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**Existential Strains in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock***

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***Abstract***

*Modern age is an age of scientific advancement, material prosperity, industrial progress and rapid social growth. But at the same time it is defined an age of declining moral values, reduced tolerance and growing dissatisfaction among people. In the competition of rapid material progress, human beings are uprooted from their identity and feeling a vast emotional vacuum which is pushing them towards depression and hypertension like mental disorders. They are entrapped into the whirlpool of a series of uncountable questions related to their existence like where to go? What to do? Who am i? What is life?*

*Existentialism, as a literary theory touched this very soft emotional issue of modern human beings and attracted a large number of authors, critics and philosophers. Anita Desai being a*

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*psychological novelist, tried to portray this psychological trauma in her novels at best; Maya the central character of Cry, The Peacock is the best figure representing the existential dilemma of everyday life. The present article is an attempt to study the character of Maya in light of Existentialism philosophy and throws light upon various delicate issues related to her existence along with the solution of her problems.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Existentialism, Isolation, meaninglessness, alienation.*

The wind of change forever blows

Across the tumult of our ways

Tomorrow's unborn griefs depose

The sorrow of our yesterdays (7-10)

These philosophical lines of Sarojini Naidu are nice exposition of the futility of life and inner shriek of human mind to achieve unattainable goals. Existentialism, one of the most exciting and creative movement of modern world is a term applied to a particular kind of theory which deeply influenced a large number of writers, audiences and critics. It emphasizes the utter existence of individual person as a free agent. In general sense it deals with recurring problems of finding meanings within existence.

Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher introduced the term existentialism and popularized his three word's formula "Existence precedes essence." He strongly believed that there is no God, no original idea; "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards."(Existentialism is a Humanism, lecture 1946) Man becomes what he wills. He is entirely responsible for his decisions and fortunes. Later Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher propounded his philosophy of existentialism and classified human life into three major phases- Aesthetics, Ethical and religious. According to Kierkegaard every man has to pass

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through these three phases of life and eventually he defines his roles. Existentialists firmly believe that no meaning is predetermined by God for a man but he himself has to search his roles and positions. God doesn't exist. Human life lacks meanings; human existence is void.

This current of existentialism has continued to spark interest among a large population of literary genius and Anita Desai is undoubtedly marvelous in portraying the existential trauma of her female protagonists. She probes into the inner psyche of her figures and pours it before readers. Her novels represent the characters caught up in a situations and systems well beyond their control. They are found to be trapped into the whirlpool of adverse situations and opposite circumstances. The close study of her texts raises several question related to the existence of her female protagonists: Do Desai's women really exist in her literary works or they pale into insignificance against their counterparts? Do they actually find any meaning and charm in their lives? Why do they react in abnormal and absurd manner? Are they really absurd? This article is a serious attempt to find out the answers of these queries and the sense of being insignificant in the large system of society based on Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*.

Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is sensitive, poetic, emotional and demanding young lady. In this novel Desai effectively depicts the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautam .Maya is dissatisfied with her husband physically as well as emotionally. Maya believes in the life of total involvement but Gautam preaches her the need of detachment. In the beginning of the novel the death of Toto, the lap dog is an event of great misery for Maya; on the other hand for Gautam it is a natural event to be forgotten very soon. The different reaction of both to this event clearly shows the wide differences of their temperament. Desai uses the stream of consciousness technique to explain the cause and growth of her despair in these lines:

She cried and fled to the bedroom to fling herself unto the bed and lie there, thinking of the small, still body stiffened into the panic-stricken posture of the moment of death. (*Cry, The Peacock*, 9)

Desai effectively expressed the typical condition of an alienated person. Maya's rootlessness keeps on increasing day by day and it culminates in a kind of schizophrenia -A body

without a heart and a heart without a body. Now Gautam seems unbearable to her just like an unreal ghost. She is alienated through and through. Her obsession drives her to a curious insanity. She expresses her utter suffering:

This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself or the world  
around me? (122)

Unmindful of her state of mind, Gautam delivers sermons of Gita:

He whose joy is within, and whose light is within, that yogi attains  
absolute freedom. (101)

But Maya feels that Gita is a stick to beat erring soul with. Maya speaks the agony of her heart:

Oh! You know nothing, understand nothing... how I want to love.  
How it is important to me. (24)

