Review

Anita Desai’s ‘In Custody’ in a maze of existentialism

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Existentialism garnered by a sense of alienation is the forte of Anita Desai. This paper titled ‘Anita Desai’s “In Custody” in a Maze of Existentialism’ shows the tumultuous pathos that fitted the subaltern existential struggles engulfing the life of Deven in In Custody. The crux of the problem is the existential absurdity, a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of apparently meaningless world. This existential crisis leads to complete desolation, void giving him a sense of complete isolation. Isolation, alienation from the socio-cultural sphere generates a sense of freedom, a liberty that guides him to action. It is through the existential pangs suffered in entrapment that the protagonist moves to the ultimate realization that liberty is with creativity. Only pure freedom working with a sense of responsibility can help one to find the basic truth of life- from endless struggles to a state of trance and tranquility. The research paper focuses on the problem of existentialism ushered by a series of entrapments to the feeling of liberty in an act of responsible creation. Deven initially lacking identity illuminates gloriously on being the responsible custodian of Urdu language, poetry and the poet himself.

Key words: Creation, existentialism, liberty.

INTRODUCTION

“I think therefore I am” the famous maxim by Rene’, Descartes (1596-1650) sums up the existential thought. Jean Paul Sarte (1905-1980) adopted the term existentialism in the 1940s emphasizing individual existence, freedom, choice. It states that humans define their own meaning in life and try to make rational decision, even though they exist in irrational universe. The dominant of existentialism feeling of no purpose, nothingness can only be countered by embracing existence. The art world has been enormously influenced by the current existential thought. Art in true sense acts as lens, absorbs the idea in vogue and reproduces it in literature. Albert Camus’ (1913-1960) novel Plague (1947) recounts the outbreak of the bubonic plague in a port city. Those trapped within the city walls with the disease are forced to summon their inner reserves of strength and determination in the face of the negative force of death. In this striving for existence he realizes his essential Being. In the twentieth century, The Nausea (1938) by Sartre makes an academician experience the intense singularity of his own existence which leads to complete freedom and a sense of responsibility of their own actions in which a downtrodden continually struggled to ultimately find his worth. Existentialism was not only of European countries but oriental writers too tasted the flavor of it- Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaye, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai to name a few.

This research paper concentrates on the work of Anita Desai’s novel In Custody from an existential perspective. Anita Desai does not interweave the plot just on imagination but her creations are grounded in lived experience. Desai herself admits her novels are not populated by heroic characters. Her protagonists are marked by a certain passivity being swept by the historical and social forces rather than controlling them. Anita Desai towers over others in her ilk for exploring the deeper recess of human subjects and create a unique space by adding new vistas in thematic treatment of existential issues dogging the common strata of society. The helplessness and the fallibility of human beings form
the bedrock of her existential approach to work. The protagonist, Deven in In Custody suffers existential absurdity, dilemmas, loss of communications, a complete sense of isolation which brings in a state of mental crisis where the protagonist is in search of true self. Lacking a firm sense of identity, Deven exhibits remarkable inability: ‘The protagonist of the novel is in his own custody’ (Narayan, 2009). This paper critically analyses how Desai makes Deven desire to get freedom - talking in existential context from the shackles of human and is involved in endless struggles only to realize the state of trance. The aim of the research is to show that there is a steady shift from a sense of self-devaluation, as Deven who views himself as an animal in the cage gains confidence in himself as an independent entity. Driven by the urge of identity, Deven gets himself entrapped only to the realization that isolation leads to complete freedom, driving oneself to creation, a heroic attempt of survival in face of all losses.

