

The Harrowing Experiences and Realities of Maya in Anita

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is a psychological novel (purely subjective) concerning the turbulent emotional and physical world of Maya. In fact, this maiden novel of her is a sensitive and narrative experience of the neurotic ridden Maya. She is highlighted in the novel as a delicate being who is haunted intensely by the childhood prophecy of an impending disaster. The impending catastrophe serves as an eclipse in her otherwise harmonious life. The research article focuses to expose the intense passions, and the internal violent conscience of Maya which makes her insane. Thus, Desai has made her intentions petty clear by depicting the hostile inner-self of Maya which is unappeased till the end of the novel.

Keywords: psychological, neurotic, prophecy, impending catastrophe.

Anita Desai, a prominent Indo-Anglian women writer, is a pioneer of psychological novel. Her works especially her psychological novels are embedded with a series of tensions...tensions related to incompatibility, hostility, indifference, marital disharmony, over-protection in love and affection, superstition, etc. All these tensions are abundant and can be found in pieces in her major novels. Hence, her fictions can generally be labelled as existentialist studies of individuals, the problem of rendering 'complete human personality...in an age of lost values, lost men and lost Gods.' (Thakore, 57)

In the opinion of Anita Desai, "writing is a process of discovering the truth--the truth that nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things." Thus, she is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation than action, experience and achievement. (Thakore, 57)

Desai is fond of working on the internal human psyche...especially women psyche. She lurks deeper into the unconscious layer of human psyche and reveals existential trauma of man. She speaks the essentiality of human interaction as a way of self-disclosure. In Carl Rogers' view-point, "Man lives essentially in his own personal and subjective world and even his objective functioning is the result of subjective purpose and subjective choice." Often her protagonists appear mere pigmies in front of the gigantic powers of the city. Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*(1963), is also drawn on similar line with innumerable problems and stress.

Cry, the Peacock gives an expression to the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the protagonist (Maya) herself. She is extremely sentimental and emotional woman. She is projected as a fragile heart among all the characters of the novel by the writer, Anita Desai. She is a destitute woman who is childless. Her mental trauma accompanied by the indifferences of other characters in the novel adds to her woes and aggravations. She stands tall on her own pre-assumptions ignorant of the harsh realities of life. Her childhood life which was more of a princess blurs her vision to comprehend the cynical world.

The novel concerns about Maya's cries for affection and love in her loveless marriage with Gautama. Her agonized cry is symbolic of the peacock's cry for love and affection and social involvement. All the serious issues of Maya started with the childhood prophecy of an impending disaster. This impending catastrophe wrecks her life completely. The prophecy that either her husband or she will die during the fourth year of her marriage gets deeply imprinted in the minds of Maya. Though her father and others have termed it baseless and advises her to forget yet it has left a deep stigma in her peaceful life. It continues to torment her psyche. After her marriage, her husband too finds reasons in the prophecy and advice her to disbelieve it completely.

Maya shares a very affectionate relationship with her father. She from her childhood regards the world as "a toy specially made" for her painted in her favourite colours and set to dance to her favourite tunes" (*Cry*, 36). She finds herself in a difficult ground when she was married to Gautama. Her upbringing by her father after the death of her mother makes her completely detach from the external world. Her childhood pain can be highlighted from the following statement:

"...my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was pretty one."

All hopes and expectations of a beautiful married life were dashed as her marriage proved to be unsuccessful. She was married off to a much older person (Gautama) who lacks certain traits to be a good husband. Their married life is punctuated by 'matrimonial silences' and Gautama's 'hardness... his coldness and incessant take of cups of tea and philosophy,' Though he is cultured, educated, practical and rational yet he fails to understand the vexed mind of his young wife Maya. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is never taken seriously either by her father or her husband. The main reason of negligence is her status as a woman. Maya is aware of this attitude of her father and husband which she totally objects. As time gallops, she becomes more irritant and restless with her self progress and empty life. She feels as if she were a lifeless object meant for other's satiation especially her husband and father.

Maya as a protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is portrayed as a weak woman who has a strong emotional attachment to her father rather than her husband. She

remains aloof from her husband Gautama because he is insensitive towards her needs. He doesn't understand her utter loneliness. She ponders: "How little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me... Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed." Though she is from a patriarchal society she doesn't abide by it and she revolts to it. She refuses to identify herself as a mere woman as her husband treats her. According to her, she deserves much affection and love from her husband which she was accustomed to right from her childhood time. Thus, she resents the concept of 'ideal housewife.'

