

Love and Spirituality in Anita Desai's 'Cry, the Peacock' and Rabindranath Tagore's 'Breezy April'

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the first non-European and the first Indian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He was awarded the prize for *Gitanjali*. Tagore was a multi-faceted personality who not only composed poems, verses, short stories, novels etc but also sketched and painted with equal brilliance. As a flag-bearer, he presented the best of India to the West and vice-versa. In *Breezy April*, Tagore combines romanticism with spiritualism. On the other hand, Anita Desai (born-1937) is the youngest among the women novelists of eminence in India. The spiritual aspect of human life is at the centre of attention in her works. Women protagonists of fragile exterior and strong interior take the lead in Anita Desai's works of fiction. Spirituality is an integral part of most of her works. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Desai minutely depicts both love as well as deep spiritual intricacies.

Keywords – Love, Spirituality, Breeze, April, Maya, Gautama

In most of his poems, Rabindranath Tagore - the poet, completely surrenders himself to God. He feels that God is omniscient. Tagore's philosophy is related to the finer and

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quintessential knowledge of anything. He was influenced by both the British and Indian traditions. The Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhakti cult had an impact on Tagore. The works of Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson left a deep imprint on his mind. Tagore usually wrote in a lyrical framework. He wrote numerous poems in praise of the Divine Reality.

The spiritual aura in the works of Anita Desai can be easily overlooked by any casual reader. Its beauty can be relished only by the keen observers. Spiritualism is prevalent in almost all her works. However, it still remains an important aspect of her creations, which has been the least highlighted. Desai's women protagonists are mostly presented in a forlorn environment. This loneliness is depicted as a cherished treasure. Women of different age groups are depicted; from a little school-goer to an elderly grandmother. These women are however clouded by an emotional trauma. It sometimes leads to a fatal ending – a violent death; as is the case in *Cry, the Peacock*.

Tagore is neither as mystic as William Blake nor as sensuous as Sri Aurobindo. Rather he treads an ultra-fine middle path. The world of God of Tagore was closely associated with the human life. For him, love was spiritual but in consonance with human love. There is always an urge in his writings to feel the divine presence. He was less a visionary and more a poet who felt. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "What is material and what is not? When the world is the end and God is the means to attain that end, that is material. When God is the end and the world is only the means to attain that end, spirituality has begun." (The Complete Works, 66) Union with the divine is the ultimate goal. Tagore believed in pantheism. He believed that God pervades every object of Nature. His belief can be summed up as; God gave his soul to nature. Then nature gave its soul to its each and every object, and man should be in communion with nature; resulting in the ultimate union with

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God. Anita Desai presents intense trials and tribulation of her women protagonists. This trial by fire gives expression to a deeper spiritual presence.

Spiritualism is a sense of connection and search for something which is higher than our own selves. It lends meaning to our existence. The healing power of the April breeze which rejuvenates life after the heartless destruction of winter is unique. Nature's rebirth in spring and the blossoming of love is interlinked. Absorbing all the negativity, the breeze with its soft touches brings about positivity signalling rebirth.

Breezy April is an ode by Rabindranath Tagore. According to M.H. Abrams, an ode "denotes a long lyric poem that is serious in subject and treatment, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure." (Abrams, 203) Whereas "a lyric is any fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought and feeling." (Abrams, 157) An ode is a lyrical poem addressed to someone or something. The poem consists of four quatrains. It is composed in free verse with pliant rhythm. Tagore glorifies the power of nature through symbolic, metaphoric but simple language. The magical rejuvenating power of spring breeze and its spiritual love is presented here.