She dives deeply, darkly and silently into human minds to work on the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the modern life style to the ultimate realization of existential living. Nirode, in Voices in the City (1965), experiments with failure like a true existential hero seeking meaning in life; though he gets nothing except that he comes to realization in the end. Similarly, in Bye Bye Black Bird (1971), Desai’s deep existentialist concern explores adjustment, belonging and ultimate decision in the lives of Dev, an external immigrant who can never accept his new home and acts like stranger in enemy territory to his ultimate realization of his affinity with the countryside. In Desai’s works, it is the existential pangs through which characters move to their ultimate realization. In Fasting and Feasting (1999), Cry, the Peacock (1963) and Fire on the Mountains (1977), Anita Desai recounts the enigma of feminine existentialism, a sense of isolation, alienation only to be liberalized through the realization of essential being. The author has considered In Custody (Kirpal, 1984) along with this penmanship in order to emphasize the existential crisis suffered by characters in this novel.

Desai’s dexterity lies in the art of delving into the psyche of modern man. Her primary goal is to discover the truth that is nine-tenths of the icebergs that lie submerged beneath the one-tenths visible portion we call reality. In her novels Anita Desai has concentrated more on characters than on the social milieu. They are not types but individual men and women solitary being retreated to some extremity of despair. Their characters are independent, agonized frustrating self combating with an angry defiance, their individual problems and predicaments which are basically existentialist. No emotional problem is more threatening today than the existential problem. The moral confusion of modern Indians who live on an ‘ad-hoc’ basis and show a dual code of behavior as we find Deven Sharma the protagonist of In Custody endowed with all the complexities and fears devoid of any trust in people and future. This existential problem, this duality of self traps Deven a temporary lecturer of Hindi in a private college of Mirpore, a Delhi suburb in a sense of alienation, loneliness and pes-simism. He suffers from dislocation of normal life, morbidity of temperament, maladjustment in family life and such contradictions. Deven comes from a lower middle class family, finds his job and family oppressive and believes he is chained to the necessity of earning livelihood in order to support his family but his existential crisis lies in the romantic notion he fosters. He had secretly dreamt of the world of drama and revolving lights and feasts and furies of a wider circle but the harsh realities of life and his personal incompetence produce in him a feeling of frustration and resentment.

Deven is trapped under experiences of various shades and complexities. He suffers marital dissonance, of impassivity as he failed to provide the desired marital bliss to his wife, Sarla. Overtly his irritability with Sarla appears to be the outcome of his hurt male ego. Deep down his rage is in a way all externalization of self hate born out of unconscious self accusation. At home, he imposes superiority but outside is unable to revolt; he adopts self minimizing posture to extricate sympathy from others. The students trap him with their expression of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance which make him focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room for freedom and release. Murad, Deven’s childhood friend and the editor of Awaz, an Urdu magazine provides him a release by offering him a golden opportunity to interview Nur Shahjehanbadi, a veteran Urdu poet for a special issue. Deven is suddenly thrown out of his ordinariness. “Deven’s hand fluttered on his knee as he melted at the suggestion and felt a glow creep through him at the thought of writing something in a language which had been his first language when he was a child. The glow was also caused by pride of course at being asked to contribute a piece by the editor” (Desai, 2001:6). The prospect of interviewing Nur opens up a new world for him in which he knows not how to conduct. Though Mirpore is solid, its stubbornness is a cruel trap, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape. Deven suffers from doubts and vacillations in about taking a journey to Delhi which contrasts to Mirpore with its openness and liberalization to interview Nur. “What madness had drawn him to undertake this journey into what could only be disaster? What vain glory to have accepted Murad’s challenge to have agreed to a task for which he was not qualified; for which he had neither the experience nor the confidence” (Desai, 2001:14). Deven like a Shakespearean tragic protagonist is held between decision of whether to interview Nur or not. In spite of uncertainties, he has always earned a hope to bask in the
glory of Urdu poetry. Deven, though being a Hindu, associates Urdu with good times and regards the language as divine regardless of being a Hindi teacher. The thrust of imperialism and post-colonialism marks a criss-cross of culture, of language, of traditions in which Deven is trapped being a victim of bad times and wrong placing. His linkage with Urdu is a matter of past, of his childhood when in Daryaganj District of Old Delhi, his father a connoisseur of Urdu poetry has initiated Deven into its halo. Trapped in the present to fulfill certain duties he relegates to the past to release his crisis. He has a fond childhood memory of his father and his recitation that provides him a release and helps him to bury his present and enliven the past and ceremoniously dwells in sadness and nostalgia as the dawn singers echo his mood “O will you come along with us? Or stay back in the pa-ast?” (Desai, 2001:92). Deven had nurtured a romantic thought as he had idolized the poet in their first meeting. No sooner did he hear Nur’s voice Deven felt some taut in the membrane of reservation tore apart inside him and a surging expression of joy. It was as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up. But his idealized visions of the poet received a rude jolt when he finds Nur trapped in semi-darkness and shadowy gloom amidst furniture that enhances the sense of lurid murkiness. When Deven mounted up the stairs casting away meanness and dross of his past existence he realized that illumination is only an illusion and freedom a farce. He found Nur trapped between parasitic hangers on, amidst louts and lafangas of the bazaar who revel at his cost. Nur sitting in the middle and taking pleasure in the company of uncultured wannabes who eat greasy impersonations of the refined courtly dishes of yesteryear and spitting crude opinions granted as witty repartee caused a crisis in Deven’s mind which had imagined Nur in total serenity surrounded by elderly, dignified literature or in complete isolation. Deven wants to free himself from the caged domesticated existence of Mirpore journeys to Delhi, but the recurrent nightmares repeatedly waylay and deflect him from his destination, pulling him to the centre from where there is no exit. It points out the meaninglessness of human existence where his purpose is thwarted by circumstances that were unexpected thus pulling him into deeper mire furthering existential crisis. “His feet seemed to be enmeshed in the sticky net of the nightmare that would not let him escape at any level of consciousness.” Though his purpose of interviewing Nur ended in a failure and it had trapped Deven into baffling politics of language but Deven realized that the secret of existence is to be meshed and unmeshed to manifest the ultimate summum bonum of life.

