

Ordeals of Suppressed Womanhood in the novel '*Cry, The Peacock*' by Anita Desai.

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Abstract

Anita Desai in her attempts to capture the essence of a character who moves away from society and lives in a sort of exile portrays the struggles such an individual faces before they arrive at a reclusive solution. Their solitude is often either forced or voluntary. Her protagonists are primarily female and they struggle with a tremendous inner tension. *Cry, The Peacock* is the story of a young girl Maya trapped in a loveless marriage. Having lost her mother at a young age she looks for affection in other sources and becomes extremely sensitive. Brought up by a doting, over-protective father she believes in romance and love. Maya suffers from 'Electra Complex' which is partly the reason why she marries a man much older than her. But her husband Gautama turns out to be nothing like her father. He seems to be a cold, unfeeling intellectual who considers Maya a stubborn, spoilt child who needs to be disciplined and taught the meaning of real life. Their marriage shows visible signs of strain but Gautama remains unaware of it and also of the loneliness that he subjects Maya to through his condescending attitude. The present study is an attempt to explore how the novel portrays the ordeals of suppressed womanhood in the novel.

Keywords - Anita Desai, Failed marriage, Loneliness

Introduction

Literature is a mirror of society, it reflects how the society functions. Writers use literature to show the existing practices in society. They connect to their readers via the portrayal of characters that resemble actual people. Anita Desai is one such writer who uses her literary skills to represent people who have lost all hopes of happiness due to the negligence and sufferings they face. Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand India. She is one of the well-known literary writers in India. Her novels are particularly famous for capturing the hidden human psyche which defines a person's characters. She has been shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize, for *Clear Light Of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and has won Sahitya Akademi Award (India's National Academy of Letters Award) for her novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1978) and Padma Bhushan (India's Third highest Civilian Award) in 2014. What is most prominent in her novels is how artistically she portrays the issues of suppressed womanhood in her novels without ever resorting to defining suppression or oppression of women. Her novels have created a steer in the literary world for the clarity of thought with which she expresses her observations of society.

Anita Desai captures exquisitely how a person suffers when they aren't allowed to pursue their own path and are forced to follow a perceived "normal" path. In that process, their uniqueness becomes their fatal flaw which then turns them into disturbed personalities. Her characters are essentially rebels who are constantly in search of prospects to define the meaning of their life. The dull monotonous everyday life is not for them. Desai's characters are filled with a sense of adventure but they end up paying a high price seeking its actualization. This paper deals with the solitude and suppression of Maya, the protagonist of *Cry, The Peacock*.

Suppression of womanhood in *Cry, The Peacock*

Cry, The Peacock, published in 1963 is one the well received Indian novels written on the feminine sensibilities of a woman. It is a faithful description of Maya's inner world of conflicts arising out of her failed marriage, and her loneliness. She is seen as a young woman unable to reconcile with the harsh realities that became a part of her life. Her peace of mind is infiltrated by the cries of her neighbor's child as she remains bereft of the joys of motherhood. She is deeply disturbed by the cabaret dancers displaying themselves flamboyantly in their glittery garb while their expressions remain fixed with a mechanic

smile that had lost all warmth. She detects an unspoken love between Leila, Gautama's sister, and her husband when she sees her tending to his needs. These thoughts arise out of her own fruitless marriage with Gautama who despises her touching him. Desai has shown in this novel, the plight of a woman in the bonds of a loveless marriage.

Dr. M Rajeshwar in his "*Superstition and Psyche in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock*" takes a psychoanalytic course to study Maya's loneliness and, traces when and how her neurosis grows. He says that the reason behind Maya's progressed mental illness was a hidden desire. Subconsciously, she has a lot of suppressed hatred for Gautama for "*her unfulfilled instinctuality in the marital relationship*"¹. He says "*it is difficult to conjecture what course her psyche would have taken if she were married to a much younger man and had been satisfied sexually.*"² What we take from this is that the reason why Maya grows neurotic is because of her unfulfilled desires. Maya holds Gautama responsible for their failed marriage. He is a man of cold hard intellect who resists all things sensory claiming them to be the markings of an inferior mind. This makes him the polar opposite of Maya, a sensitive compassionate person and it leaves her trapped in a loveless marriage, where she feels,

"our marriage was based on a nobility forced upon us from outside" (Page, 38)

unable to form a rapport with Gautama she feels their marriage was only a pretence where they didn't actually share a relationship, but stayed together because marriage gives an external validation of nobility.