Due to the suppressive society, Maya takes refuge in nature and takes its solace. She feels satisfied with nature which fills her empty heart with peace and acceptance. Her choosing the natural landscape is mainly due to the fear of not being understood by her father and her husband. As a result, she resorts to writing as a means of venting out her emotional being. Maya is labelled as a victim because of her confinement/tension between the vain glory of city and her ardent desire to retreat to childhood and cherish the innocence and purity. The city life widens the gap between Maya and Gautama annihilating their marital life. Gautama is a busy lawyer who doesn't want to be interrupted with trivial matters. Maya feels the absence of her husband in the house for long hours. But when he comes he used to be very tired and busy with his clients. She is confined to the four walls ignored and suppressed to a shabby state: "His coldness, 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" (*Cry*, 1980).

Maya throughout the novel remains an unconscious woman obsessed with her father. She could not become mature and independent and remains 'daddy's girl' because of her submissive nature. She endeavours to seek neurotic solutions but is drowned by her vague perception. She formed a father-fixation and loved everything about her father who was her only world of happiness and peace. Her father had kept her protected from the snobbish world for so long that she finds difficulty in adjusting her marital life and appears timid to confront the realistic world around her.

In fact, Maya suffers from neurotic because she seeks the same fatherly affection from her husband who doesn't have the capability to bestow love and affection to her. She married Gautama not because of her sharp attractive feature but because she thought him to possess

good judgmental power. But she was disappointed with his indifference and his accusing her of her father-fixation. Her world of dreams and fantasies is never given any priority which worries her most. This indifference of her husband to heed her inner world leads to her tragedy. Their attitude, temperament and upbringing acts as a stumbling block to pay respect to each other's life. Her tragedy is the tragedy of frustrated love and affection.

Desai's characters are a projection of dreams and wills. They create the activities which are heartrending in her novels. The incidents happen in certain way/order in certain time which is different from the chronological sequence. This sequence of Desai is a presentation of action and information which is more psychological. Leech and Short explain, "The best order of presentation, if one wants to facilitate the reader's processing of information both in fiction writing and in general expository writing is to go from elements which presupposes the least prior knowledge to those which presuppose the most. In presentational sequencing as well as in the other aspects of sequencing the authors artistic sense often shows in the way information is withheld, rather than in the way it is revealed" (Leech and Short, 1989).

The writer portrays the protagonist's crisis with the view to teach the readers her philosophy of existence amidst harsh urban (city) life. The problem Desai deals is primarily to elucidate her concept of 'how to exist' and not 'how to exit.' Unlike T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* speaks more of embracing the hardship of city life rather than escape from it. She focuses on the realistic city life to present the metaphor of existence. The city acts as an existential dilemma of the suppressive souls who are in quest of their identity and status. According to Anita Desai, the city life in the beginning plays havoc for women but later bestows them with a new recognition and objectives of life. This urban milieu also injects despair and frustration in the minds of the traditional Indian women and the naive Maya is no exception to it.

Since Maya has grown up in an environment where her father was her protector, guide and rolemodel she fails to attain the individuality she deserves. She is pictured as a fragile and subordinate woman who couldn't go beyond her limitations. She prefers to be in an environment where she will be ruled by others. In short, she couldn't commit herself to anything big of her own. Her failure in marriage is not entirely her failure. Her husband also

is responsible for not providing a helping shoulder to his helpless wife who needed his moral support and boost. So, Gautama fails to give her protection/contentment and the much needed zeal to live a free and independent life.

Maya often recalls the prophecy of the albino astrologer and starts to compare herself to the peacocks who fights before mate and who are aware of their death. Her surrounding makes her restless reducing her to a mere insane creature. She is broken psychologically and physically due to the prophecy. This prophecy left her delicate mind in chaos and emptiness.

Though she is an educated middle class woman it's quite perplexing to see her believing the blind superstition of the society. The blind superstition/dreadful prophecy subdued her to a total ravaging. Maya believes that no one can help her not even Gautama in bringing her out of the mental agonies. She feels caged in the net of tremendous mental stress. In her seeking love and affection she admits: "I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm and I shall soon be mad if I am not that already." Often she would think that her husband could have helped her but he is a different being with different philosophies of life. Since Gautama was not fully involved with life it is immaterial for Maya whether he is alive or not. Thus, in this jostling of life she chose Gautama to sacrifice his life. Her perturbed mind with the enthusiasm to live some more years felt that the detachment of her husband from this world has approached. In a fit of intense mental instability she pushed her husband from the terrace and he dies and she followed him by jumping to her own death.

Hence, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* can be analyzed as the manifesto of female predicament. She represents "creative release of the feminine sensibility" (Rao, 50). All the young characters of Desai crave for women lib. It can be said that though the society has become sophisticated it's difficult to predict the state of mind which may or mayn't change with the changing of time. Maya in certain way is an epitome of such moribund patient.

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