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The Enigmatic Maya in Anita Desai's
Cry, The Peacock

B. Chitra, M.A., M.Phil.

Anita Desai – A New Dimension to Indian Novel

Anita Desai is one of the renowned novelists working in English in the sub-continent. For K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, she has added “a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers in India.”¹ (Seshadri 50). Her novels catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the ever-beckoning modern promise of self-gratification and self-fulfillment. She has given a new dimension to the Indian novel in English by shifting the emphasis from outer to inner reality.

Feminine Sensibility of Anita Desai

Ann Lowry Weir examines the feminine sensibility of Desai’s states: “Anita Desai is the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness... she gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists.”² (Dodiya 3). Her artistic skill primarily lies in the delineation of the psychic conditions of the characters who often indulge in a self-analysis and discover themselves in the process. The hall mark of Desai’s fiction is “to focus on the inner experience of life.”³ (Dodiya 6).

Psychological Exploration of Women Characters

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A study of her novels reveals that she is interested in the exploration of psychological states of her women characters. Prasanna Sree emphatically comments that she “penetrates psychologically deep into the inner working of women and externalizes their passive reaction”⁴ (Sree 22). Desai uses the fiction as a site for studying the role of women in society and there by indirectly offer a critique of the existential social set up that marginalizes women.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* ideally deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonist and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The protagonist Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much, married her off to his own lawyer friend Gautama who was a middle aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband.

Electra Complex

The climax of the story lies when Maya's attachment with her father further develops into an "Electra Complex" which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated, Maya then looks back to the days of her childhood spent with her father.

This reminiscence of those long lost days serves as the defense mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflicts. She therefore relaxes her tension, eases her frustration by pondering unconsciously on how "peacock breaks their bodies" in order to relieve their own pain. Here comes the sense of violence, the feeling of killing or get killed which engulfs Maya. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impassiveness and indifference weaves the story of *Cry, the Peacock*.

Struggle Within Maya's Mind

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai reveals the grim psychological battle fought in the mind of Maya. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and shows little inclination to take up adult responsibilities even though she has been married for four years to Gautama, a successful and prosperous lawyer. She feels that nobody in the world cares for her. Besides, her pet dog Toto's sudden death throws her completely off her balance. She is filled with neurotic anxiety, and says: "It was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair." (Desai 8).

Predictions by an Albino Astrologer

The reason for Maya's neurosis is the prediction by the albino astrologer of the death either of her or her husband within four years of their marriage. It is apt to quote K. Meera Bai who rightly observes: "The opening of the novel wherein Maya is shown to be washing her eyes in order to wash off the sight of Toto's dead body gives a glimpse of Maya's obsessive compulsive neurosis."⁵ (Sujit 5). The frightening words of the prediction ring in her ears and unnerve her. She is so haunted by the prophecy that she begins to think of death of either of them.

A Trapped Bird

Maya's marriage with Gautama, a man, double of her age, takes place out of her desire to please her father. She is forced to live in Gautama's house and bear the tortures of her husband and in-laws. She compares her mental condition with the birds and creepers, leaves and clouds of dust. At several places Anita Desai uses the symbol of peacock to show the anguish of Maya. R.S. Sharma states: "The iterative symbolism of the peacock suggests Maya's struggle for life-in-death and death-in-life."⁶ (Sujit 6) Maya's position is like a trapped bird. She cannot escape from her present. Her childlessness adds to her miseries.

Gautama is pragmatic, unromantic, unsentimental and believes in 'detachment' on every count. Maya on the other hand, is a highly sensitive, gifted with poetic imagination and a neurotic sensibility. The death of Toto which upsets Maya is nothing to Gautama. This is suggestive of the lack of any possible emotional communication between them.

Communication Gap between Husband and Wife

Communication gap between husband and wife is felt throughout the novel Maya and Gautama disagree with each other even over trifles. Although their marriage has been a complete failure, they continue to be together, leading a mechanical life. Maya herself reflects upon her marriage which has become a misalliance:

It was discouraging to reflect as how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and, therefore, neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again. (Desai 45).

Unable to establish a rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her 'arid existence', Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature in this helpless and indifferent world. Sudhakar T. Sali in his book titled Anita Desai's Female Protagonists quotes: "The incompatibility of character stands revealed-Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels even without touching."⁷ (Sali 11).

Thus Maya's unique temperament, her peculiar relationship with her father, her unfulfilling matrimonial ties, Toto's death, the astrologer's prophecy, her childlessness, push her slowly and surely to a state of mental disorder.

Father-Daughter Relationship

Father - daughter relationship is the leitmotif of the novel. Maya suffers from father fixation. Her neurosis is the result of her love - wish which she transfers from her father to her husband and which remains unfulfilled. She hopes to prolong the relation with her father in the same spirit as it used to be, as she clearly perceives that Gautama will not play the father for her⁸ (Paniker 47). Her neurosis is further heightened by her awareness of her horoscope and the macabre prediction of the albino astrologer, which leads to her killing Gautama and her committing suicide.

