identity and find the meaning of life.

Various aspects of Existentialism:

Existentialism focuses on individual freedom and existence and has various aspects, which help to deal with different characteristic traits. Various aspects of existentialism are as follows:

- a) Anxiety: Existential crisis is reflected through anxiety in the individual. Owing to unfavourable situations, the individual is torn within himself resulting in tension and anxiety.
- b) Absurdity: Being unable to find meaning in life, individuals are thrust into the absurd. They feel themselves within a purposeless existence.
- c) Nothingness: Existentialism consists of the prevalence of nothingness in situations.
- d) Death: Life tends to lose meaning and hence the individuals are prone to adopt death as a means to find solace—an end to endless turmoil of anxiety and anguish.
- e) Alienation: Individuals seem to lose faith in life and start getting detached from their near and dear ones. They begin to move away from social confines and engagements, resulting in mental estrangement.

These aspects of existentialism give rise to crisis of identity in the individuals.

Identity Crisis

Owing to anxiety arising out of several frustrating situations, individuals tend to lose faith in life as well as themselves. This often acts as a source of losing any meaning in life. The entire scenario seems to be absurd. Individuals then begin to get estranged from their near and dear ones, both professional and personal lives. In such a hollow circumstance, they are prone to suicide or murder because death appears to be the only solution from this psychological vacuum. Thus, existential crisis leads to crisis of identity within individuals.

Cry, The Peacock by Anita Desai:

Maya, the protagonist, a childless, motherless housewife is engrossed in a baseless prediction of death made by an astrologer. Owing to her mental detachment from her husband, Gautama, she suffers from a strong sense of alienation, frustration and inability to find meaning in life. Desai makes a very vivid portrayal of the hapless condition of Indian women, restricted to the confines of domestic life, having no one to share their grief. In this novel, we find how women are never allowed to express their free will, which ultimately leads to some violent outburst, resulting in a disastrous end. Maya, a hyper-sensitive, over-emotional, cultured woman is entrapped in the obsession of fear of death. An astrologer, 'the white faced magician' had foretold that either she or her husband would die after four years of their marriage. Her obsession leads to intense mental agony and creates a huge hiatus between the couple. At the very onset, we see that the death of her pet dog Toto makes her excessively sad. Her husband tries to make things normal but she feels he is insensitive to her sorrow:

“Gautama rose immediately ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her woes altogether.”(9)

This makes her feel lonely and estranged from Gautama.

“I whimpered I am alone and then gave myself up to a fit of furious pillow beating...” (14)

She gets all the more engrossed with apprehension of a sudden demise. She desires his tenderness as a solace to her tormented heart and mind. But Gautama does not share thoughts similar to those of Maya. Her "belief in frivolities" makes him consider them as ways to bring a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end. The morose Maya tries to establish her point:

"pets ... mean the world to me"(19)

She even considers this trivial incident as an evil omen suggesting someone's inevitable end. Having been treated as an infant, living in a fanciful world of dreams and allusions, Maya cannot accept harsh reality with practical insight. Her immaturity and love for imagination always seeks a guardian in her husband but in Gautama, 'understanding was scant love was meagre'. Simple natural events of a peacock's cry, purple hue of sunset make her create her own interpretation that gradually makes her move into a world of darkness. She confines herself in a world of superstitions, and is unable to do away with the constraints of the society. She thinks of how a peacock seizes a snake and breaks its body to relieve its own pain. She craves for an immediate outlet. Under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama by thrusting him down from the terrace, thereby bringing

an end to her anxiety for the prophesy, 'one had to die'. She thus brings an end to her frustration regarding life, unhappy matrimonial bonds, unfulfilled longings and his unresponsive attitude towards her.

Existential characters often suffer from alienation and frustration. In this respect, Maya, the protagonist is truly an existential character. These characters suffer from identity crisis, often failing to find meaning in life and turn to violent cathartic outcomes like murder or suicide. So also Maya murders her husband and later commits suicide. This brings her relief from her intense existential dilemma throughout her life. Lack of affectionate and sensitive association of near ones goes into the making of these characters. Her desperate desire to extricate herself from psychological complications is distinct through her cry:

"Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying."(84)

This reflects the quest of every modern human mind. Desai projects the condition of Indian women, thrust into a world of emotional vacuity. She tries to take refuge in illusory creations.