Deven apart from being domesticated, cocooned into the four walls of Mirpore is trapped in dialectics of culture, of language seeded by post colonial economy and politics. To support his corporeal needs he teaches Hindi whereas his imagination is fired by Urdu literature. This causes a psychological turbulence that arises out of his conflicts of his immediate needs and illusions when Murad to express Mughal superiority rather Urdu supremacy banters Hindi ‘that is raised on radishes and potatoes……it flourishes while Urdu the language of the court in the days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city’ (Desai, 2001:5). Deven to overcome his guilt of not doing anything in the field of Urdu literature bends to the superficial passion of Murad for Nur’s poetry. Murad in spite of debunking Hindi politically chooses a voice of the same sector to restore Urdu to its previous glory. So Murad to uphold Urdu eventually subjugates to its rival Hindi being trapped in the language of the constitution. Deven faces the chagrin, the unease of minority communities in modern India by Murad specifying the new imperialism of the ‘vegetable monster Hindi’. Murad grieves over the decay fissuring the body of the Indian society and the slow death of the mother language Urdu that has once ornamented Old Delhi. As Murad, Nur too is caught in a nostalgic commemoration of Urdu which after post independence has been marginalized within a limited section of the society with Hindi taking its edge. Nur’s ailing body symbolically represents the sickening state of Urdu as Nur tapping his chest with one finger tells Deven ‘So now you see its corpse lying here waiting to be buried’ (Desai, 2001:24). On recognizing Deven’s purpose Nur teases him, ‘It seems you have been sent to torment me’ (Desai, 2001:25). The political crescendo in language is evident in the voice of Nur “The Congress wallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler” (Desai, 2001:24). Moreover on knowing that Deven teaches Hindi to earn a living, Nur feels Deven is a slave serving Hindi, and acerbically states that he should have better dealt in rice and oil as earning a living was his first priority. He even does not hesitate to contemptuously call Deven a spy sent to hunt and kill Urdu. Deven feels uncomfortable when he realizes that Nur fails to keep the royalty and aristocratic bearing of Urdu and hurl’s abuses at random. Nur can be presumed to be Deven’s alter ego as though his existence revolves round the purpose to commemorate Urdu but he suffers a crisis being trapped among figures who lack genuine respect for the language. The discussion switches over to the literary awards that heighten the pitiful state of Urdu. “Govind’s latest poem cycle will win the Sahitya Akademi Award for Hindi this year” (Desai, 2001) whereas for Urdu “No book was judged worthy of the award this year” (Desai, 2001:33). Desai impregnates the political discourse with religion which digs a deeper trap for Deven. His reason for Delhi visit to interview Nur to soothen his nerves lands him into complexities enmeshing him in a jargon of religious politics. Being a Hindu he thought it preferable to stay
off the discourse of the minorities but Nur calls him to join the fray “Listen and tell me if my poetry deserves to live or if it should give way to the fodder chewed by peasants Hindi” (Desai, 2001:33)? Nur trapped in this confusion verging on pain that his voice would die aggravates the problem of political angle in language. In Custody diffuses with a sense of entrapment, the existential crisis is strengthened when attempts to escape traps often of their own making. Deven could not understand how he the central character in the whole affair, the one on whom depended the entire matter of interview had relinquished his own authority – been brought to his knees, abject and babbling in helplessness. Languishing upon the remnants of a lost interview he returns to the safe dustbin of their world, the shabby house, and its dirty corners which is a similar trap with its wretchedness and lovelessness created by frustrating locked emotions. Though initially Deven thought that had made a timely escape from failed interview and its complexities to his simplified existence but on realizing that he could not contend with the desolate state he again gave way to Murad who without sympathy, without compatibility utilizes the custom of friendship as a trap and forces Deven to meet Trivedi the Head of Hindi Department asking for a leave. “I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu Department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department; you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language” (Desai, 2001:102). Deven trapped between religious identity of being Hindu his passion being Urdu that sets a dichotomy and questions his loyalty.

