

Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*: A Manifesto of Maya's Psychological Predicament

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Abstract

The present paper aims to explore Anita Desai's Debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* as a manifesto of Maya's psychological predicament. *Cry, the Peacock* is Anita Desai's first novel published in 1963. Anita Desai is one of the most known and distinguished Indian English novelists with worldwide fame and name. She is gifted with extraordinary penetration and sharpness of vision. Her works have provided her with worldwide fame and attention. The novelist is accomplished with prospecting psychological insight. Majority of Anita Desai's novels are the true and real manifesto of women's situation and predicament. *Cry, the Peacock* is a manifesto of Maya's psychological predicament. Desai's has very well explored the inner or interior world of woman, her anger, frustration and storm raging inside her mind and heart through the protagonist of this novel. The novelist's concern with the emancipation of Maya can be seen in almost every page of the work. She often peeps into the interior or inner psyche of her main characters instead of just focusing on the outer view. She is a master in composing the psychological novels. She very well knows how to explore the psychic depth of her main protagonists as well to analyse and examine their motives in details. The novelist is generally considered as a trendsetter in the area of psychoanalytic study. Through her extraordinary penetration of vision and sharpness, the novelist has brilliantly portrayed

the inner turmoil going on in the psyche of Maya who is a hysterical personality. She is successful in bringing out the frustration, loneliness and claustrophobia of Maya.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Manifesto, Psychological Predicament, Maya, Fantasy.

Introduction

Anita Desai is generally known as the Mother of the genre of Indian psychological novel. Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, she has written sixteen works of fiction. Her different and unique style of writing, her original and life like characters and her realistic subject-line make her writings praise worthy. Apart from writing, Anita Desai is also actively involved in teaching as well. She continues to be a source of inspiration for many young and aspiring writers in today's time.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is an interesting psychological analysis of the main heroine of the novel, Maya. The novel is considered to be a pioneer in the realm of English fiction. It is generally called as wonderful psychological work. In this novel, Anita Desai has successfully explored the interior or inner world of the main protagonist, Maya. She has also very well described the protagonist's insecurity, strange behaviour and fear. She has portrayed the psyche of Maya who is on the verge of madness or insanity. As well as the various factors responsible for her insanity. Her concern with the emancipation of Maya can be seen in almost every page of the work. The novelist has successfully painted the heroine's world of suffering, loneliness and alienation. She has used her protagonist to discuss the true situation and condition of women in India. As Cixous says,

"Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they

have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." (Cixous78)

The protagonist of the novel, Maya is portrayed as an introvert, neurotic character by the novelist. She is a hypersensitive woman. She is over pampered daughter of a rich

aristocratic father. She was born in a rich orthodox family. In her parents' house she enjoyed her life to the fullest. She has father obsession. As we go through the novel, we come to know that Maya's mother is no more and her brother has gone to the USA to shape his destiny, better and secure future. She has her father left with her. She spends her majority of time with her father. She is highly affectionate and pampered by him. She is so spoiled by her dad that we find her exclaiming to herself that no one in this world loves her so much as her dad does. She gets excess love and care from father which later spoils her marital life and later on her own life. In her mind, she creates her own lop sided view of life due to the excess of love she receives from her father. It makes her feel that the whole world is just a toy or puppet in her hands which is especially created for her only. She is of the opinion that she has full freedom to paint it with her favourite colours. She can dance it to her own tunes and rhythm.

After her marriage, Maya expects the same kind of affection, attention, love and care from her husband which she used to get from her father. She desires for the same carefree and jovial life after her marriage. She dreams that her husband will provide her same affection and attention like her father used to give her before her marriage. But things go in opposite and complete different direction for Maya. Her husband is an opposite figure of her father. He is a prosperous, busy lawyer engrossed in his work. He is an aged man. Her marriage with Gautam is not the marriage of love but it is the marriage of convenience. Maya's father and her husband's father were close friends. Their fathers share similar level and ways of thinking. Gautam used to come with his father at Maya's residence to meet her father. Maya's father thinks that Gautam is eligible bachelor and just perfect match for her daughter. So he presents his proposal that her daughter should marry Gautam. Both the family agree to his proposal. As a result, Maya gets married to Gautam, the husband of her father's choice. In real and true sense, the marriage of Maya and Gautam is not the marriage of love but it is the marriage of friendship between Maya's father and Gautam's father. Their marriage is totally

based on the friendship. After they get married, Gautam fails to fulfil Maya's expectations and demands. As a result, she feels frivolous and neglected. When her husband sees her condition of morbidity, he warns her that she is gradually becoming neurotic. He is of the opinion that Maya's father has a huge role in spoiling his daughter. He says;