The poet presents before us three personifications of April. Firstly, April is like a mother – as poet refers to birth in Nature's world. It is comparable to John Keats' *Ode to Autumn*. Keats personified autumn season into a woman and the sun as a man. The union of the two sets into motion the ripening process in Nature. Secondly, April has been personified as a fairy spirit. April as a lover is the third personification. Tagore assumes the persona of a Tree in the whole poem:

Breezy April, vagrant April,

Rock me in your swing of music;

Thrill my branches with enchantment

At your touch of sweet surprises. (*Breezy April*, 1-4)

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April is the month of spring. In this month cool breeze blows, which is very pleasant. There is blossom in the world of nature – new leaves, buds. This is the season of Rebirth in the Nature’s world. Tagore is happy as rebirth is taking place in his life and time. Tagore addresses the month of April as breezy and uncontrolled. Here we are reminded of another famous representation of this very month:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour; (Prologue, 1-4)

Through the first four lines from *The Canterbury Tales: General Prologue*; Geoffrey Chaucer presents the image of renewal and rebirth in the season of spring. The sweet showers of April penetrate the dry earth of March. This hydrates the roots which in turn sprout flowers out of the ground indicating rebirth. Chaucer says that after the harsh winter, weather becomes agreeable in April. Hence, it is the most suitable time for pilgrimages and storytelling after the lengthy winter sleep. The visiting of shrines in distant holy lands also symbolize spiritual cleansing and rebirth after the stagnation of winter.

An entirely contrasting image of April is presented in *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot. “April is the cruellest month,” (Eliot, 1) Eliot describes April as the most brutal month. It is the period of regeneration after a prolonged numb winter. Revival although gratifying brings back painful memories of the glorious past. With a confrontation between the past and the present, Eliot displays the present state of decay. Eliot describes our emotional wasteland. He perceives the people as spiritually dead. They are threatened by the prospect of rain which can infuse new life, a life that spring heralds. Whereas, in *Breezy April*, Tagore displays an affectionate picture of April and adores it spiritually.

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The 2nd line carries an image of a mother rocking her baby asleep by singing. Here, April has been personified as a mother. Just as a mother caresses and accompanies her baby to sleep, similarly the slight breeze of April weaves magic on the poet with its motherly charm. In the 3rd line Tagore has been personified as a Tree. The phrase ‘my branches’ – equates every limb of his as a leaf, twig, or branch of a tree. The poet requests Mother Nature to swoon his mind by rocking it with music. This sweet breeze feels like soft touches; it’s so soothing, so comforting. It has been compared to the affectionate consoling of a mother. The feathery touch has magical powers which can rejuvenate the branches of the tree. This enchanted touch can bring forth manifold changes in nature. It is also a fairy like charmer who can thrill and captivate his entire being.

The poet is welcoming April with open arms and with a heart full of warmth. Its enchanting power changes the nature entirely and creates a new era. The soft and gentle breeze of April excites him. Swinging branches and rustling leaves symbolize the thrill within the narrator at the onset of spring. This feeling of intense happiness delights him. Tagore wishes that every part of his body be filled with eternal spiritual bliss. He says:

In my life-dream by the wayside

You come startling me from slumber,

Wilful in your mood fantastic

Courting, teasing, and inconstant. (Breezy April, 5-8)

During winter, the cold and snow bring the entire world to a stand-still. Even general human activity is reduced during this unfavourable weather. This is comparable to human sleep. Many trees shed their leaves and dearth of agriculture makes the entire creation appear barren. After winter, the breeze of April ushers in a new life. Each and every thing touched by the breeze is spiritually awakened.

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Human life is a long journey. In this serene atmosphere; when man gets tired; he takes shelter under tree's shade by roadside and then takes a nap. Similarly, whenever the poet feels relaxed, at that time the April breeze visits him. While he is in deep sleep, its kind touch awakens him up with a surprise. The soft, gentle breeze symbolise the pleasant April weather. Personifying April, Tagore tells us that it is in a strange mood and wishes to do something. In such a playful mood, the breeze teases the speaker. This has been compared to the wooing of a lover by its beloved. This inconstant and diverse behaviour pleases the poet. 8th line gives us a beautiful example of consonance with the repetition of consonant sounds in "courting, teasing, and inconstant." The joyous breeze teasingly wakes up human life after the merciless wintry season. He observes:

