Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The novel and the novelist

Of all the literary forms, the novel is considered to be the most socially oriented because it depicts human society in its varied aspects of struggle, chaos and anarchy. Of all the literary forms—fiction, poetry, drama, prose etc—it is the novel that has achieved a major accomplishment in the field of literature. Diana T. Lawrenson and Alan Swingewood in *The Sociology of Literature* observe:

Thus the novel as the major literary genre of industrial society, can be seen as a faithful attempt to recreate the social world of man’s relation with his family, with politics, with the state: it delineates too his roles within the family and other institutions, the conflicts and tensions between groups and social classes.

Novels are therefore, depictions of values and feelings. They reflect the changes occurring in society and the manner in which individuals become accustomed to the social system. Baker in *The History of the English Novel* is of the view that novels should not be mere reproduction of things or events but
interpretations. The novelist aims to record the events taking place in a social milieu. He must be a keen observer. He must be frank and fearless in his expression. By appealing to the people's imagination as well as to their intelligence, the novelist is more emphatic in his expression. The novelist cannot remain indifferent to the problems of the world in which he lives. When he sees the world around him and becomes restless he must try to express his feelings through his writings. Martin Price comments:

The purpose of the novel is to reveal life under a certain aspect, to shape it so as to make sense of a roughly formidable kind – the formulation is its theme. To do this the writer creates a model, a small scale structure whose proportions or relationships have some analogy with the realities we know.2

Thus the novelist penetrates into the life of the people to reproduce it in a novelist structure, so as to ensure a thorough comprehension, thereby exposing the inner as well as the outer layers of the society.

The novel as a medium of story – telling and art – form is essentially of the west and represents a tradition that is totally different from India's tradition of story telling. To quote V.S.Naipaul:

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The novel is of the west. It is part of that western concern with
the condition of men, a response to the here and now [...]. In
India thoughtful men have preferred to turn their backs on the
here and now and to satisfy what Dr. Radhakrishnan calls "the
basic human hunger for the unseen." It is not a good qualification
for the writing or reading of the novel [...]. It is part of the
mimicry of the west, the Indian self-violation.³

This opinion emphasizing the incompatibility of the nature of the novel
as a mode of literary expression with the Indian concept of life and literature
leaves us with the basic question "Can there be an Indian novel?". In answer to
this question the following observation made by T.D Brunton is very
significant:

The novel puts a premium on originality. The novelist's tradition
does not consist of rules, but rather of certain assumptions about
the handling or imagined and observed reality [...]. It shall be
evident that the novel is adapted to any culture [...] and also the
modern, almost worldwide curiosity about society. In the modern
world, all these interests develop with education and literacy. So
the novel is becoming international.⁴
Therefore it would be wrong to consider the novel as alien to the Indian tradition.

1.2 Genesis of the Indian Novel in English

The appearance of the novel as a literary form in nineteenth century India was a social phenomenon and was associated with social, political and economic conditions which were similar to those which favoured its rise in England. Social reforms such as abolition of sati, prohibition of throwing a child into sea at the mouth of Ganga in fulfilment of religious vows and infanticide were accepted readily by the Indian society despite the protests from orthodox sections because of the moral support they received from influential Indian personalities like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. India was also cured of superstitious ideas and there was a radical transformation in her religious ideas as well. English education was responsible for the afore-mentioned transformations.

English education became the only passport to higher appointments. This accounts for its progress and popularity. There was a steady increase in the number of colleges and universities and in the number of young men and women graduating from these institutions. Western education opened the floodgates of western ideas. Raja Ram Mohan Roy with his liberal and creative use of English expressions ushered in a new era of English literature.
The first novel in India made its appearance in Bengali and then in a number of other Indian languages and in English. It was Bankim Chandra who established novel as a major literary form in India. He was the first Indian to write a novel in English. *Rajamohan's wife* was his first and last novel in English. With the advent of Bankim Chandra the stage had been set for the emergence of novel as a form of literary expression in India. Referring to other novelists like Balkrishna, Sorabji and S.B. Banerjee, M.E. Derret observes:

> Others who imitated English forms and expressions admirably could not convey through them the Indian modes of thought and feeling, so that their works lacked the necessary depth and sincerity and were mere imitations.  