Maya wants to give a vent to her imagination. She is at the same time, a symbol of growth, life and vitality on one hand, and withdrawal, regression, decay and death on the other.

She could not associate normally to any natural event. The cooing of the doves appeared to her as 'tedious repetition of fatal words "Go away!" Off and on she feels the absence of her father and lamented that no one else could love her as her father did. Even her in-laws were interested not in love, affection or any soft emotion but in parliamentary discussions, political treaties and revolutions. Coming across women, who are either childless or pestered daily by their in-laws, she tries to extricate herself into a world of illumination. Events of humiliation, debts and dowries moved to question the significance of women in society as a whole. Inability to establish compatibility with surrounding environment or people, Maya gets involved into absurd, unscientific beliefs, which make Gautama say:

"Palmistry? Astrology? What new fad is your sudden interest in them? Must we be so childish? After all, we have both been educated fairly thoroughly..."(67)

Impracticality leads Maya to apprehension and depression. This makes her overall viewpoint pessimistic. She becomes rather fatalistic:

"Fate – fatality...I fingered the flowers sadly, and felt much like them myself-bruised and tired, not quite alive."(81)

Her belief in fate and irrational fears leads her to insanity. Maya wonders she might grow mad. Her insanity makes her move away from wisdom. It makes her imagine the encounter with the astrologer.

"I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad."(92)

She again wonders her 'horrible imaginings' (Macbeth) that crops up hallucinatory visions in her mind are just creations of her brain. It reminds us of Macbeth's imaginary visions as products of his 'heat oppressed brain'. She feels her 'insanity can be cured...' Thus she vacillates between sanity and insanity. Her very existence seems to be a shadow, a false visage, something transitory or insignificant.

The difference of mentality between Maya and Gautama made her engage in fits of outbursts:

"One of us will win, the other must lose."(97)

When Gautama tried to show her the reality or practical way of dealing things, she considered him a 'traitor', one who has betrayed her. He calls her 'neurotic, a spoilt child,' unable to bear any adverse word. He chides her saying:

"Life is a fairy tale to you"(98)

She is unaware of stark realities of life-living, dying and working. She lacked courage to face the adversities of life. When he tries to make her break her illusion of passion and attachment, her disillusionment temporarily makes her rely on "the dryness, the bleakness of his voice, of his theories," which now appears to be her refuge. She considers him as something to cling on, when she is tossed in the turbulent sea of uncertainty, mental agony, depression, absurdity and insanity. This failure in finding any conclusion or solution to her apprehension makes her feel tormented by words or human association:

"Words tortured me now, as memories did, and Murder, that too, followed me, relentless as a well aimed arrow, as I passed through avenues of thought, recollection, doubt and horror."(139)

'Murder' seems to pierce through her flesh. She wants to cry, "Is this what I have come to?". She then thinks her name 'Maya' means an illusion. Thus she herself is an illusion and is thus meaningless. The frenzied cries of peacocks searching for mates, tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in acts of love, screaming with agony at the death of love.

This refers to a way to get rid of a strong emotion. This moves Maya to try and find a way out of her claustrophobic environment. She conjures up horrid visions annihilating everything around her. She loses her mental balance:

"Past, resent, future, Truth and Untruth. They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade;"(149)

She imagines some warnings in waves, in the mountains of some impending 'danger' as if asking her to 'run and hide'. Her 'innocence turning to guilt' and she wondered about a world where 'guilt, sin, crime, punishment, all stood stock still, struck into threatening immobility by a ruthless force of fate'. Maya became desperate for liberation of her mind. Then, one day she made Gautama pause on the parapet of the terrace in a moonlit evening. His figure seemed to cast an ugly shadow between her and the moon and he thrust him down. She killed Gautama to bring an end to her depression, frustration, alienation and anxiety. After this incident she turns completely mad:

"It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live.

You see, to Gautama it didn't really matter. He didn't care, and I did."(182)

She finally commits suicide, being unable to get respite from immense trauma of identity crisis.

Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai:

Nanda Kaul in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the widow of the vice chancellor of a university, lives a life of isolation. She lives alone after the death of her husband and her children are settled. This isolated life in the hills of Kasauli is imposed by herself.

"She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction."(3)

While on a stroll in the soulful natural landscape of Kasauli, she notices a postman. The very sight of him makes her desperately desire for not having a letter for herself. She did not want to converse or keep any contact with the social world. But all her expectations are set at naught when the postman delivers her a letter from her daughter about her great-granddaughter about to come to live with her very soon. This letter appears to be an unwelcome call from the world, from which she has extricated herself to live a life alone, enjoying a self-imposed seclusion.

She feels she has had enough in life, she has shouldered lots of responsibility throughout her life in maintaining her family and rearing her children and now the time has come when she wants to lead life for herself. She is no longer willing to retake domestic responsibilities.

Her desperate desire to live an existence of her own reflects her quest for an identity of her own.

"Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?" (18)

She suffers from this isolation, which is a byproduct of her search for identity in her family and her life. She has been a responsible housewife and mother but never did it with love. It had been an act of compulsion, where she has never had the scope of exploring her own self and her potential.

"All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain." (18)

Also the extramarital affair of her husband with Miss David, maths professor in his university brings her to face the question of her identity.

"He had been to drop some of the guests home—no, she corrected herself with asperity, *one* of the guests home." (28)

When Raka, her great grand-daughter comes to live with her, at first she is rather troubled to think of taking the responsibility of someone other than herself.

"Now to converse again when it was silence she wished to, to question and follow up and make sure of another's life and comfort and order, to involve oneself, to involve another." (20-21)

But the lively, uncontrollable spirit of Raka acts as an external agent that stimulates her internal spirit of adventure, which she had been unaware of or had deliberately suppressed throughout her life. She begins to feel one with Raka's liveliness. Her forced isolation leads her to a crisis of identity. But the entry of Raka in her life seems to lend meaning to her life. She goes with her wandering among the hills to Monkey Point to join the child in her adventure. Thus Nanda Kaul's stagnant world finds a way to mobility through the child.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri:

The crisis of identity, frustration, depression and alienation is also very prominent in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Lahiri probes into the socio-political, cultural and psychological vacuity of the Indian diaspora in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Namesake*. The protagonist Ashima, moves from Calcutta to America after marriage. She not only enters a new country but also a new culture, new populace, new society, totally unknown to her. She is unable to shed her origin, the Bengali culture. She also cannot accept the American lifestyle. All through her life, she is always in an identity crisis. She thus leads a hyphenated existence. Cultural, social and personal alienation leads to her existential crisis. She feels alone during her pregnancy—so much unlike the Bengali community, when a pregnant woman is looked after at her parental home. Here she has no one but her husband by her side. As an immigrant, she feels a sense of loss and agony. The estrangement from her near ones leads to her depressions.

“Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has left normal at all.”(5)

She feels awkward at the thought of motherhood in a foreign land, which is so much unfamiliar to her. She often feels queer and lost all together. When in hospital before her delivery, she wishes the curtains on her three sides were open. The curtains shut her from the exterior world. This is also symbolic of her being separated from her family and even her husband. She is thrust into a solitary refuge which is very asphyxiating. After the baby's birth, she thinks of going back to Calcutta but decides to stay back for Ashok, her husband. Gradually, she tries to get herself into the lifestyle of the foreign country. But when they move from the apartment to a suburb, things become all the more unmanageable for her. A strong sense of loneliness and displacement engulfs her. She feels over-burdened with the thoughts of being a misfit in the surrounding society:

“being a foreigner...is a sort of life-long pregnancy—a perpetual wait , a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.”(49)

Previous acquaintance, warmth and simplicity of homeland and family are displaced by unfamiliarity, coldness and complexity of a foreign land. Her physical displacement results in her mental displacement—dissociation from her very own self. While christening their son, the practice of nickname for home and a goodname for formal purposes, is something unconventional in America. Their son Gogol is teased by his friends for his name, which he changes to Nikhil to establish an identity of his own. While Ashima, along with her husband try to make adjustment between Indian and American culture, Gogol, their son is desperate to practice the culture of his birthplace, America. They try to make Gogol and his sister, Sonia get acquainted with Indian culture, customs, rituals and practices. Ashoke and Ashima face constant challenging situations when their children try to assert their own identities.

