

Srimad Bhagavad Gita and *Voices in the City*: A Comparative Study of the Concept of Existence

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Abstract- Anita Desai as a novelist deal with the question of existentialism in her works. She has focused more on analysis of characters than on the story of her novels. The main question of her characters is not political or social but existential in nature. She visions life through existential point of view. The uncertainty of mind and existence troubles her characters. Existentialism as a theory deal with the question of the purpose of life, the purpose of existence. The philosophy of Srimad Bhagavad Gita includes the theory of existence, the theory of being. The action of Gita, Arjuna's hopelessness, and final realization of Truth deals with many different facets of Hindu belief but the central concept is the concept of dharma and a regimented universe where each person has a responsibility to do what they have been placed on earth to do and which no one else can accomplish. Among Hindu texts, Gita is the fullest expression of the concept of the means toward self-actualization and liberation which frees the soul from the illusions which cause misery, sorrow and suffering, and reward one with peace in this life and union with God after death. The present paper focuses on this theory of existence as portrayed through the characters of Anita Desai in her philosophical novel *Voices in the City* (1965).

Keywords:Anita Desai, Existentialism, Theory of Existence, Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Voices in the City.

Anita Desai is a distinguished Indo-Anglian novelist and is regarded as a literary genius both in India and abroad. Her second novel, *Voices in the City*, was published in 1965. Considered as her best work, the novel shows the corrosive effects of the city of Calcutta upon an Indian family. It is a story of three siblings: Nirode, Amla and Monisha, and their life

in the city of Calcutta. The fourth part of the novel is dedicated to the mother of these three characters. The novelist has delved deep into the psychology of these characters and brought out their different reactions to the materialist life of the city. Nirode and Monisha are more sensitive and intellectual than Amla. Amla, when she arrives, is chirpy and hopeful about her upcoming life there. But she is surprised to see what the city of Calcutta has done to her siblings.

Anita Desai is a writer dealing with existentialism. She has presented to the reader the psychology of her characters rather than their social life. In her novels, it can be seen that she has visioned life through an existential point of view. The uncertainty of life haunts the mind of her characters. Her concern for human lot has imparted philosophical appeal to her novels. Anita Desai presents the theme of disillusionment, depression, hopelessness and existential despair in her novels. She has woven her views on existentialism imperceptibly with the theme of her novel *Voices in the City*.

Dr. C. Ramya has pointed out:

“In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life, detachment, isolation and time as a fourth dimension...”

Existentialism as a theory deals with the question of the purpose of life. The question that has troubled every intellectual is: why have we been placed on earth? What is the purpose of life? “In the view of an existentialist, the individual's starting point has been called "the existential angst", a sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, or anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.” (Wikipedia) To put in simpler words, existentialism is a philosophy about human existence which is not to be equated with philosophical pessimism.

The philosophy of Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the ancient Hindu text, has great relevance here. The philosophy of Gita includes the theory of existence. The action of Gita, Arjuna's despair (hopelessness), and final realization of Truth touch on many different aspects of Hindu belief, but the central aspect is the concept of dharma, which is an inseparable aspect of being, and an ordered and organised universe where each person has a responsibility to do what they have been placed on the earth to do and which no one else can accomplish.

Gita starts with Arjuna saying:

सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति । वेपथुश्च शरीरे मे रोमहर्षश्च जायते ॥ १- २९ ॥

(My limbs fail and my mouth is parched, my body quivers and my hair stand on end.)

The symptoms stated by Arjuna here are those which are faced by a patient out of mental confusions.

Swami Chinmayananda in his book *Holy Geeta* has identified that

“All these symptoms are described in the textbooks of modern psychology as typical symptoms of the mental disease named 'anxiety-state-neurosis.’” (Chinmayananda 29)

The course of Geeta follows to take Arjuna from this neurotic state to the final realization of Truth as he says:

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा त्वत्प्रसादान्मयाच्युत । स्थितोऽस्मि गतसन्देहः करिष्ये वचनं तव ॥ १८-७३ ॥

(Destroyed is my delusion, as I have now gained my memory (knowledge) through your grace, O Achyuta. I am firm; my doubts are gone. I will do according to your word (bidding).)

Swami Chinmayananda believes that “such a revival within and a rediscovery of our personality are possible for all of us if only we truly understand the significance of the Geeta philosophy.” (1343)

Among Hindu texts, Gita is the fullest expression of this concept of self-actualization and liberation which frees the soul from illusions which cause suffering and reward one with peace in this life and union with God after death.