S.K. Venkataraman's *Kandan the Patriot* (1932) and *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) are novels full of Gandhian politics. Strong echoes of these novels are found in the novels written by Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Anand's novels occupied the forestage and the Indian novel replaced poetry as an expression of Indian life and culture. After Anand and Raja Rao, the most significant talent of R.K. Narayan emerged. After Narayan came Govind Desani, Kushwant Singh and Manohar Malgonkar. The afore-mentioned social reforms had brought
about emancipation of Indian women and the emergence of women writing in English.

1.3 The Emergence of Women Novelists

Indian women had to be content with playing only a subordinate role in the social life of the country. The advent of English education had cast its impact on the status of women in Indian society. The battle for emancipation which was initiated by western education, was taken over by a few educated women who turned writers in their attempt to lay bare their own bitter experiences to the world. Prof. Alphonso Karkala observes:

They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers both in India and abroad. ⁶

The writers who belong to this category are Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianathan, Sheventibai M. Nikambe, Raj Lakshmi Debi, Smt. Swarnakumari Ghosal and Cornelia Sorabji. It is only after the second world war that women novelists of quality have begun to emerge. Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabavala are undoubtedly the best women novelists. Ruth Prawer
Jhabavala’s six novels, *The Nature of Passion*, *Get Ready for Battle*, *To Whom She will*, *The Householder*, *Esmond in India* and *A Backward Place* concentrate on family-life, social problems and personal relationship within Indian family system. Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *A Handful of Rice* and *The Coffer Dams* concentrate on the despair of unfulfilled or ruined love, the agony of ambition, the quest for self-realization and truth by the young. Most of the novels of the women novelists are autobiographical. For instance, Santha Rama Rau’s *Gift of Passage*, Nayantara Sahgal’s *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*, Kamala Das’ *My Story*, Padmini Sengupta’s *Red Hibiscus*, Iqbalunissa Hussain’s *Purdah and Polygamy* have the semblance of an autobiographical novel. Anita Desai is another woman novelist who has received much praise recently. She has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction.

1.4 Achievements of Anita Desai

Born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India, and educated in Delhi her published works include short stories, children’s books and eight novels. Of the eight novels, two of them, *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody* were short listed for the Booker Prize. Anita Desai studies the inner life of her characters. Her novels are fine specimens of involved writing. She is one of the most
distinguished and promising women novelists of the younger generation in Indian writing in English. Almost, all her novels deal with the interior selves and private thoughts. Her success in moving away from the real experiential life to the life of the mind, to the fundamental being of the person distinguishes Desai’s writing from social satire. Her art of plunging into the inner dynamics of her characters, lives and motives is closer to that of Henry James and Virginia Woolf.

From her first novel Cry the Peacock to Baumgartner’s Bombay, Desai’s focus is on the frailty of human conditions under severe psychological and social pressures. Most of her novels have for their setting “bleak and sultry Indian landscape.”7 The protagonists of Desai, most of whom are women, feel exposed, vulnerable and utterly isolated. Their condition may be best described in psychopathological language as “ontological insecurity.”8 The anxiety and trauma that arise from the condition of the divided self are most movingly dramatized in Desai’s first novel Cry the Peacock. Voices in the City has for its central theme the total atomization of human experience. Bye-Bye Blackbird explores the complexities of the dilemma of migration and also identity crisis. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, the thread begun in the first novel is taken up again. The tension caused in the novel is due to the claims of intuition and the processes of reason. Fire on the Mountain
exemplifies the division in the inner being of an individual and the devastation caused by the pseudo duality in that individual's being.

"The novel" according to the American-novelist-critic Joyce Carol Oates, "is perhaps the highest art form because it closely resembles life, it is about human relationships."9 Anita Desai’s novels are about human relationships. It is their absence that is at the heart of the themes of her novels. Clear Light of Day hints that reconciliation puts an end to alienation of the individual self. In Custody deals with the theme of marital isolation and Deven’s failure to form harmonial conjugal ties. Baumgartner’s Bombay explores the human or subhuman condition of an individual and through this the universal implication of estrangement is also explored.

In The Village by the Sea Desai deals with the “tragic predicament of an individual and the problem of his survival in a society at cross-roads between tradition and transition, the rural way and the urban scientific and sophisticated approach to life.”10 Economic hardship is taken up by the novelist in Clear Light of Day and In Custody to a limited extent. But in this novel, Hari and Lila’s struggle for survival is economic in nature. They are able to raise the family from below subsistence to subsistence level through hard work. Desai deals with the lower classes of society and rural life for the first time.
Fasting and Feasting deals with two different ways of assuaging human hungers, desires and appetites. The novel moves from the hub of a close-knit Indian household with its traditional obligations and impositions, it's over pouring warmth to the cool center of an American family with its freedoms and self-denying self-indulgence. In both there are victims and survivors. In Journey to Ithaca, Desai retains "the expatriate perspective of misguided journeys to the East." Spiritual India becomes a kind of Ithaca in the novel. A young European couple, Sophie and Matteo come to India in search of spiritual enlightenment but after what is a difficult voyage they end up disappointed, disillusioned. Desai seems to suggest that the quest originates in the minds of the questers rather than in the site of the quest and in their failings and frustrations rather than in their strength.

