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V. Sunitha, M.A., M.Phil.

Utopia and Dystopia, Conflict Between Two Extremes –
An Appraisal of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*

Utopia and Dystopia, Conflict Between Two Extremes **An Appraisal of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock***

V. Sunitha, M.A., M.Phil.

Utopia, Dystopia and Maya

Utopia is an imaginary island represented by Sir Thomas More (1516) in a work called 'Utopia'. It is an ideally perfect place of excellence. On the other hand, Dystopia means an imaginary place or state in which everything is bad or extremely unpleasant.

Maya, the chief protagonist of the novel *Cry, The Peacock*, is an inhabitant of the dreamland Utopia. She is much occupied in illusion, fantasy and imagination that go with her name 'Maya'. Her husband Gautama, the reincarnation of Gautama Buddha, stands for real and actual world. His practical outlook to life is beyond Maya's self love and imagination.

If Maya is a Hedonist and epicurean, then Gautama is a Puritan. Gautama's philosophies and his adherence to Bhagavad Gita sound hellish and dystopic to her. Maya's ready submission to fantasies and reveries propels her in a dystopic land. Her fatuous supposition to the chimera ransacks her life.

The present paper makes transparent the incompatibility and detachment between the two extremes, Maya and Gautama, who were tied by the sacrosanct nuptials.

Story of Mismatched Couple

The novel unveils the story of mismatched couple Maya and Gautama where one implores for love and the other retreats from it. Their disposition, attitude, outlook and perspective to life stand poles apart. While Maya is over-emotional and highly strung, Gautama is calm, placid and phlegmatic. He is a diligent and industrious lawyer dedicated much to his profession than probing into the fanciful world of his wife. She embellishes and adorns the glory and beauty of the sensuous world with great diligence. Her excessive love of life with all its pleasure and rapture makes her delightful and fine. Her aesthetic appeal and ornamental tendency is inhospitable and unwelcoming to an empirical and feasible man Gautama. Her world is confined and restricted from external realities but Gautama is well reasoned, sound and intelligent man with a rational outlook to life.

Gautama's legal profession also attributes to his well proportioned nature. His philosophical and theoretical perspective is antithetical to Maya's temperamental and passionate nature. His dispassionate temperament proclaims objectivity and detachment to his wife who is conjured up by the thoughts of love and attachment. She obtains inexorable gratification if she is entangled in the love of her husband. But her exuberant and overcharged passions get neutralized by Gautama's rational mind because "She experiences the world through the senses while Gautama looks at it through reason and commonsense" asserts Jain. (28).

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The whole novel is a sad reflection of two mutually exclusive temperaments bonded in the sacred icon of marriage. This ill-assorted and incongruous couple is destined to disintegrate and collapse at the end.

The Names Chosen for the Characters – An Intriguing Selection

The novelist's selection of the names of her characters itself is highly evocative to explore their attitude.

Maya is conjured up by the thoughts of *Maya*. Gautama's name evokes the image of reputed saint Gautam Buddha who proclaims to shun the physical pleasures of life to attain nirvana. He always views nothing subjectively, nothing with passion and always looks like Buddha to whom physical pleasures of life are of no value. His strict adherence to profession leaves no room for Maya's fulfillment of emotional urges. He is much absorbed in attending his clients and money making rather than to probe into the demented psyche of his wife.

Gautama has his own business to worry about and take care of its progress contrary to Maya whose only business is to yearn for his presence, crave for his love and worry about the foretold prophesy that dictates death to any one of the couples in their fourth year of marriage. He is a balanced man uninhibited or unrepressed by feelings or sensations. His self-discipline and firmness in attitude has sharpened him to a yogi, who is unappreciative and unresponsive to worldly pleasures. Aloofness and dispassion is what he practices and enjoys in imposing the same to his passionate wife. Husband and wife have different notions and refuse to abide and pay reverence to another's feelings or thoughts. Mutual understanding, companionship and co-operation are decimated from their married life.

The Basics of Life

It is not only food, clothing and shelter enough for human survival. Sex and lovemaking are also the 'basics of life' is Maya's argument. Her affluent life at Gautama's with its comforts and luxuries fail to satisfy her emotional and sexual needs.

Maya's life would have turned into a different angle if she is married to a younger man who can satisfy her sexually. Gautama's age and his attitude to sex remains an intractable difficulty to her. Her seductive ways has no power to hold him in her trap of love because Gautama is neither generous to shower his love nor is interested to acquire it from his wife. He is an ascetic indifferent to human affairs.

Love has many connotations like deep affection, fondness, tenderness, attachment etc. Maya aspires for earthly and secular love whereas to Gautama it means worship and devotion. He wishes for a supernatural and ineffable love that is on the far side of mundane existence.

Who is Responsible? What Brings the Sorrow?

The root cause of distance and separation between the couple is Gautama's numbness to the exorbitant charm and attractiveness of the natural world. His innate disposition is to remain unappreciative of anything around him. Neither the sight of the cabaret dancers nor his wife's allurements, nor the enchanting beauty of nature has the power to exhilarate him.

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Contrary to his character, Maya easily gets aroused by birds, animals or celestial bodies. Everything reminds her of sex. She muses, “We belonged to separate worlds and his seemed the earth that I loved so much scented with jasmine, coloured with liquor, resounding with poetry and warmed by amiability. It was mine that was hell, torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment-these were the walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long; death was certain”(88) underlines their incompatibility and conflict.

Loneliness and Isolation

Maya craves for Gautama’s presence in her moments of isolation. Gautama’s fondle and fondness would introduce her to a world of merriment and amusement with bright colours. In this exalted state she would forget the ominous and sinister thoughts of the prediction. A slight touch of his fingers is enough to take her into heaven and bring bliss and ecstasy. She feels inebriated and intoxicated under the influence of his love which makes her sullen and gloomy life bloom and blossom into a garden of fragrant roses and she wishes to inhale this aroma throughout her life.