In spite of earning the title of a traitor, Deven is so locked in Nur and his poetry that he strains himself for a second visit when the illusionary world of Deven’s creation regarding the poet is shattered. Nur’s rare feet, his loose pyjamas, his vest full of holes made him appear like a caged animal at a loss. If Deven trapped in marriage, family, job had illusioned a concept of a wider world but a closer familiarity with the poet made him experience that this world of Nur the star is a cage too from where there is no escape. In his world of desolation and loneliness he pays for the loutish company, to be loved and attended he readily gets trapped by the young scheming wife. With Imtiaz Begum’s birthday being celebrated with the thumping of the drums and drawing of the harmonium Nur is left as a beggar with all his jewels stolen. In his sodden memory he revealed the truth of Imtiaz Begum “she wanted my house, my audience, my friends. She raided my house, stole my jewels – those are what she wears now and sits before an audience showing them off as her own; they are mine” (Desai, 2001:58). He realizes that art is not away from reality; it is the entrapment of the real world which paves the way to freedom. Deven has been captured in the custody of Nur’s genuine spirit and soul and the one true disciple in whose safe custody Nur could place his work. As art appears to be incongruous trapped in the fangs of commercial world Deven thought of rescuing it from the throes of struggle. To give voice to Nur’s feelings he agrees with Murad to waste money on a secondhand tape recorder and an incompetent assistant Chiku for an interview. Subjected to Nur’s whims and fancies the three days affair continues over three weeks with recording sessions becoming mehﬁls at Deven’s cost. He realizes that to relieve art and to restore the lost glory of Urdu poetry he is letting himself into a greater abyss of disaster. Chance is a factor that dominates the existence of modern man making him fail in his life’s attempt. During poetic recital and its recording chance intervenes making the recording program useless with incoherent voices, pigeon flights, interspersed with abuses. Deven doggedly hopes to decipher Nur’s poetry resulting in editing, recurring expenses leaving him with only a cassette. As Nur and his first wife Safiya Begum are instrumental in materializing this interview so it seems that his life is in custody of Nur and his family. Deven pays huge amount to Safiya Begum for which he had taken loan from college, arranged by Siddique, the head of the Urdu Department for his own purpose of getting the rarest recorded collection of Urdu poetry. To solve a riddle, Deven getting enmeshed in another riddle can never make two ends meet. Unable to give the correct updated version of the recorded cassette he is trapped by the college authorities who set up an enquiry against him as he had been misunderstood for keeping the recording in his own custody and not handing it to the authorities. The whole novel portrays a descending trajectory of Deven and the rise of miseries coupled with misfortunes. Deven is a weak personality tossed by self effacing drives suffers existential crisis and is trapped “I was fooled and cheated by everyone – the man who sold me the secondhand equipment, the technician who said he could do the recording but was completely inexperienced, by Murad who said he would not pay and did not, by Nur who had never told me that he wanted to be paid, and by his wife, wives, and of them” (Desai, 2001:141).