“A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse word ... He is the one responsible for this - for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess- riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers - all the luxuries of the fairy tales ... What have you learn of realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man.”(Desai 115)

Throughout the novel, we find Maya searching the image of her own father in her husband. She is not at all satisfied with her unromantic and aged husband. She has created or developed a father fixation in her mind and heart. She notices that she is being avoided and neglected. Her feelings and emotions are not given due importance after her marriage. Her husband does not give her due importance and care. She finds herself being isolated and alienated in her house. This makes huge impact on Maya. She is terribly disturbed. She feels completely avoided, isolated and lonely.

The death of her loving pet Toto adds fuel to Maya's alienation and isolation. She gets more disturbed when she notices that her husband has nothing to do the death of her pet. His indifference towards Toto's death is more disturbing for her. At this time as well, she is busy in making comparison between her father and her husband. And she always finds huge difference in the personality of both of them. It results in the complete destruction of her marital life with her husband. She gets angry when she notices that her husband does not show any kind of sympathy to her at the death of her loving pet.

She is bound to her husband just because of the marital bond. Except marital bond, there is nothing in their marriage which ties them together. In her marriage, she experiences various

contradictions. In order to run away from the difference in her life after marriage, she tries to escape and hide herself in a complete different world of fantasy and imagination. Her life has changed completely. Her life is totally opposite to her previous in her father's house. When Maya gets married to Gautam, she comes to the realisation that life has totally taken a different turn. It is not at all same to her previous life. There is huge difference between the personality and thinking of the couple. Maya has deep attachment to her past life and childhood memories. While on the other hand, Gautama gives more importance to action because he is a man of rational nature. Her father's over protective love does not allow her to act maturely. To Maya, Gautama is cold, emotion less and feeling less. He is always preoccupied with his office work and does not pay any attention to her. He is completely a practical man. She is totally opposite and different from him.

The main reason for alienation between the husband and wife is that Maya is intensely involved in her own inner world of illusion. So she searches for an escape from this loveless and emotion less marital bond. In the opinion of Suresh Kohli, in the novel, *Cry, the Peacock* the novelist has very well exposed an influence or impression of conjugal incongruity or incompetence and unhappy married life of Maya and her husband Gautam. According to him:

“No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is.”(Suresh 34)

A deep study of the novel reveals that most of the times, Maya used to feel totally helpless and pathetic. She wants someone to share her inner trauma and tribulation. She wants help from her father, brother and husband. She cries for their support. She wants someone to take her out from psychological predicament. She gives a glimpse at her father, brother and husband and cries out loudly saying;

“Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying.” (Desai 84)

Maya trusts in astrology. Throughout the novel, she is haunted and pursued by the idea of early death predicted by an astrologer. The astrologer prophesized that one of the couple will die in strange and unnatural way. He told to Maya that when her marriage will reach its fourth year then a death will take place. It can be either hers or her husband's. She cannot free herself from the prophecy of the astrologer. She is so much disturbed that soon she slips into insanity. She finds herself trapped with the fear of astrologer's prophecy about her coming future. She finds herself confined in a false world of superstition. Her father does not take the prophecy seriously and defies it calling it false belief. But Maya on the other hand, is not able to separate herself from her superstition and her fear. This fear has made a permanent place in the mind and heart of Maya. When the fourth year of marriage arrives, she takes her fear and superstition to such an extreme and high level that it takes the form of sudden and horrible explosion.

In order to make herself burden free, she goes back to her past days and starts fantasizing about her childhood, good and loving memories related to it. She takes pleasure living in the world of fantasy. She is not able to connect and relate herself to the real world or reality around her. Fantasy acts as an important part of the whole novel. It is generally presented along with as well as in contrast to the real world.

Maya fails to accept her melancholy and dispirited environment and state around her. She tries to comfort herself psychologically by musing how a peacock stamps its feet and then strikes its nib or beak against any rock. And then she imagines how it tries to capture or hold the snake so that it can break its body. The peacock does it to get rid of its own body pain. She is inspired by peacock's actions which affects her own consciousness. She urgently craves for some sort of outlet to release her feelings and emotions. She comes under the direct

spell of phantasm or delusion and takes not time to kill her own husband. And later on steps forward to kill herself as well. Maya's unconscious desire of murdering her husband is nothing but her reaction of her own frustrations and isolation. She was frustrated because of the cold and unresponsive behaviour of her husband, unfulfilled desires, longings and unhappy and loveless married life. After killing her husband and then committing suicide, she gets to experience a sense of fulfilment. She finds herself relieved from perplexity and agitation of her past and abeyance of her present.