Each and every moment of her life would be gratified and blessed with fortune if Gautama’s tender love becomes a part of her being. When Gautama cuddles and cares for her she acknowledges him with gratefulness and covets that his love should not be hampered by any external factors. It is because the supreme happiness that she attains in the process is inequivalent to anything in the world.

It is a complete unification of body, mind and the spirit. Maya’s overabundant imaginative faculty and fascination is no doubt enterprising and enthralling. It can form a good stuff for fairy tales with prince and princess but the feasibility of it is highly impossible especially with a pragmatic lawyer Gautama overloaded with the thoughts and philosophies of estrangement and detachment. Maya’s self-esteem is severely bruised when Gautama do not respond according to her expectations.

Kaleidoscopic View

Life is kaleidoscopic and scintillating to Maya as against Gautama’s numbness. She disrobes and uncovers herself to beguile Gautama and coaxes him to play the game of love. She surmises that her undressing would certainly cajole Gautama’s sexual urge and yearns for his appreciation of her physical beauty. She hopes that her charm and luster of youth would captivate and pull him for sexual act which would abate her blazing sexual desire.

Poignantly, Gautama’s drowsiness and insensitive sleep is the rejoinder for her preparation. His deadpan expression for her unclad body incites her fury. She conceives her wedlock as a deadlock to her desires, imaginative faculty and creativity. She becomes sad and helplessly thinks of her weakness for him. As her attempts to excite him fails she becomes conscious of his unyielding nature and detests her own state. If Gautama agrees to touch her it is not to quench his sexual thirst but only to gratify his wife. His is a world far away from the sensual world of his wife.

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Goel observes, “It is difficult for the lawyer Gautama—a man of reason, logic and practical worldly knowledge to realize the intensity of Maya’s needs and then to bend down to her requirements.”(23)

Gautama’s need is to make Maya a matured woman withstanding the realities of existence and connecting her internal and external that has been deviated. He, in fact, expects her to develop devotion to his creed on dispassion by negating her exaggerated passion on him. It is implausible to Maya who has exorbitantly adhered to lust and love. She can even become a vagrant provided Gautama is generous enough to contribute his love alms for her. She aspires for his emotional intimacy that would stand as a rock in the sea of her troubles. If Gautama would have sanctioned her needs she would not have become a hapless victim of mania. She would not have metamorphosed into a rudderless ship. The controversy between the couple is felt throughout the novel. Nursing their own convictions the couple stride in divergent paths not bothered about the needs of other and finally meet up with death.

An Antagonistic Life

Gautama and Maya are antagonistic in many aspects. They both are adamant and refuse to merge with each other. Gautama is scornful and terse while Maya is verbose and admiring. Maya experiences a sense of fatalism that keeps her fear at hand. She is not bold enough to be prepared for whatever fate had in store for her. On the other hand, Gautama and his family, “would hoot with derision at the mention of superstition, with pity and scorn for those who allowed their lives to be ruled and ruined by them”(67). Pathetically, Gautama’s death is caused by the unfounded belief of Maya. Both the couple has become the victims of marital dissonance and hold responsibility for their despicable wedding.

Maya, unable to attain Gautama’s love, is driven by passions, emotions, instincts, desires etc. She suffers from the conflicting experiences and sensations of heat and cold, happiness and sorrow, success and failure, union and separation, from what is desirable and undesirable. She becomes restless driven by the passions and emotions of her unstable and undisciplined mind. Maya, an amalgamation of Mayas’ of the concrete jungle cogitates about the real world as a land of enchantment, a land of promise, land of prosperity, fairy land etc. Deluded Maya pursues wrong aims, indulges in wrong actions and finally kills Gautama and commits suicide at the end.

Dimple and Maya

Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist Dimple in her novel **Wife** is akin to Maya in many aspects. Her feelings to revel in ecstasy and euphoria are mismatch to her husband’s demeanour. It is this which prompts her to exterminate him from life. Like the astrologer’s portend that regulates Maya, Dimple is victimized by the morbid and violent opera culture of America. It creates for her a world of fantasy in which she practices the very act of murdering without even aware that she is actually committing the murder.

Celebration of Marriage

Marriage is a bond and union of two different minds where integration, acceptance and adjustment of feminine and masculine principles sanction glee into the married life of the

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couple. SreeRamulu beautifully views his ideas on the crux of marriage. “Marriage is a bond beyond biology. It is two hearts indissolubly tied together. A husband is in an ideal marriage so much similar to his wife that she loses herself in him; and a wife is so much the part of the husband that he rediscovers himself in her. In other words marriage is a means to find the matrimonial mirror image. Conjugal bliss is the culmination of the inexpressible ecstasy of the human heart resulting from the quest for the conquest of one’s own lost self.”(89)

Today’s modern couples are hardly aware of the aforesaid concept on marriage. The rupture and parting is mushrooming day by day. It is to be understood by all that marriage is a delicate and intricate bond between the two. Meager variance and squabble would be strong enough to dispartate the couple.

The modern couple should be prepared to lead the conjugal life at any cost. Patience, forbearance are the necessary virtues in the matrimonial bond. Hand clap cannot be audible unless both hands unite and coincide with each other. Similarly a sound life cannot be lead unless the couple adheres to the above said conceptions. “Metaphorically, the novel calls for reconciliation and balance, communication and understanding between spouses. Since marriage implies a space of sharing and mutual risk, both the partners have the responsibility to flow towards and into each other, so that they can avert tragedy. If this is not possible they should part without violence, without killing each other.” is the valid statement of Kher (23).

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