Breezy April, vagrant April,

Living with my lonesome shadows,

I know all your fitful fancies

Leafy language, flitting footsteps. (Breezy April, 9-12)

Despite being a social animal; man is inherently lonely. His sole constant companion is his shadow. It stays forever by his side right from birth to death. Tagore calls himself a lonely person; with his shadow being the solitary companion. Tagore's famous Bengali patriotic song "Ekla Chalo Re" echoes here. The song was originally titled Eka, meaning 'alone' in Bengali. This song states forth that if no one heeds to our call, then we must traverse our path all alone with self belief. (Ekla Chalo Re) The ever-presence of the divine spiritual being by our side is addressed here. In the journey of our life we are never alone. The situation may be adverse or favourable, but God – our spiritual guardian is always with us.

Tagore once again addresses April as wandering and full of breeze. In spite of being forlorn, he is well aware of the sudden impulses of the calm wind of spring. The speaker

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perceives its peculiar fancies coming now and then. As the kind breeze flows through the tree; its leaves are stirred up into mobility. This lush green motion is comparable to the tripping feet movement of the approaching spring. When the breeze passes through the leaves, a rustling sound is created. Tagore perceives this musical sound as the language of the tree – another example of personification. He can fathom this verdant language; and discern this benign presence of spring by the sound of its skipping footsteps – April is once again personified as a human. The desolate man is filled with intermittent desire by the tender April breeze signalled by its approaching footsteps. The poet feels:

All my boughs break into blossom,
At your passing breath and whisper,
All my leaves break into tumult
Of surrender at your kisses. (Breezy April, 13-16)

Tagore – the Tree is the beloved. Breezy April – Nature is the lover. Tagore as a Tree is in spiritual union with Nature. A kind touch of the breeze of April aids the branches, twigs and leaves of trees to flourish and prosper. Referring himself as a tree, the narrator says that flowers suddenly blossom on his branches i.e. his limbs. The breeze by its gentle touch can blossom the tree. It possesses magical powers to bring about changes in nature. It symbolises sprouting of deep love in his heart. This pompous effect of April on nature suffuses human spirit with fresh life and new found love.

The breeze is personified here once again. Tagore can feel its breath. It is so close to him that he can listen to its whispers. This soft blowing of wind is compared to the calm breathing and almost inaudible whisper of a human being. As the gently blowing breeze comes in contact with the tree; its leaves are set in a haphazard motion. The poet visualizes it as a violent commotion. Tagore says that he completely surrenders himself to the April breeze. He says that he identifies with the tree. This surrender makes the tree ecstatic and as a

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result all its parts – leaves, twigs, etc. start singing together in a chorus. The entire being of the speaker is filled with immense spiritual pleasure owing to this surrender.

Kisses symbolise love. When a lover cajoles her beloved; at first the beloved is shy. She tries to coil. Then she surrenders. This surrender is a response in feminine emotion. Nature completely surrenders to the touch of the breeze. This benign touch of the musical breeze is personified as kisses. It symbolizes spiritual love transcending human emotion. Tagore completely surrenders himself to this affectionate breeze of spring. It signals the passing of cold, inhospitable aura and the beginning of a pleasing ambience filled with warmth in man's life. Almighty's perpetual presence and the poet's delight in the witnessing the unmatched beauty of nature in spring is palpable. Here, earthly love is transformed into spiritual love.

The Indianness in the prose style of Anita Desai, her vision and striking originality make her characters appear lively. She is adept in delineating actual Indian life experiences closest to reality. Anita Desai attempts to paint a scenic spiritual landscape in most of her novels. Her works stand firm with deep roots in soil of Indian ethos and culture. This is from where her Spiritualism emerges. Her lively characters as well as the spiritual scenery make her creations unique.

Anita Desai portrays weak female leads. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*; is one such character. She is sensitive and unstable on one hand. On the other she is aesthetic and instinctive. Owing to her sensitive outlook, Maya appreciates the beauty around her. She is in perfect communion with nature. She loves and revels in the lap of Mother Nature. Enjoying the presence of trees, plants, flowers and fruits; beneath the all-encompassing sky with all its seasons; Maya's free spirit finds its fullest expression. Her husband Gautama stands in stark contrast to her personality. He is a practical man. Carrying a rational outlook, Gautama is insensitive to ephemeral beauty. His primary concern is with the absolutes.