Babita in her "*Sociological critique on Anita Desai's Novel 'Cry, The Peacock'*"³, points out that Maya's loneliness arises mainly because of the distance Gautama maintains from her despite all her efforts to have a communion with him. Gautama strictly follows his perception of supreme male identity wherein he consciously and carelessly crumbles the identity of his female counterpart. This idea is acceptable because Maya herself points out that Gautama doesn't communicate with her.⁴ Her loneliness is quite apparent. She sees her neighbor

¹ Dr. M. Rajeshwar. *Superstition and Psyche in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock, The novels of Anita Desai: A critical study*, E d. Bhatnagar & Rajeswar M., New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. Page 14

² Dr. M. Rajeshwar. *Superstition and Psyche in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock, The novels of Anita Desai: A critical study*, E d. Bhatnagar & Rajeswar M., New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. Page 15

³ Babita. *Sociological critique on Anita Desai's Novel "Cry, the peacock"* , International Indexed & Referred Research Journal ISSN- 0974-2832, RNI-RAJBIL 2009/29954;Vol.IV. Issue-38. March 2012.

⁴ "The things we leave unsaid would fill great volumes; what we do say, only the first few pages of introduction." (Cry, The Peacock, 90)

pregnant and surrounded by children and feels her loneliness more acutely. She wants all that for herself but then remembers how Gautama does not even let her touch him.

Baljit Kaur Dhaliwal in her *"Feminism in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock"* refutes the notion of Maya being an original neurotic. She says rather *"It is difficult to agree with the critics who consider Maya to be a neurotic. She is perfectly normal and healthy woman. Her only sin is perhaps she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous"*⁵. She suggests that Maya is a normal woman who grows neurotic because of the total lack of understanding and communication she experiences at the hands of her husband. She faces the evil consequences of gender bias imposed by her partner which gives an ironic turn to her hopes and desires. Dhaliwal's idea is probable because Maya is quite an impressionable person. And it is possible that Gautama's rejection of her and her long stretches of isolation while she yearns for company, pushes her mental boundaries and makes her a neurotic.

Lack of communication and understanding in conjugal life due to the difference in perception, age or personality is an issue that often surfaces in the Indian institute of marriage. Here, we see a young girl married to her father's student who besides being much older than her was as different from her as could be. It is seen on various occasions that Gautama has a condescending attitude towards her which does not go unnoticed by Maya. Whenever she is distraught or wanting his affection he brings up the subject of either tea or philosophy or quotes passages from Gita to silence her. In her unbridled loneliness, she would reflect-

"His coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house." (Page, 14)

Maya's aspirations fail gradually passing through a phase of realisation and struggle to avoid the inevitable. Gautama feels she is inferior for all her passions, and he superior for his detachment and makes this point clear by rejecting her attempts to get close to him. Thus, failing as a companion to Maya. All her appeals to have his attention and wishes for him to attend to her needs appear whimsical to him. She clings to positivity till the furthest limit. For four years her love for him does not quell, for she detects his silent need of her. She *"enjoyed... his- speechless need of me"* (Page, 81). It is seen that even though Gautama brings a certain amount of order in Maya's life, like when he takes care of Toto, the dog's

⁵ Baljit Kaur, Dhaliwal. *Feminism in Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock*. Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research journal ISSN 2278-9529. Vol. I. Issue. IV. October 2012. Page 1

carcass; he remains cool and distant as a husband and is unable to understand her. After taking care of the dead dog, to which Maya was extensively attached he simply says,

"Come and drink your tea, and stop crying... It is all over. Come, won't you pour out my tea?"(Page, 8).

He is unable to understand the attachment Maya has for her pet. He fails to see that Maya because she was a childless woman loved her pet like a child. Maya was childless not because she was lacking in anything but due to the cunning fact that Gautama failed to understand the needs of a wife and even proved incapable of understanding the supreme truth of marriage and procreation. In the process, he crushes and transforms Maya into a neurotic patient.

Maya longs for her husband's company she wants more than just the *"matrimonial silences and conversation"* where she is supposed to dutifully listen to her husband and not object to anything he says. She wants *"not union but communion"*. She didn't just want him physically present but mentally as well. She wants him to understand her and want her as much as she wants him. But, Gautama just looks at her as a child-woman who didn't merit an entry in his superior world that dealt with far more important stuff. He conforming to his patriarchal ideology, wants her to be a traditional submissive wife. He maintains his distance from her for he sees no similarity between them. Even when she thinks they have some similarity and tries to join him he ignores her. She says,

"It was not they who turned me out. It was Gautama. Turning his back to me, he stood talking to a friend, a glass in his hand, and his voice rose, in order that I might hear, when he said, 'Blissful, yes, because it is unrelated of our day, unclouded by the vulgarity of ill-educated men, or of overbearing women...'"(Page, 89)

Maya grows lonely in the house and feels that Gautama never listens to her and dismisses her concerns as mere trifling. She craves his attention but he is always unavailable. Their conversations are mostly superficial. Four years together and yet they remain strangers to each other. She experiences a dire lack of emotion in Gautama. She feels-

"Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull, I thought of him so deeply. But, of course, there was none... There was no bond, no love-hardly any love. And I could not bear to think of that."(Page, 93)