Anita Desai records vanities, prejudices, loyalties, eccentricities, likes and dislikes of the human mind in her larger as well as shorter fiction. Games at Twilight is a study in child psychology. In Private Tuition by Mr. Bose the inner conflict in the life of Mr. Bose is very meticulously brought out. He is compelled to continue with his tuition even though he wishes "strongly to return to the warmth of his wife and baby son. Scampering from one tuition to another is all that he does throughout the evening."
Studies in the Park focuses on the plight of a student in a family where
in the father listens to the news in six languages, mother keeps on cluttering in
the kitchen, constantly pressing her glass of sugared milk on the student,
children disturbing, tap splashing always. In Surface Texture, Desai condemns
the cowardliness and irresponsibility of the conduct of Harish, a supply office
clerk whose sainthood prospers on the grave of his family happiness and
dignity. Sale and Diamond Dust:Stories also illustrate the point of human
relationship in clear terms.

1.5 Existentialism

Existentialism is the name given to a group of philosophical doctrines
and ideas which have found contemporary expression in the works of such men
as Sartre, Heidegger, Marcel, Camus and Jaspers. Though the existentialist
writers are varied in their theories, certain underlying themes can be singled out
as characteristic. They emphasize the unique and particular in human
experience. Each man is what he chooses to be or make himself. Consciousness
of such freedom is a condition of authentic existence. In their psychological
explorations existentialists have shown an imposing insight and introduced
explicative concepts, which have broadened the area of moral self-knowledge
and self-awareness. This explains the wide appeal of their writings.
Many renowned writers such as Dostoyevsky, Graham Greene, Patrick White, Joyce Cary, Conrad, Kafka, Colin Wilson, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Samuel Beckett, J.D.Salinger, Thomas Hardy etc., have been influenced by existential philosophy. Their writings give a vivid picture of man who is a stranger in his world. He moves about in a state of homelessness but is always doomed to wander in quiet despair, incommunicado, and a defeated man.

In the Indian literary scene though many writers like R.K.Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Raji Narasimhan, Vikram Seth, Arun Joshi, Tara Ali Baig, Githa Hariharan, Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, Sashi Deshpande, R.W.Desai and many others have written on existential themes none have exploited existential philosophy to the extent that Anita Desai has. Desai considers the enduring human condition seriously and for this reason she is considered a true existentialist.

1.6 Social Issues in the Novels of Desai

At the heart of the discourse of the novels of Desai is the relationship between the individual and the society. With the stress laid on the freedom and autonomy of the individual, the relations between the individual and society become problematic. The protagonist not only looks for his own self, but also searches for new values or meaning in a world where the gap between
professed values and reality become larger and larger. The protagonist has to either accept society as it is in resignation or reject it in despair.

This problem arises out of a definite assumption about the nature of the nineteenth century novel:

It is seen as the literary portrayal of the insoluble conflict between the individual and the society, ending in the defeat of the individual.\(^{13}\)

Desai depicts India, Indian culture and Indian society in her novels. Desai has the analytical mind of a sociologist who provides an exact record of human life, society and the social system. Ralph fox has rightly pointed out:

The novelist, therefore, has a special responsibility both to the present and the past of his country. What he inherits from the past is important, because it shows what are the sections of his country’s cultural heritage, which have meaning today. What he says of the present is important, because he is assumed to be expressing what is most vital in the spirit of his time.\(^{14}\)

The issues and problems Desai raises in her novels can be studied at the level of society and at the level of individuals. The main purpose here is to find out the social content characterized in Desai’s novels. D.P. Mukerji comments:
Mostly the situations relate to conflict and their treatment is sociological. Various problems are discussed of maladjustment between husband and wife, between the individual with his new values of personal welfare and the society with its ancient code of static morality [...].