Neurosis

In spite of her neurosis, Maya commands sympathy of the readers because she reminds one of Nora of A Doll's House.

“...our home's been nothing but a play pen. I've been your doll- Wife here, just as at home I was papa's doll-child.”⁹ (Pandey 13).

Maya's marriage with Gauthama was more or less a marriage of convenience. Her marriage was only serves to highlight her total involvement with her father. She constantly thinks of him and unconsciously searches him in her husband. However, it is a fact that her helplessness and an intense longing for love are the root cause of her trouble. Besides, her childhood world of fantasies and adult world of realities clash, and create imbalance in her life. She expresses her agony with the help of the imagery of withered flowers.

Corpses of Today

Madhusudhan Prasad in his *Anita Desai: The Novelist* briefly alludes to Maya as a neurotic figure. “In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonists, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity.” (Bhatnagar 22). The lifeless roses and carnations on her dressing table "belonging to yesterday, corpses of today," are very much like her desires. Maya's desire of sexual union is clearly perceptible in her contemplation and exultation on seeing the male and female papaya trees in the garden.

... I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the female papaya tree and twine about her slim trunk and the firm-petalled blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the male.....Besides, If I could pleasures in contemplation of the male papaya, how much more food delight in this male companion, surely. (Desai 92).

Maya finds herself spiritually ruined, and out of frustration she condemns Gautama to death and burdened with death haunted by self-contempt, self-accusation, self-hate and drags herself into complete darkness of the world of the insane.

As the very title suggests, *Cry, the Peacock* is about Maya's cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama.

Imperfection and Unfulfillment

Sashi Paul in her article titled **Alienation to Existentialism: A Study of Anita Desai's Novels** states:

Desai's protagonists are highly sensitive and terribly bewildered by the burden of living helplessly in the society with absurd realities. Therefore, her fictional world is full of imperfection and unfulfillment, hankering and helplessness, agony and anger, struggle and surrender. She is essentially a novelist of existential concerns.¹¹ (Misra 96-97).

Crying Peacock

The peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's agonized cry for love and life of involvement. Names of the characters in the novel are also symbolic. Gautama, as his name suggests believes in philosophy of detachment. Gautama is a dry type of matter of - fact person who shuns all sentimentality.

On the other hand, Maya, as her name suggests, is too much in love with life. She delighted herself in the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes. Meenakshi Mukherjee who believes that imagery reveals the author's natural mode of awareness, commends Anita Desai for her distinctive style and intensely individual imagery. It is marked by "sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness and for the sound of words." (Dodiya 54). Thus, Maya and Gautama stand poles apart in their attitude to life.

Dance Images

Desai has employed many dance images in this novel. The first powerful dance image is that of the 'Kathakali' dancer.

It was the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, masked, with heavy skirts swirling, feet stamping, eyes shooting beams of fire. It was a phantom colours, rose out of realms of silence into one of thunderous drumming. (Desai 29).

The image of cabaret dance obtains a truly remarkable importance when placed side by side with that of the bear dance changing the frenzy of Maya's subconsciousness into a contemporary reality. These cabaret dance and bear dance indirectly present the cruel exploitation in the society. Accordingly these should not be treated as scattered dance

images; these are, in fact, victim-and-victimizer images which are used on an experimental level.

Another dance image in the novel is the familiar dance of Shiva which mythologically signifies the dance of death. In this novel, it is "a symbol of liberation" a way out of the embarrassing existentialist predicament in which Maya finds herself. The unforgettable dance image of the peacocks, figured in chapter three and later on referred to in chapter six, part II, of this novel, is in fact the most pungent of all the images. The title of the novel too refers to this very thrilling dance of the peacocks at the advent of the monsoon: "pia, pia "they cry" "Lover, Lover, Mio, Mio, I did, I die ..." (Desai 95).

In fact, lovelorn ecstatic cry of the peacock runs parallel to the main thread of the story. The cry which in auspiciously suggests the ecstasy of life has the finality of death. Gautama, through a father-substitute for Maya, is also her lover who wretchedly fails not only to feel the intensity of her anguished soul, and thus when she commits suicide in the end she, in a way, symbolically substantiates the agonized cry of the peacock.

A Brilliant Study of the Abnormal

Thus *Cry, the Peacock* is a brilliant study of the abnormal psychology of its neurotic protagonist Maya. She is an enigma. Her moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed effectively by Desai. Her fears, insecurity, strange behaviour, loneliness, and sufferings indicate how Desai has succeeded in portraying her female protagonist Maya making her one of the most enigmatic characters in Indian fiction.

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