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A Picturesque Description of Neuroticism in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

Mr. Suneel Prasad

Guest Faculty

HNB Garhwal University,

SRT Campus, Badshahi

Thaul, New Tehri, India

Abstract

Anita Desai is an eminent novelist who explores the women's psyche and her quest for identity. In her debut novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, she deals with the theme of husband wife alienation and the marital discord. Desai very finely portrays the character of Maya, lost in the dark world of agony and loneliness. Maya and Gautama, her husband, both possess a different outlook towards life. Maya is very sensitive and emotional whereas Gautama has a practical approach. Maya is unable to relate to Gautama. Her Emotional needs are not fulfilled by him. Maya's mental agony is further aggravated by the prediction of the astrologer. *Cry, The Peacock* reflects upon the mental state and agony of women in the Indian society.

Keywords: Alienation, Marital Disharmony, Indifference, Obsession

Anita Desai, a prominent Indian women novelist in English deals with the problems of marital disharmony, alienation, immigration etc. in her novels. Desai's debut novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, examines the theme of husband wife alienation by the portrayal of the characters of Maya and Gautama. Gautama cares for Maya but she thinks that he is entirely indifferent towards her. They both share a different outlook due to which she is unable to adjust with the situation resulting in disappointment and frustration.

Anita Desai depicts sadness, solitude and the dark world of shadows in Maya's life in the novel. The wedding of Maya and Gautama had been arranged by her father through his friendship with Gautama. The loving and affectionate behavior of her father made Maya feel protected but her husband, Gautama's nature was entirely different. He was a lawyer and possessed a practical outlook. He was unable to satisfy her keen desire of love and life. She was engrossed in loneliness. Maya continuously pondered about the lacuna of love in her husband for her. She was haunted by the prediction of Albino astrologer in her childhood that either she or her husband would die within four years of their marriage. Maya was possessed

by the vision of the astrologer to such an extent that she recalled his talk about myth surrounding the peacock's cry. She realized that she can never sleep in peace when she listened the cries of peacock in rainy season. She was entirely in the meshes of inescapable.

Pom and Leila were the friends of Maya. Leila shared a very affectionate relationship with her husband. She had done a love marriage. Leila had bravely encountered all the ups and downs of life and evolved as a great fighter against all the odds of life. Pom, another friend of Maya, faced the problems which are common in Indian society. She lived a suffocated life with her in-laws under numerous restrictions. Pom cannot do anything according to her own will. It is revealed in the novel that how a female, in a patriarchal society, is considered an object of satisfaction for the physical desires of a man and are, thus, sexually exploited. Maya represents a class of women who quietly suffer at the hands of males. She suffered from Neurotic fears about her death and marital discord. As Cixous says: "Woman must write herself. Must write about women and being women, to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."¹

One of the major themes in Desai's novels is alienation which is a consequence of the hypersensitive nature of her female characters. They are unable to establish a point of contact with their life partners. Maya was so engulfed with the fear of death as a result of a prediction by an astrologer in her childhood that she was unable to establish an effective communication with her husband.

Gautama, who was a very practical and rational man was twice of her age. He was wholly indifferent to her predicament and agony. Her childless life, further, aggravated her sense of alienation and loneliness. She needed her husband but received indifference always. Both Maya and Gautama had a different attitude. Maya was highly sensitive and emotional. On the contrary, Gautama was practical, detached and philosophical. They lacked emotional intimacy and were unable to bridge the gap due to their different nature. Maya pondered:

Our marriage was based upon a mobility 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.²

Maya felt herself alone and companionless, starved emotionally as well as physically. She longed for Gautama's contact but he was unable to spend long hours with his wife. The couple was in need of an emotional bond. The marriage provided them only some physical intimacy with no mental satisfaction at all. The subjective attachment of Maya gives a sharp contrast to Gautama's objectivity and detachment. Maya was always troubled by the prediction. "I know the time has come. It was now to be either Gautama or I."³

The solitude separated them from each other. It appeared that Maya cherished a continuous desire for something which she never got. She was greatly affected by the prediction of the astrologer and haunted by the nightmare of death. Life became unbearable

to her. She hadn't any communication with Gautama. She got to know that he cannot connect and share his real feelings with her.