After the death of her husband , Ashima feels lonely, suddenly, horribly and permanently alone. Thus alienation again gains hold over her. Unable to adjust with the new social, physical and cultural environment, Ashima always strives to maintain her traditional values that she has inherited. She never breaks the psychological restrictions, imposed upon her by her elders, as to yielding to the foreign culture and practices. She tries her best to uphold Bengali culture in American environment. But her children, adopting the foreign culture and practices, do make her different from them. They adopt a different lifestyle. Ashima remains confined to her own practices and thoughts—leading to her alienation. This distinction of Ashima from American life makes her an existential character in the true sense of the term.

Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri:

In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine emotional short stories, we come across a set of female characters, who are lost in problem of isolation, leading to identity crisis. But some of them try to make their way out of their crisis.

- **Mrs. Das** in the story *Interpreter of Maladies* is alienated from her husband. She has an illicit affair with a friend of her husband, who comes to stay with them at an instance. This may be an attempt on her part to bring solace to her soul. She has a child from him. But she cannot share this stigma with her husband. She reveals this secret of her life to Mr. Kapasi, a guide to their tour to Konark. She confides that Mr. Das is not the father of Bobby, her second son.

“He's not his...He's not Raj's son.” (62)

Having no one to confide or share her thoughts, Mrs. Das always suffered from a sense of isolation. So when one of her husband's friends came to stay in their house for a week for an interview, she tried to find solace to her lost self in his company.

“She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back...” (64)

Mr. Das was totally unaware that his friend was Bobby's father. He felt his wife was still in love with him. So, it is evident that each individual, going through identity crisis or isolation, always tries to find a way out of it.

"I have terrible urges to throw things away" (65)

The way Mrs. Das shares her secret to get a sense of relief from her malady can act as a beacon for tracing out solutions to one's problem.

"I have been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy." (65)

- **Miranda** in the story *Sexy* has a relationship with a married man, Dev. Her friend Laxmi informs her about her own cousin's plight, whose husband has an extra marital affair. When Laxmi's cousin's son Rohin comes to stay with her on one occasion, she realises how an extra marital relationship affects a family and the children, who have to witness harsh conflicts between the parents and grow up with identity crisis, distorted mentality and crave for solace to their tortured mind. Rohin says about her:

"That's what my father did, ... he sat next to someone he didn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother." (108)

This feeling affects her so much that she tries to avoid Dev.

"You shouldn't come today." (109)

She shows great sense of mental strength to cope up with her identity crisis that might result from her relationship with Dev—a relationship that has no fixed name or outcome.

- When **Twinkle** quarrels with Sanjeev in *The Blessed House* about keeping a statue of Mother Mary on the mantle of a house they have bought, we find the difference of opinions between them.

"These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him." (138)

This difference leads to their mental detachment from each other. Twinkle is obsessed with some antique Christian paraphernalia in the house. This makes Sanjeev disturbed. But in the end we see that Twinkle decides to keep the statue in her study rather than the mantle because Sanjeev does not like it. This shows the way out of detachment. Twinkle adjusts to the situation to keep a balance between their personal preferences.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, from the above analysis, we find that Indian women always suffer from existential crisis in family as well as society, irrespective of their societal status. Whether marital, professional, conjugal or familial life, women are always engaged in constant search for identity. Social stigma, practices, culture and traditions entangle them in sophisticated or ordinary servility. Psychological confinement prevents them from coming into the forefront. From the discussion of existentialism in Indian women as depicted in Indian novels, it is evident that the 'fairer sex' has always struggled to establish her identity. Their willing or imposed subjugation compels them to pass through traumatic periods of frustration, depression and alienation—be it husband or children or society, a woman's psyche is always lost in a seething turmoil of compromise, sacrifice, surrender and humility. They are subject to abject misery, humiliation and torture at home and in the society. However much they try to break the age-old, obsolete rituals and customs, they somehow get lost in the doldrums of impractical hindrances. They are thus, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, not born but made women. Socio-cultural and psychological darkness submerge their world of illumination.

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