Various scholars of Geeta have believed Arjuna to represent modern man in terms of his psychological state. Man in the contemporary world is always in such a state of neurosis and existential crisis. This state is also presented in literature by many writers such as Arun Joshi and Anita Desai. Throughout the novel *Voices in the City*, we see Monisha living in a similar neurotic state like Arjuna at the onset of Geeta. Monisha possesses a neurotic, hypersensitive, artistic sensibility while Nirode, although being in a neurotic state, is cynical and tough.

As H. M. William observes about the novel *Voices in the City* and the characters Monisha and Nirode:

“It is an existential novel that explores the inner climate of youth despair, epitomized by the over-acutely self-conscious Nirode that quoter of Camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all. This existential ‘angst’ is duplicated in Monisha in whom it assumes a fatal rhythm from which Nirode was once narrowly saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end.”

All the three characters, Amla, Nirode and Monisha, in *Voices in the City* struggle against the city of Calcutta to preserve their integrity and find relevance in life. Nirode, to whom the first part of the novel is dedicated, feels detached from his surroundings. He often quotes Camus, cannot find purpose in his life, and is presented to be living with this existential angst. He is disillusioned with the reality of life. All that he wants in his life are “three drinks a night and a room of his own- three drinks for inspiration...And a room in which to write it.” He introduces himself as a journalist when all he does is cut and paste newspaper clippings and file them. He throws up his *Patrika* job and his justification for this action is: “The newspaper carries the writer further and further into impersonal, it only follows the You. The You is everything in the news. There is never I. It is the I that interests me now.” His comments, views, and quotes that he uses to describe his life in the city presents his philosophical bent of mind.

Monisha is similar to Nirode in her experiences of life in Calcutta. Being married in a traditional aristocratic family of Calcutta, she finds herself trapped between her materialist in-laws. Her inability to conceive a child worsens her plight as she is being tormented by her indifferent husband and loneliness. She longs for freedom but feels trapped in the house and later, in her body. She hates her confinement to the iron-barred room upstairs. She writes in

her diary: “Through the thick iron bars I look out to other windows- other iron bars.” She hates how others talk about her inability to bear a child and of her ‘organs,’ that her tubes are blocked. But there is nothing she can do about it. All she does is stop listening to them. “I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to scrutiny.”

When Arjuna went through a personal crisis before the battle, Krishna's words, etched with fervour of existentialism came as a solution to his problems. Both Monisha and Nirode long for soothing words which can provide solution to their problems as Krishna did to Arjuna. This existential angst in Monisha assumes a fatal situation and ending her life seems to be the only solution for her to get rid of this meaningless existence.

There is another minor character of Professor Bose with “elderly, whiskered face” who is not a professor. He writes children’s textbooks. He often quotes from and is fond of telling stories from *Panchtantra* for substantiating his views. The *Mahabharata* and *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* constitute another strong fascination and form a contrast with Kafka, Camus and Baudelaire.

Anita Desai believed that the “literature should deal with the most enduring matters, what matters is the psychic and the existential reality of the characters.” The uncertainty of ‘to be or not to be’ haunts the mind of Anita Desai’s characters. Same was the case with Arjuna before the battle of Kurukshetra. To ease his dilemma, Krishna showed him the path of balance and restraint. In the eleventh chapter of *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, named *Vishwarupadarshan Yoga*, Krishna very directly tells Arjuna to be his ‘instrument’ (Nimitt) and merely act the part of the hero, and claim all the glory and success. In fact, to every thinking man, this truth that we are at best merely the instrument in His hands is obvious. It is our egotistical self which makes us unable to accept this plain truth. This rejection of truth is the root cause of our predicament.

Anita Desai’s characters represent the modern humans who are looking hopefully at the different philosophies of the world, those of Kafka, Camus and others to provide solution to their existential questions and lift them out of their predicament. They desire peace and solution in life. But their *gurus* are unable to provide it to them. They are detached, self-centred and remain aloof from their surroundings. The middle-class intellectuals of the city of Calcutta find themselves trapped between the aristocratic materialists. These sensitive souls find that their society is beyond any improvement and there is no hope for redemption.

Coming back to the philosophy of *Gita* and the concept of self-surrender, the only cure for this kind of society seems to be service of the world by man with awareness of His constant presence. The concept of self-surrender as laid down by Krishna in *Gita* is not just an idle dream advocated for escaping the sickening realities of the world. Swami Chinmayananda states that the concept of self-surrender “is essential for man to raise his calibre and temper so as to work efficiently and achieve success in the world.” (837)

It is *Gita* only which is the answer to all the existential questions not only in the epic but also in the contemporary world and unravels all the mysteries of life. *Gita* provides us

with what path to follow and how to withdraw from the false by-lanes of existence. It ends with Arjuna openly declaring “I will do according to your word”, because in Gita, Krishna stands for “the Divine Spark of Existence manifested as pure intelligence.” (Chinmayananda 1344)

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