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Individual Identity and Quest for Survival: An Exploration of the Inner Psyche of the Existential Hero in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*

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Abstract

Literature is the finest manifestation of human experience, thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. Literary fiction reflects the aspirations, passions and faith and so forth. Fiction which represents life in all its complexities is one of the most dominant forms of literary representation. In the Indian context, the paradigm shift that took place in literature focus on the profusely creative literary release on multifarious issues that directly linked with individual identity and consciousness. *Voices in the City* is a seminal work by Anita Desai. It stands unparalleled to other fictional works of her contemporaries as it manifests the existential quest and social conflict unraveling the psychosomatic miseries of the individual characters that permeates the entire novel. The novel echoes the mute voices of the characters who feel outlandish in the city of Calcutta. As a novelist of human concern, Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. *Voices in the City* documents the pitiable plight and failure of a typical Bengali youth, Nirode along with his sisters Monisha and Amla in the city of Calcutta. The novel mainly projects the spiritual cataclysm of a journalist Nirode, who is destined to reside in Calcutta in quest for finding truer meaning of life. The study attempts to explore the intense sufferings, disappointments and frustrations of the wrathful youth which arises out of the intense sensitivity of his intellectuality.

Keywords- Existential, Miseries, Quest, Human, Sensitivity

The postcolonial discourses and critical analyses across the globe embark upon a numerous and dialectical approach towards the issues of identity. In the Indian context, the paradigm shift that took place in literature focus on the profusely creative literary release on multifarious issues that directly linked with individual identity and consciousness. Edward Proffitt claims that “fiction are treasure-trove of human experience limning an intimate sense

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of the inner lives of people, their deepest feelings, their conflicts, their most secret joys and fears” (Proffitt 31).

The issues of formation and crisis of identity have drawn decisive attention in wide from both scholars and critics in the pre independence as well as post colonial period. The theme of existentialist angst has been often the most discussed subject in literary discourse and it has been depicted in multifarious ways. In fact, the subject appears to be never-ending coupled with its infinite quality in the transitional social circumstances.

The iconoclastic writings of Anita Desai bracketed her as a champion of psychological novel whose credibility is worth acknowledged for incorporating insightful issues like individual self, cultural alienation and loss of identity and most inclusively women issues. Existential theme of alienation is skillfully woven in the texture of all the novels of Anita Desai. Anita Desai stands unique to her contemporaries as her writings capture “the atmosphere of the mind and directly involve the reader in a flow of particular consciousness” (Belliappa, 1). She seems to be an expertise in delving deep into the levels of consciousness and bringing forth the extreme realities and psychosomatic miseries overwhelming them.

Published in 1965, *Voices in the City*, is certainly one of Anita Desai’s best creation. The novel, *Voices in the City* succinctly delineates the pitiable plight and failure of a typical Bengali youth, Nirode along with his sisters Monisha and Amla who feel weird in the city of Calcutta. The novel mainly projects the spiritual cataclysm of a journalist, Nirode who is ordained to reside in Calcutta in quest for finding truer meaning of life. He starts his career as an “anonymous and shabby clerk in a newspaper” (p.8) in Calcutta. Then he leaves it to start his independent work as the editor of ‘Voice’ only to discontinue the responsibility when he is about get success with it. The novelist pithily delineates the disillusionment and frustration of the wrathful youth which arises out of the intense sensitivity of his intellectuality. Becoming more and wearier of contact, his sense of withdrawal inclined to be strong. The petrifying reality behind Nirode’s frustration is that being the product of no particular educational or cultural inheritance, he is left with no alternative except “the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.” (Dalmia,13)

A Kafkaesque figure, he is the ‘self’ that is ever alone despite its continuous search for connection. (Singh, 68). Nirode quotes Camus and calls himself ‘an out-lawed hermit crab’. Unlike Maursault, the hero of Camus in ‘The Outsider’ he does not opt out of the absurd world, but rather he remains a luke-warm revolutionary obsessed with the feeling of absurdity and only indulging in fervent criticism against the bourgeois respectability in the City.

A rootless rebel, Nirode reflects on the absurdity of existence with no sense of reconciliation with life. While trying to get rid of his painful sorrows he drowns his intelligence in the cups of booze or smoke of cigarettes. His deep frustration gets reflected in

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these words, “Nothing extends but this void in which all things appeared equally insignificant, equally worthless” (63).

The social conflict and the changing ethos result in an increasing demand on the individual’s quest that pertinently keeps haunting the psyche of the characters. If social pressure is the main root of such a feeling, the characters themselves are ill-fitted in society and this sensitiveness causes them to endure a lot. Though the characters are confronted to several solutions like rebellion, death and finding a new identity but it does not completely withdraw the negativity and the pessimism, the two omnipresent concepts imbibed in the character’s mind. In modern age, we find people engulfed with confusion, frustration, disillusionment and alienation. Modern man has become a catchword of all the woes of today and all the conflicts such as frustration, identity crisis, ennui, rootlessness etc. can be identified under the umbrella term, alienation which covers up under the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism representing the spiritual climate at present time is absolutely addressed as a philosophy of crisis. R. S Pathak opines that “the modern man is doomed to suffer the corrosive impact of alienation, which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the credibility loss or gap, the compartmentalizing of life, the stunning of personal development and conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life and so on” (p.11). An analysis of the novel projects the truth that Nirode, the protagonist is a victim of bad fate, who fails to transcend the limitations and to give a unified sense of experience into reality.