The ideal of Gita is only a distant dream for Maya. In fact Maya is a prisoner of the past. She is always under the shade of past memories. The painful past is always throbbing in the inner consciousness and it has taken the shape of permanent fixation. The astrologer's warning regarding her future 'one of the spouses will die four years after marriage' continuously ache her. In her nightmares and sufferings Maya moves farther & farther from reality. She descends into the darker side of life. Loneliness and isolation became her permanent companion:

Death lurked in those spaces; the darkness spoke of distance,  
separation, loneliness.... (24)

One can be fully aware of Maya's hyper-sensitive nature and highly disturbed state of mind in the very beginning of the novel reacting to the ultimate death of her pet dog Toto. She rushes to "the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes" but Gautam is undisturbed. His attitude gives her more pain and a kind of restlessness always boils within her. She breaks into her heart.

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“Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing.” I raised my voice.  
“Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me-and of how can I love. How I want to love?” (96)

To Maya her married life appears her as an endless tedium with nothing significant taking place at any time. She is never the centre of importance nor is she instrumental in any event. The sphere of her social service is so restricted that she seems to feel suffocated within it though she has a secured home, earning husband and well defined future. These seemingly ideal external conditions are however not acceptable to her unconscious where her desire for unbridled freedom is hidden.

Maya is also not satisfied sexually with her aged husband Gautam. Because of Gautam's age and attitude towards sex she becomes disappointed woman. Even when they make love the act is devoid of passion. Freud views sex as the prototype of all pleasurable experiences in life. Sex is not only an intense and pleasurable experience in life, but it can act as a revitalizing force in an otherwise sterile life. She expects both emotional and physical satisfaction in married life, but both of them are denied to her. Several passages have been contributed in the novel to show her disillusionment in sex. In the beginning of the novel Maya herself confesses her sexual dissatisfaction frankly born of Gautam's unpardonable negligence...

Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he didn't give another thought to me, to either the soft unwilling body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed. (14)

Frustrated by his coldness in relation, she gives herself to a fit of pillow - beating. The image of fighting and mating peacocks, being the central motif of the novel, underlines Maya's sexual dissatisfaction too and she reminds the innocent enjoyment of childhood full of bird and animals and enjoyment:

When with my father, even breakfast in the garden...becomes a party, as good as revel of elves and fairies who feast on melons and syrups by moonlight. (41)

A continuous frustration in physical as well as emotional needs proves disastrous to Maya; she feels no use of her life; her existence seems to be meaningless for her. To add her problem of isolation, she is childless. The birth of a child would have given her a sense of creativity and achievement. The three years of her unhappy married life and the prospect of passionless, uninteresting and unchallenging life for the next fifty or sixty years, during which she would continue to be fully devoted to husband without any emotional attachment, comes as a shocking fact to her hyper-sensitive mind. On the other hand the prophecy of astrologers that after fourth year of marriage either she or her husband would die, makes her restless. She began to think that Gautam willn't die before her and if she is to live and find happiness. Gautam will have to go. To fulfill her wish in the fit of insanity, she pushes her husband from the roof. Having done the deed and having taken recourse to psychosis, she relaxes and openly declares that unlike her, Gautam hasn't been in love with life so he had to die.

Desai in the novel very closely shows how Isolation can be risky in a frustrated mind. Maya's over sensitive temperament, fairy like childhood under over protection of her loving father and her lack of communication with her elder husband Gautam became the cause of her isolated life. She did not try to adjust with Gautam rather lived in her own illusions and dreams. This mental retrogression suggests that Maya has not been able to adjust herself in the world of reality and after killing her husband, she mentally goes back to her protected childhood. Thus in the character of Maya Anita Desai has presented the feminine psyche of both a girl and a woman who has lost belief in life; who finds no meaning in her life and finally commits suicide.

Hence, Maya the heroine of Desai chose the path of aloofness and isolation because she couldn't tackle the problems of her life. Her isolation was in fact the result of her repressed dreams, suppressed desires, and in competency to tackle the situation. She couldn't find the meaning of her existence, she felt isolated because she failed to face the difficulties of life and she couldn't fit herself in the societal framework. The meaning of her existence could be achieved by

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devoting herself to some constructive task, by maintaining proper balance of emotion and reason but instead of doing anything creative, of searching her identity, she surrendered herself before the problems; first murdered her husband and later committed suicide. Thus the existence of a normal woman Maya shattered due to the feeling of frustration, lack of belongingness and sense of rootlessness.

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