Gautama related to the theory of Karma, a great intellectual in his approach. He believed in logic rather than faith. Action was of great importance for him in life. On the other hand, Arjuna, Maya's brother was in sharp contrast to her. He was alienated from his father and went to America. Maya longed to loose herself in the elements of nature but was unable to do so with Gautama. She thought that he is a disgusting hurdle in her way, with stress on intellect. She observed:

Poor Gautama, not to be able to notice the odour of times, not to hear the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, not to have time to count the stars as they came out on by one – poor Gautama, my poor, poor husband.⁴

Gautama brought a cat for Maya. It had white hair take tassels of silk. Its large almond eyes were topaz. Both, Gautama and Maya, were fascinated by it. Maya desired to found a friendship upon it. The season was spring and the cat used to awake Maya every morning. Maya was in need of tranquility and peace which she can only attain from companion life. She longed for a relationship and communion for her disturbed and agitated soul. She made an effort to talk about it to her husband Gautama but in vain. She was unable to make him understand that reality and idealism are different but, yet, the same aspects of life. Life isn't about differentiating between the two but a reconciliation of both. Maya desired for a single moment of absolute happiness which she was not able to attain with Gautama. Gautama couldn't understand her thoughts of anguish as a consequence of which her heart was filled with agony. She was released a way from the net of astrologer's shadow as she called him a magician. Maya again, began musing about her early days spent with her father. She concluded that nobody can love her like her father. She became, all the more, frantic and longed for meet her father again.

Maya can be said to be a cold and calculated voice of weariness. She told Gautama that everything appeared horrible to her. She called Gautama a wretched and miserable person. Maya realized that there was something weird about her. Maybe, she was getting crazy. But soon, she felt that the people around her were insane and she was totally sound. Gautama worked till late in the night. Maya again, started musing about death whether it would affect both of them. She passed through a chain of thoughts, doubt and horror and the fear of murder arrived in her mind. She was in a very agitated state of mind. Even her rings slipped off her fingers. She encountered continuous uneasiness and hesitation. Tears were ceaselessly flowing out of her eyes. She was restless, sleepless and wholly exhausted and caught in the meshes of old memories when her dog Toto was alive. She arrived at the opinion that childless women got attached to their pets in a fanatic manner, as the people used to say. Her relationship with her dog Toto was not less than that of a woman and her child.

The darkness of the bedroom healed Maya to some extent. But she, still felt disturbed and uneasy. Something tortured and itched her from within and it remained meaningless.

Maya had a lot of friends earlier. But now they were only memories. Her friend Leila reminded her of the white poppies. Maya remembered Leila taking care of her husband who lay dying of tuberculosis. Leila had married the fatality of his disease. Maya was continuously thinking about Albino, the magician, the physical appearance; his dull and opaque eyes. She was able to recall even the minute details about him. As R.s. Sharma wrote: "The cry of peacock is a symbol of Maya's life in death and death in life." ⁵

Maya's imagination and speech were highly sensuous. She remained unhappy and upset from Gautama when he failed to point out the difference between the odour of lemons and the smell of petunias. In her mental conflict and crisis, she often cried and wept, bursting into furious pellowbeating. Maya remained a lonely being desiring for what she wanted in life. This longing made her indifferent to the outside world, spoiled her inner self and deteriorated her psyche. Her fear of death was directly related to neurosis and, further, aggravated by the memory of an unpleasant prophecy by an astrologer:

My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone but look, look at the horoscope, stars do not lie. And so it is best to warn you, prepare you.... Death to one of you. When you are married.... and you shall be married young.... Death - an early one. ⁶

The various moods of Maya and a change in her chain of thoughts, indifference, obsession, alienation and abnormality are revealed through several sets of images and symbols in the novel. Her fast disintegrating personality clearly conveys about her neurosis. Her longings and desires were not fulfilled as she didn't get a life partner of her choice. Slowly and gradually, she was engulfed by solitude and loneliness and her dissatisfaction increased day by day.

It can be concluded that Anita Desai in *Cry, The Peacock*, clearly depicts the women's psyche, her mental conflicts, pain and agony which she is subjected to in a male dominated society. Her dreams are shattered and is forced to adjust in the environment chosen by her family.

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