Voices in the City is thus a tragic exploration of human existence that constantly echoes the individual suffering arising out of the agitated sensitivity of the Indian youth who have lost the way in the contemporary world. The city Calcutta dominates the entire structure of their lives. Though the city provides ample possibility to the characters to exhibit their potentials, it also appears to shackles their dreams through its bleakness impinging seriously on the sensibilities of them. In his struggle to attain his goal, Nirode meets failures after failures. The title of the novel itself is existentialist in its nature as it depicts that in the big crowds of the metropolitan city, the voice of a single person can never be heard and hence that unheard voice is not recognized and has loss his identity. A lukewarm revolutionary, Nirode too feels helpless and single amidst the huge crowd of people and develops cynical attitude towards the city. He is in quest for an enduring meaning in life in his frequent encounter with failures.

Society here appears in the form of the city of Calcutta. Not only Nirode, all the characters seems to be ensnared and oppressed by this menacing monster. The offending sights and sounds of the city, sordidness and brutality suffocates them most and they find the city to be brutal and insensitive. The city symbol employed in the novel with the Bohemian and sort of outlandish life with copious liquor consumption, dismal sights and sounds contributes to the theme of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’. The protagonist project himself as a

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classic example of the stereotyped majority who loses his individuality, integrity as well identity among “all that tumult of traffic and commerce” (p.8). The city of Calcutta disillusioned him but he has learnt to live with it.

The dimensions of human condition are typically at the root of emotional difficulties. Nirode in *Voices in the City* is more or less a victim of such personal prejudice of his parents which turns him into a rebel since his childhood. The familial circumstances and the consequent conflicts gave way to distort the adolescent life of Nirode with an added sense of insecurity, failure and Oedipus complex. Further, his jealousy for his mother’s conduct gets foregrounded in the continuance of his broken journey of outlandishness. A split personality, Nirode seeks solace in his self-conceived world of imagination by withdrawing himself both from the society and family. Nirode, the protagonist in the novel is webbed with existential predicaments. Perplexed and directionless in the journey of life with no purposive aim and commitment, he is driven from the normalcy of life and accepts neurotic values. Bernard J. Paris in his *A Psychological Approach to Fiction* underlines the significance of Maslow’s value theory while saying that “Frustration of the basic needs so alienates the individual from his essential nature and so disturbs the course of his development that he is no longer aware of his own interests or able to pursue them” (p.42). Nirode’s basic needs have been frustrated, his value system is damaged and he alienates himself from his essential nature.

Existentialism, a name given to a modern philosophical movement in the 20th century has exercised wide influence in the fields of cultural activity, literature, including political as well as religious thought at present. Influential existentialists, Philosophers and Thinkers emphasize on the priority of human existence over essence as well as individual freedom and responsibility for what he is capable of. Existentialism as a philosophy has made many positive contributions in understanding human existence in different perspectives. Positive psychology demands individual to act as a social catalyst in the transitional process and to confront existential anxieties and frustrations by manifesting one’s self realization. The inherent dichotomies of life can well be resolved with an integrated approach by understanding the essential nature of human existence. Abraham Maslow, American psychologist evinces self realization as the “impulse to convert oneself into what one is capable of being”. (Doyle, 28) To the post modernists, disorder and fragmentation which were viewed previously as negative qualities are now treated as acceptable representation of reality. Human potential lies in balancing the life worth the experience. Struggle to communicate bears two sides. On one hand, it is a handicap which prevents the characters from expressing themselves their situation that illustrates their estrangement and alienation from society. On the other hand, the lack of communication can become a choice and thus strength. But if isolation is linked to the absence of expression, it gets deeply influenced by space and how the characters experience their environment.

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As a spokesperson of the disappointment and frustration of modern youth, Anita Desai is at her best in this existential novel. Unlike the Existentialist Philosophers and Psychologists, Desai's writings too reflect the fragment of the Existential Positive Psychology which emphasizes on integrating 'nothingness' into 'being'. Apparently, the novel is a painful projection of the sensible depiction the protagonist's dilemma but, at the symbolic level, the novel ends with an affirmative note of confronting the existential problems and thereby coming to terms with the realities of life valiantly. The very essence of existentialism is that it deals with the painful separation of individual from himself as well as the society but at the same time inviting response to establish some sort of justification to accept positivity by readjusting himself. The victimized transcend all the inevitabilities despite the harshness of realities of human actions. Nirode, the existential hero in the novel who blundered into pride, restlessness and withdrawal under the masquerade of aloofness comes to learn the real connotation of life. As a committed writer, Desai has tried her best to voice seriously the psychosomatic miseries of her characters caught in the vortex of existential dilemmas and predicaments. The situations and conflicts in her novels are of existential nature but her writings hinges on understanding the characters not with the being but with beginning as well. This is how with a positive existential approach, she strives to reclaim the lost identity of the characters. The insecurities and existential dilemmas of the protagonists may provide a bleak picture in this masterpiece but Desai makes a plea for a better living by providing us an optimistic wayward approach embarking upon a new journey of confidence and self realization thereby harnessing the potentials of meaningful seeking and meaningful making.

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