There is an undercurrent of insidious perceptions in their relationship, Gautama does not consider her creditable enough to join his so-called superior world. Desai craftily integrates the archaic belief that a woman's ideas and opinions are not really estimable enough to be

considered. That it is okay if a man silences a woman to talk about something that he considers important rather than listen to the senseless chatter of an inferior being. This condescending attitude of Gautama is traceable when Maya recalls Gautama declaring her expressions of passion being the work of a *"third-rate poetess's mind"*(Page, 92). It is also visible when Maya objecting to the objectification of the Cabaret dancers says,

"none of them looked as though they were doing what they wanted to do. They all looked so sad to me- so terribly sad" (Page, 78)

And, Gautama coolly replies,

"they're as happy as they are capable of being happy".(Page, 78)

When Maya says she is afraid they were forced into this profession by "evil uncles, or stepmothers" He calls them "aberrant women of small ambition" and blames their vapid expressions on their lack of intelligence. Just as he blames Maya's difference of opinions on her lack of intelligence. It is clear that Gautama has no compassion for the womankind and feels that they deserve to be in the bonds they are shackled in. Maya feels ignored and unwanted because Gautama gives her a second-hand, silent treatment. This is a testament to the misguided patriarchal belief that women are not as efficient as men. The novel shows a dire lack of compassion in Gautama.

It is noted how deeply Maya thinks about Gautama and how little Gautama indulges her. She waits the whole day for him to come home so she could share the events of her day with him. But, they were forever stuck in the peripherals of their relationship. Their conversation never went beyond tea or other times, philosophy, of which he considered her incapable as a woman "afflicted" with occidental sensory thoughts. They failed to match each other's expectations. There is a noticeable discord in their relationship.

It is seen that Gautama was merely concerned with expressing his views and could not tolerate an interruption in it. He considers Maya overbearing when she gives her opinion. Gautama explains his logic in believing in the continuity of life and the significance of their deeds *"without which life would be one amorphous darkness."* (Page, 104) but Maya hearing the words "amorphous darkness" begins to protest against the sudden darkening of the illuminating circle of life. Gautama sees this as an act of disagreement and loses his patience with her and attributes her disagreement to her lack of logical understanding and says-

"Now what is it? He sighed, in utter disgust. 'Really, it is quite impossible to talk to a woman'."(Page, 105)

If Gautama had used "to you" to refer to Maya, it would simply reflect he meant Maya as a person was incapable of loftier thoughts. But, it is not so. He uses "to a woman" to refer to

her, showing his belief that the entire womankind is unreasonable. This shows that Gautama believes that Maya because she is a woman, is inferior intellectually and thus is incapable of understanding his superior male logic. While Maya, on the other hand, feels he is too rigid to understand a point of view which is different to his own. She feels she can never communicate with him effectively. This is seen in the excerpt of Maya's thought quoted below-

"The things we leave unsaid would fill great volumes; what we do say, only the first few pages of introduction."(Page, 90)

The novel closes with a suspense-filled open end. Maya pushes Gautama off the parapet of their house's roof in a state of frenzy for coming between her and the moon with which she was having a communion. She goes down and sees him laying immobile there but does not realise the significance of her act. Later, when she is taken to her father's house, what happens on the balcony remains a mystery. Whether she has a lucid moment where she realises what she has done and jumps off the balcony at the horror and dies or, is sent to a mental hospital remains unknown.

Conclusion

The traits of suppressed womanhood in this article is highlighted as Maya's struggles that lead to her tragic end. She is seen to be struggling to merely present her views and gets put down as unreasonable and overbearing for having them at all. Her desires of having a child or going on vacation are rejected as expensive and unpractical. She hopes for love and acceptance in her marriage but she only finds a cold handed rejection and a husband who did not desire her nor saw her as an equal. Equality, a place where they could stand hand in hand at a mental level was extremely important to her because she was raised under the care of a father who treated her exceptionally well. Yet we see her grappling with Gautama's opinion of her as an inferior incomplete person for not having experienced sorrow. It is quite possible that Gautama's marriage to Maya was based solely on Maya's father supporting Gautama's mother's downward spiraling career as a social worker. The juxtaposed description of Gautama and Maya's father shows how a female is treated as a possession rather than as a person and also the reasons why Maya is so acutely aware of the wrongs done to her. The deprecating display of flesh by the cabaret dancers is another point where Maya is shocked at the crass objectification of the women there but, Gautama's ubiquitous belief that women are inherently inferior leaves her speechless. Gautama's rejection of Maya's opinions as merely her incompetence to grasp his loftier male logic, his failure in seeing Maya as an equal in their marriage and the fact that he misses her glaring mental condition despite her

increasingly erratic behaviour even though they have been living together for four years shows just how much he ignores her and feels no compassion for her sufferings as a human being. Thus, the issues of suppressed womanhood highlighted in Cry, The Peacock.

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