Solanki (1992), notes “Anita desai’s novels are concerned with the portrayal of the most troubled part of her protagonist’s life. They are at their wits end, the world seems to be ‘out of joint’ and in their helplessness they feel like trapped birds.” Deven is trapped in his self created mess, suffers humiliation but finally feels whole despite the challenging experience. Deven lacked self confidence and needed a prop to goad him which comes in the form of Murad, Siddique, Nur’s first wife, students only to make him realize that is trapped by them for their own benefits. It is only when everyone had cut him off he would begin to find himself, his own strength. His self analysis and self discovery make him face reality and shoulder responsibility and be the custodian of Nur’s poetry. His frustrated self breathed life when he realized
that among all entrapments his relation with Nur is of liberation though formerly trapped. He expresses clarity of vision being the only custodian of Nur’s very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction that he could not deny under any pressure.

There is a thread of optimism as Nur at the end finds himself a custodian to breathe to him his life and Deven gets the opportunity to take the custody of the divine poet. ‘Through his throat, my words will flow…’ (Desai, 2001:33). As Anita Desai says about the title In Custody “It is about an emotional prison, a spiritual prison, not a physical one. It is a word with a double meaning – custody means guardianship, keeping safe as well as imprisonment”. Though Deven thought himself caught in a trap – he is in custody almost, but he has a certain freedom by having entered the world of Nur’s poetry he has won a great freedom; his being out of custody is a kind of reward, a freedom that he realized. If Deven has tried to save Nur from worldly entrapments the reverse occurs and Deven becomes trapped by Nur till the last. Even after Nur’s death his poetry will be alive and Deven being out of custody is a custodian of Nur’s poetry. Even up to the end of the novel, letter keeps coming from Nur asking Deven for money for his son, for treatment, for going to Haj. Deven finds himself helplessly trapped and suffers negative vision similar to the neurotic vision of Maya in Cry, The Peacock. He saw Nur’s bier with women weeping, funeral music playing, and the grave opening. Deven thought if with his end the connection would break, the relation would end…..but his inner voice answered no…. never. It is to take Nur into custody that he has taken all pains, involved in complexes, have been befooled just to rise like a phoenix from his own ashes.

CONCLUSION

Deven suffers an intense identity crisis; a sense of purposelessness haunts him. The world in which he lives is full of dualities that create his mental turmoil, clash of identities. It is this crisis that makes him explore his free will. He starts investigating truth but human knowledge being limited and fallible he entraps himself into further crisis. His isolation leading to detachment from his family causes marital anguish which further questions his identity. To solve this he interweaves a nexus with Nur and his family to give specification to his search. He frees himself from one bondage of expectations of being and becoming to be trapped in another and plunges devotedly into discovery the art of creating his own identity, his realization of his essential Being by being the custodian of Nur and his poetry. Deven at first isolates to enjoy liberty and realizes the ultimate through life’s experience. The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), a joint venture by Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre uses the analogy of the Greek myth of Sisyphus to demonstrate the futility of existence. In the myth Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a hill, but when he reaches the summit, the rock will roll to the bottom again. Camus believes that existence is pointless but Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning and purpose in his task by applying himself to it. Deven too in In Custody finds meaning to his existence by putting himself into the task ordained for him with a sense of creating and preserving anew.

REFERENCES