

EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION IN ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S MRS.SEN

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Abstract

Existentialism can be defined as the theory which shows the relationship between existence and essence between being and becoming. Existentialists believe that existence takes precedence over essence; they also believe that human beings are totally free and are completely responsible for the choices they make as well as from their actions. This responsibility lies at the root of the intense despair and anguish that are the preconditions of human existence. It emphasizes the existence of individuals in a hostile universe, an existence that is marked by uniqueness and isolation which makes human experience inexplicable and incomprehensible. Anita Desai Fire on the Mountain has been described as a novel that deals with existential problems of people of the middle-class and that too mainly of women. She explores the psychic alienation of her characters and depicts the manner in which life becomes a burden to these people who have no exit except to go on living from day to day but at the same time there is a constant exploration and action. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri's short story Mrs. Sen represents the barriers to human communication.

Keywords: Existentialism, Anita Desai, Alienation

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Anita Desai *Fire on the Mountain* has been described as a novel that deals with existential problems of people of the middle-class and that too mainly of women. She explores the psychic alienation of her characters and depicts the manner in which life becomes a burden to these people who have no exit except to go on living from day to day but at the same time there is a constant exploration and action. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Mrs.Sen* represents the barriers to human communication. She highlights the themes like marital relationships, parent-child relationships and cultures which run consistently. Her short story *Mrs. Sen* is concern with the dichotomy of care and neglect in relationships and at the same time it represents the barriers to human communication. She defines *Mrs.Sen* story as the emotional exile and also a wonderful companionship between two entirely different persons.

Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* is divided into three parts. The first part is Nanda Kaul at Carignano, the second part is Raka comes to Carignano and the third part Ila leaves Carignano. Coming to the title of the novel 'Fire' itself indicates an important dimension. The word 'Fire' entails to 'death and destruction' and it also juxtaposed with the concept as 'destroyer and purifier'. Thus, it is analogous to the same epoch and role. According to Indian mythical elements the time indicates as Kalachakra or wheel of time which turns inexorably in order to remove evil and bring about good. This eternal cycle of time is often concretized in the symbol of fire. The Fire also represents the energy in each human being. In the novel, the character of Raka represents with full of energy and the fire

in her leads her to constant exploration and action. She slips out whenever she can and her zeal is akin to fire. She gets vicarious pleasure in thinking of setting fire to the garden or the hill. She is fascinated by the burnt cottage and is finally instrument of causing the fire on the mountain.

The alienation is clearly depicted in the character of Old Lady Nanda Kaul who is so tired of her family and responsibilities that now she wants to be left alone. When she was as the wife of Vice-Chancellor, the yoke of responsibilities used to irk her but she was helpless to escape from those responsibilities. Now, she wants and enjoys being alone and does not allow anyone to intrude in her life. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction". (*Fire on the Mountain 3*)

Unfortunately, Raka is a child herself suffers from acute alienation because she has been brought up with negligence and irresponsibility by parents who seem to be uncaring of her sensitive being and therefore she is abnormal, maladjusted and alienated from the world and its people. "Raka does everything silently and secretly that Nanda cannot discover what she does with herself all day long. She would be gone, totally, not to return for hours" (45)

According to G.S. Balarama Gupta, 'Philosophically, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is a lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism". (*Gupta 185*)

For instance, the old lady Nanda Kaul faces an existential dilemma when she receives a letter from her daughter Ash. She can neither refuse to house Raka nor can she look forward to the visit as anything other than intrusion.

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' is a collection of separate and independent stories with diverse and unrelated characters. In the short story of Mrs. Sen Jhumpa exposed that two different countries and cultures affect her observations and perspectives. The protagonist of the story Mrs. Sen is an ordinary woman moves with her husband out of India to the United States and is put in charge of taking care of an eleven-year old American boy Eliot. She tries very hard to become accustomed to the ways and customs of the United States but she cannot escape from the fact that everything is there in India and we see the effects of her displacement in her actions. She deals with the cultural alienation of an Indian woman who lives in a university apartment located on the fringes of the campus. She is a wife of a Bengali Professor of Mathematics, relocates with her husband to a coastal American city. She goes through a sort of crisis of identity. Her alienation in a land is both physically and culturally different from her home which sums up a universal experience one that applies to all immigrants who had to leave home. Mrs. Sen is a docile housewife

who is bored because her husband is busy with his job and she is missing her Calcutta family, her neighbourhood and above all the community feeling that is totally absent in the American Culture. Her stay in the foreign land has made her lonely and she longs to go back to India. Unfortunately, she cannot do this because she has a duty as the wife. She misses her homeland bitterly and tells her young companion that –

“Here in this place where Mr.Sen has brought me. I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (*Part 3, Fiction, Mrs.Sen: Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing* 301)

In Anita Desai’s novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’ and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘Mrs. Sen’ we see that there is a constant conflict between characters and their environment and a helpless acceptance of the inexorable unfolding of fate. In the novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’, we see that the Old Lady Nanda Kaul cannot stop letters from coming though she wants no letters. She cannot help but answer the phone when she would like to cut all connection with the world outside. Her inability to stem the tide of time is an age-old existential problem.