Marriage in Indian society is the most important and engrossing event of life. While discussing the significance of marriage in Indian society Desai points out that marriage is a traditional institution in which a man and a woman are bound together by duty. The fate of the woman within the framework of this institution is to be helplessly subordinate to man. Conflict and affection are present within the framework. Love is a binding force, but Desai points out (in her novels) usually there is no love in marriage. Desai has also commented on sex relations outside marriage in *Fire on the Mountain*. By showing such relations outside marriage the novelist is trying to show the inadequacy of marriage as a social institution. Desai also points out the transformation in the existing norms and values of Indian society. The new younger generation is for equality and is against the vast disparity between husband and wife.

The position of women has long been a burning issue in Indian society. Desai’s novels measures the ups and downs in the modern Indian women’s life. For ages in India the concept of family has been that of the joint family. This results in a patriarchal order. In most of Desai’s novels one can find that
the new generation does not seem to accept the value system of the older generation and therefore there is a clash of values between the two, the ultimate result of which is resignation and fatalism.

Revolt is becoming widespread in the younger generation irrespective of the sex. In their search for individuality and freedom they tend to alienate and isolate themselves. Desai’s novels make the reader understand what has been making them feel alienated towards society as a whole.

1.7 Objectives of the Study

1. To discuss emergence of women novelists in Indian writing in English and achievements of Anita Desai in this field.

2. To trace the inter-relationship between existential philosophy and the themes of the novels of Desai.

3. To show that the technical variations adopted by the novelist suits the existential themes of the novelist.

4. To discuss husband-wife relationship and to bring out the existential predicaments of women protagonists in Indian cultural set-up.

1.8 Data for the Study

The novels scrutinized for this purpose are as follows:
2. Bye-Bye Blackbird (New Delhi: Orient, 1985)
5. Fire on the Mountain (New Delhi: Allied, 1977)
7. Voices in the City (New Delhi: Orient, 1985)
8. Where Shall We Go This Summer? (Delhi: Vikas, 1975)

1.9 Methodology Adopted

The methodology advocated by MLA Handbook for writers of Research Papers, fifth edition, has been followed closely for the purpose of Documentation, Endnotes, Quotation and Bibliography.

1.10 Significance of the Study

This thesis is the result of an attempt to expose the philosophical and psychological perspectives of existentialism and to relate it with the novels of Desai. In other words an attempt is made to identify how certain philosophical truths are imbibed in creative literature.
1.11 Plan of the study

Existentialism, the modern system of belief made famous by Jean Paul Sartre in the 1940, states that the world is meaningless and each person is alone and completely responsible for their own actions and that their actions determine their own character. This term, which means "pertaining to existence" or in logic predicating existence philosophically, now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world and his relationship, or lack of one, with God. As such, an analysis and deduction is attempted in the study undertaken. For this purpose a broad distribution of the theme over five chapters is presented:

1. Introduction

2. Existentialist Relevance and Orientation

3. Thematic and Technical Variations: The Persisting Experimentation

4. The Existential Women

5. Conclusion.

Chapter one deals with the purpose of the novels and what is expected of a novelist. It throws light on the genesis of Indian novels in English. It deals with the significance of women novelists in Indian writing in English and also discusses the achievements of Anita Desai who has added a new dimension to
Indian English fiction. The third phase of the chapter presents the social issues in the novels of Anita Desai.

The second chapter deals with the inter-relationship between literature and philosophy thereby bringing out the link between existential philosophy and the novels of Desai. This chapter also explains the main ideas of some of the most influential existential thinkers. The latter part of the chapter relates the existential thoughts of the recognized existential philosophers to the themes of Desai’s novels.

Chapter III focuses on the techniques adopted by novelist to present the existential themes of her novels. It is an attempt to study the plot, narrative technique, structure, character, setting, symbolism and imagery, language and style of her eight novels mentioned earlier. It also throws light on the novelist’s success in the usage of the concept of ‘realism and fantasy’ as a technique in her depiction of truth. This chapter also discusses through the techniques employed the different existential predicaments experienced by the protagonists of Desai’s novels.

The fourth chapter examines ‘husband and wife’ relationship in the novels of Desai. It throws light on the existential numbness experienced by the woman protagonists of Desai’s novels and the position of women in Indian cultural set up. This chapter also shows that those aspects of feminism found in
Desai’s novels are merely an extension of existentialism. The concluding part of this chapter also offers a solution to this predicament experienced by women all over the world and reveals Anita Desai’s leanings towards womanism.

The concluding chapter sums up the impressions and evaluation of the novels of Desai. The study opens up new avenues for further research on interpersonal relationships.
Notes