The novel is filled with conflict, inner frustration, violence, isolation and loneliness. And all these things take place in the life the protagonist of the novel, Maya. It is an interesting study of experiences of the protagonist's alienated and disturbed mind and soul. Her tragic flaw is her own hypersensitivity. And when her hypersensitivity combines with her various circumstances then problems generate. The combination of Maya's hypersensitivity and circumstances is the root cause of her disturbance and disharmony in her married life with Gautam. Dr. Sanjay Kumar comments regarding the psychological pain and agony of the protagonist in the novel. He is of the opinion;

“Maya's fear is aggravated as she fails to relate to Gautama her husband. Between the husband and wife; there exists a terrible communication gap as both of them seen to live in different worlds.” (Kumar 22)

Maya's own false belief is responsible for her sadness and madness. She is unable to face the truths of life. The character of Maya very well exposes the psychological problems of an Indian woman.

In this novel, Desai has made use of some symbols in order to represent the psyche of her protagonist. Here the sky represents the total mind of Maya. While daylight symbolizes the conscious mind of the heroine. On the other hand, her unconscious mind is represented by the night time.

As we read the novel, we come to realise that no one is responsible for the tragedy of Maya except herself. She is only person who is responsible for her own downfall. Throughout the novel, she feels isolated and alienated because she does not make efforts to clear her points and issues to her husband. She does not try to make herself clear in front of him. All the time, she feels herself haunted by the death fear. The death prophecy of the astrologer makes her feel terrible. In her daily life, she goes through several psychological and emotional disturbances. But she never discusses or reveals anything to her husband. Gradually, she starts losing control over her mind. Under the spell of the prophecy done by the astrologer that one of them will surely die after marriage, she decides to kill her own husband. She is of the opinion that her husband has spoiled her life. To Maya, he is already dead as she thinks that he has ignored all the things and emotions that contribute in making life worth living. She finally takes the horrible decision of murdering her husband and dares to take such a terrible step. She pushes her husband from a terrace and he dies. The guilt of killing her own husband is such that she cannot live a peaceful life. Her guilt forces her kill herself as well. In the end of the novel, Maya's guilt leads her to commit suicide.

Through the character portrayal of Maya, Desai has very effectively portrayed the complete transmutation of a hypersensitive personality into a neurotic individual. Anita Desai can be compared to Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf as far as the portrayal of characters is concerned. The novelist has nothing to do with the external weather or affairs but she is more interested in exploring the inner weather of her characters. For her outer reality has no value. She is more focused on the inner or internal conflicts of her heroine. She has very well analysed or examined the true psychological inner functioning of her protagonist, Maya. She has also presented her reactions. Here, in this novel, Desai has pictured the mental tensions and traumatic experiences that Maya undergoes in her life. The novelist has very well explored

the neurotic world of her heroine. She has laid stress and focus on the very subtle and minute images of Maya who is self- frustrated, tortured, trodden and toiled.

Through her women protagonist, Desai has tried to unwrap the real internal or inner truth of the post- modern age. She wants to awaken the tormented, inferior and neglected women in a country like India. The protagonist of the novel cannot adjust herself wither family, husband and other people around her. Isolation, Alienation and undesirable love take Maya to the clutches of violence and death . Through her, the novelist has exposed the abnormal treatment, psychological conflicts, alienaton, isolation generally faced by women in real life.

The novelist is of the opinion that in the present time, the main reason of loneliness and alienation of Indian women is failed marriage. Through the portrayal of Maya, Desai has tried to bring into the light those women in India who mostly fail to cope up with the conventional patriarchal society and order and who later on revolt helplessly and silently just like a pathetic and inferior human being. For Desai, existential situation or predicament of her women protagonist is the important and main issue in this novel. The novelist has portrayed Maya in order to bring into the light the repressed community of women in Indian society. Or we can say that the protagonist of this novel is the representative of the repressed community of women who generally suffers at the hands of the male dominated society. Desai has presented a kaleidoscopic picture of the deep and intensive mind of Maya's inner personality.Or we can conclude that the novelist has very well presented the manifesto of Maya's psychological predicament.

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