In Mrs.Sen, the protagonist, Mrs.Sen belongs to a community which feels a responsibility to participate in the lives of others. She loves to be with a family and mingle with them. She hates to be alone. She misses her home land so she tries to recreate all the aspects of India through using the cutting vegetables, utensils and wearing her sari. Eliot notices her before her bathroom mirror solemnly applying a fresh stroke of scarlet powder on her scalp and she tells to Eliot as –

“I must wear the powder everyday”, she explained when Eliot asked her what it was for, for the rest o the days that I am married.” (*Interpreter of Maladies Stories* 117)

When Mrs.Sen mourning on her grandfather’s death at that time Eliot also sat beside her and shared her sad feelings. He understands her loneliness because Eliot is himself lonely. He is the child of a broken marriage with a father who never bothers about him and a mother who orders pizza for dinner. Even Eliot too enjoys Mrs.Sen affection. Mrs. Sen existence and her survival in an alien land revolve around the food.

In the novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’, the character of Nanda Kaul is shown as honest in her lukewarm response to the coming of the child. She is a strong-minded and authoritarian but she also likes to live in a world of make-believe. But she fails to understand the mysterious child Raka where Raka is an intelligent, independent, and introvert who does not confide her troubles even in Nanda. She is rebel and does not confirm of any codes of accepted behaviour. She has a powerful yet weird imagination and

finds strange things fascinating. Her childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency.

“... and now, a young girl up here in the mountains..her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting ‘I don’t care, I don’t care, I can’t care of anything’” (*Fire on the Mountain*73).

On the other hand, in Mrs. Sen, we can see that Jhumpa lucidly describes the companionship between two entirely different persons. It is heartening to see Mrs. Sen communicating with Eliot on equal footing despite the age difference. Each afternoon Mrs.Sen stood in a grove of pine trees by the main road where the school bus dropped off Eliot along with two or three other children who lived nearby. Eliot always senses that Mrs.Sen had been waiting for some time, as if eager to greet a person she had seen in years.

“Then as they walked back from the bus stop she produced oranges or peanuts, which she already shelled.”(*Interpreter of Maladies Stories* 115)

As the baby sitter, Mrs. Sen takes excellent care of the eleven-year old Eliot. She presents a stark contrast to Eliot’s mother who every night “eventually went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers” of their dinner. (*Interpreter of Maladies Stories* 119).

At the end of the Anita Desai’s novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’, she acknowledges that all she has been relating to Raka about her childhood has no truth in it and when Ila Das is brutally murdered, she seems incapable of accepting this as the truth. She hates contact with the reality of the everyday world. Her two links with the world of realist are letters and the telephone both of which she detests. Thus, she safeguards her loneliness carefully but the novel shows how flimsy her efforts are when one intrusion follows another and makes her life miserable.

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s Mrs. Sen, Mrs.Sen lost her all hope and happiness when she got into the car accident with Eliot. She cries a lot because she had found temporary happiness in talking to Eliot all those afternoons and now she had thrown it all away.

The protagonists of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are all trying to lead an authentic life and in the process the existential angst which they go through and the elucidations of their problems are all varied in nature. Each of the novelists has brought about a different struggle of the postmodern man/ woman and each of them tackles their issues in a different manner, thus various different perspectives of the philosophy of existentialism is brought and analysed. There is no singular approach or solution to existential angst, a wide approach and empathetic study of human psychology can be of help in analysis of the tenets of existentialism.

In conclusion, we see that Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri handled the human relationships in their novels perfectly. The characters in both the novels craved to lead a realistic life and in the process of the existential torment which they undergo through and the explication of their problems are all varied in nature. The characters face different kinds of struggle and tackle their issues in a different manner to resolve the existential crisis such as, Nanda Kaul shows how flimsy her efforts are when one intrusion follows another and makes her life miserable. On the other hand, Raka is rebel as whatever she does it seems to be a way of hitting back against life which has not treated her kindly. When it comes to Mrs.Sen story, the story defines the emotional exile and also a wonderful companionship between two entirely different persons. It is hearting to see when Mrs.Sen communicating with Eliot on her equal footing despite of the difference between two of them. Thus, both the writings made a great contribution to literature.

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