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The names of both the characters bear a symbolic as well as a spiritual reference. Maya means 'illusion'. Gautama comes from 'Gautama Buddha' – the Enlightened One. Gautama Buddha was successful in conquering or transcending the 'maya' of this mortal world. The Buddhist philosophy of the renunciation of the worldly pleasures is indicated here. Hence the names itself symbolize polar opposites and certain irreconcilability.

The beauty of this creation gives wings to Maya's dreams. Being fully absorbed in this world of senses she enjoys herself. Her husband Gautama, being a rationalist; entirely rejects this outlook. An astrologer's prophecy plays a significant role in the final outcome of this story. He predicts that between Maya and Gautama, one must die. This deadly prediction torments Maya to the core. She asks herself:

Am I gone insane? Father! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one.
I am dying and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I will never sleep again. There is no rest any more – only death and waiting. (Cry, the Peacock, 98)

Being in an immensely disturbed mental state she decides to kill Gautama. Maya's deteriorating contact with her husband is summed up in the words, "There was no bond, no love, hardly any love. And I could not bear to think of that." (Cry, the Peacock, 108) Maya comes to a conclusion that since Gautama has rejected all those things which make human life worth living; hence her husband is already 'dead' both mentally and spiritually. In an act of mindless rage Maya pushes Gautama from a terrace. This insane act terminates her struggle with her own self as well as life in general. In our lives the goal is to win over the illusion of this world. However in *Cry, the Peacock*; Maya wins over Gautama both in the physical and in the spiritual world.

On being observed from the surface *Cry, the Peacock* appears as a river of sorrows. But hidden deep beneath are minute spiritual pebbles. And they convey an entirely different

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story. This unique spiritual outlook of Anita Desai makes her stand apart. In this multicoloured creation of God, the Omnipresent Being blesses us all through every single thing we come into contact with. The all pervasive Spirituality unfolds itself through Maya and Gautama.

Conclusion

Despite not being a believer in organised religion Anita Desai accepts the existence of a Higher Spiritual order. As a result of this belief both Maya and Gautama stand at the threshold of supreme spiritual experience. An entirely new psychological dimension to Indian English fiction has been added by Anita Desai. With the inner lives of her characters her main concern, she is probably the first Indian English novelist. She successfully shares the rich inner and spiritual life through her characters. On the whole, it can be safely asserted that Anita Desai has provided a firm voice to the spiritual part of human life. This is a distinct spiritual dimension.

Influence of Mirabai's poems is evident *Breezy April*. In her poems she herself is the beloved while Shri Krishna is the lover. Her personal relationship with Shri Krishna depicted in her poems transcends human plane and delves into the spiritual. In her poems, there is a sense of longing and anticipation on one hand; and of joy and ecstasy of union on the other. Complete surrender is a chief characteristic of Mirabai's devotional poetry. Hence a link can be drawn between this feature and the 16th line of *Breezy April* where Tagore completely surrenders to the love poured by the April breeze. Mirabai hopes to take her place beside Krishna in a pure spiritual union resulting in absolute bliss. (Mirabai, 2019) Similarly in the *Breezy April* poem mortal love is modified into spiritual love by Tagore.

“No, I will never shut the door of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.” (Senses, 7-8) The intense joy at the realisation of the Creator is

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manifested here. Tagore displays the cosmic divine romance with its profound variegated colours. Hence, his poetry is a fine blend of sensuousness and spirituality. He loved to feel the touch and witness the delight of God. The poet delighted in the joyous embrace of life. The spiritual power of nature and the sensuous enjoyments provided by it is subsumed in *Breezy April*. Tagore's philosophy rested with man's life in God's hands; and God being the only succour. We find the reflection of this philosophy in the poem.

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