Anita Desai’s "Cry, the Peacock" and Arun Joshi’s "The Last Labyrinth": Self Alienation Existential Aspect

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According to the existentialists, human being lives in the alienation in his entire life. He is neither a part of it nor does he ever understand the nature of his existence. Everything is dependent on faith than rational belief. Human being lives in a materialized and power centred society rather than his own real self is the major cause of alienation from one’s self. It deals with the questions, such as who am I? Where have I come from? What is the real purpose of my existence? and the universal truth about birth and death. Every human being is unique in itself and at the same time has the power to choose from all the possible alternatives in life. In other words, human being strive for the real meaning of his existence and yet at the same time solely responsible for his actions, that means that he has to face the outcomes of his actions. R. S. Weiss defines loneliness as a response to the absence of a particular type of relationship or attachment. (Weiss, 1973, 17)

The social and psychological implications lead to alienation which can affect health and aggravate medical conditions, both mental and physical. In the selected novels of Padma Bhushan award winner Anita Desai and the Sahitya Akademi award winner author Arun Joshi, "Cry, the Peacock" (1963) and "The Last Labyrinth" (1981) respectively; the protagonists ‘Som Bhaskar’ of Arun Joshi’s novel and ‘Maya’ of Anita Desai’s novel faces the Self alienation aspect of existentialism. Som Bhaskar and Maya are tormented in their inner world of aloofness.

"The Last Labyrinth" is the story of Som Bhaskar, of the emotional turmoil in the complex relationships in his life. He has sensible and beautiful wife, two children, has his education at the world’s best universities, huge industrial empire and yet he is not contented with his life, and is relentlessly chased by underlined hungers. His dissatisfaction with his life, his hankering after something resulted into his indulgence in competitions with other companies, getting involved with other women, and yet he remains utterly dissatisfied. Som is never ever satisfied
with anything in his life and he incessantly demands more. I want; I want; I want.

I want. I want. I want. Just like that? (Joshi, 2012, 70)

On the other hand, The protagonist of Cry, the Peacock is Maya, the only daughter of Raisahab, who marries off his daughter to his friend; a middle-aged intellectual lawyer, Gautama. They both are spiritually enlightened. For them, attachment like love leads only to unhappiness. They are preoccupied with their intellectual issues, while Maya lives at the biological level.

The problems in her married life spring from this inappropriateness. She needs in her life a friend, a companion, who would love her like a normal husband, who would fulfill her emotional needs. In her marital life she longs for love relationship with her husband. Therefore, she is unhappy, and grieves about:

A husband who did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed. (Desai, 1980, 9)

Som Bhaskar is the quintessential male hero in the literary production. A millionaire industrialist who is married to a woman of his choice (Geeta) is living with the luxuries of life, he is lost in the labyrinth of his needs and desires. Joshi had shown his protagonists search from ‘Bombay’ to ‘Benaras’ for the real meaning of life. His craving for Anuradha ruins his life and she becomes his obsession like a drug. Due to his obsession his marriage with Geeta falls apart. The maze of his yearning leads to his entanglement in the web of materialistic things. His self alienation leads him to commit suicide but he is stopped by his wife. In the end, Anuradha disappears in the last labyrinth to hide from the protagonist, Som, and this justifies the title of the novel. Anuradha left Som in the dilemma of her death, that whether she has committed suicide or she has been killed. The title of the novel; The Last Labyrinth, signifies ‘death’, Som as an Indian is torn between the western rationalism and the Indian ethos. He considered that life is a labyrinth within the labyrinth. Like the writer, Arun Joshi, the writer, his hero appears to be influenced by the existential writers like Albert Camus.

On the other hand, in the novel, Cry, the Peacock, the protagonist Maya’s marriage to Gautama and its lack of attachment stand in sharp contrast to her jolly and love-laden childhood. Maya suffers after she gets married with a person of her father’s age. She cries for the love and affection in
her marriage, she longs for adult love relationship to fulfil her emotional needs. Her husband, Gautama’s cold and strict behaviour and most significantly his age have affected Maya’s life. He holds her father responsible for bringing her upon the fairy tales. And the prophecy by the albino priest about her or her husband’s death in the fourth year of their marriage greatly contributes to her anxiety which ultimately leads to the aloofness of herself. With the three years of married life without a child makes her neurotic. Maya’s childlessness haunts her and the death of her pet dog Toto creates a void in her life. She is abnormally lonely to the point of neurotic. And finally in her obsession, she pushes her husband, Gautama’s off the parapet of their house; thus she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury and commits suicide.

In the selected novels, both the protagonists in both the novels face existential self-alienation. Their feeling of alienation arises out of their dissatisfaction with the course of life they live. Yet, the way they react to the circumstances or try to face their existential angst is quite different. The male protagonist of Arun Joshi’s Sahitya Akademi novel, Som is gifted with everything in life. He is highly educated and there is no problem in his marital life. He is a business tycoon. And yet, he is restless on account of the crisis of consciousness. He is aware of his loneliness, which is the result of his futile effort to ‘know’ and ‘want’ everything. Som has everything normally a man would wish to be contended. But he experiences void in his external and internal life. His wife, Geeta, is a contrast to him. Bhaskar is tormented in the two worlds and his aloofness resulted in disbelief in God. Western education and the Indian trust in God exert influence on his mind. He yearns to seek authenticity of his life. There is no answer to Bhaskar’s dilemma, as he belongs to two worlds, the western world of rationalism and the Eastern world of faith. His restless running from one woman to the other, seeking answers to questions related to life and death is a meaningless quest. He wants Anuradha to find a God for him and get the answers. But he does not realize that
in the realm of such quest man is on his own. He, thus, faces existential alienation and isolation in his inner self. He faces the crisis of consciousness as he belongs to the two worlds of the East and the West. Despite of having all the luxuries of life he is unhappy because he faces the existential feeling of loneliness within himself.

Maya’s existential alienation is because of her emotional estrangement from her husband and his family. Her world is utterly restricted to her mind and feelings rendering her lonely as she fails to connect with the world of reality. She feels alienated from others on account of her isolation from the intellectual and detached husband and the members of his family. She starved for love and becomes hypersensitive about her sense of loneliness which is further aggravated by the astrologer’s prediction.

Maya is obsessed with the idea of death. She becomes neurotic, which is aggravated by the prediction of the fortune-teller. As a result of her anguish, and her brooding over death, she moves towards her destruction. Her unhappiness is the result of her upbringing, her protected life and her fantasies. Maya is, thus, unhappy as a result of her circumstances. Her neurotic frame of mind is the result of this, and it gets a strong impetus by her dispassionate husband and the prediction of imminent death in the fourth year of her marriage. She is increasingly alienated from Gautama by his cold intellectuality. Once she pityingly asks him:

Is there nothing ……..is there nothing in you that would be touched ever so slightly, if I told you I live my life for you? (Desai, 1980, 97)

And Gautama’s response to this is cold. He is too perturbed to be touched. He calls her neurotic and a spoilt baby. For Maya, he becomes a closed door. She is rendered utterly lonely. It is in this state of mind the prediction of death haunts her, further intensifying her state of mind.

Both the protagonists suffer with the similar aloofness in their respective lives which leads neurotic and results fatal at the end of the novel. Som Bhaskar yearning for Anuradha’s left him in the dilemma of her death; whether she has committed suicide or she has been murdered. He was left with the labyrinth of death. On the other hand, Maya in her neurotic fit of rage pushed her husband Gautama from the parapet of their house and committed suicide. Their selfishness of love resulted into a sad and depressing end.
References

