

WOMAN'S EXPLORATION FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the isolation of women in society in relation to Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*. The study of isolation experienced by women in society is a significant modern trend. In the Indian society, women are generally not permitted to make their own decisions. Desai (2007) tries to focus on the predicament of women in society and has presented a different view of the suffering of women in her novel *Cry, the Peacock*. The women characters are all well educated but fail to maintain good relationships post marriage. Hence, this paper highlights the suffering of a woman within the family, within one's self, and also within society. The objective of the article is to examine the determination of women in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya in the novel *Cry, the Peacock* is a protagonist who tries to lead a happy life but fails in her attempt to do so, and the isolation she experiences leads to desolation.

Key words: desolation; alienation; isolation; suffering of women

In the Vedic period, Indian women were considered the creator and the supreme power of the universe but in the present era, they suffer in a male-dominated society. 'The mutual interaction of gender identity and national identity is the bone and blood of post-colonial women's writings. In Indian literary scenario, the crux of feminism is that the Indian woman is caught in the trap of transition from tradition to modernity' (Agrawal 2012, 20). Women find themselves in the middle of the conflict between tradition and modernism. Many men believe that women should fulfil domestic responsibilities only. The

life of women may be divided into three phases namely; pre and post - married life and old age with their children. In a similar way Anita Desai's novels are divided into three parts. She tries to focus on the life of women in her novels. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* she focused on the sensitive nature of Maya. 'Unable to establish rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her arid existence, Maya remains throughout an utterly, lonely creature writhing helplessly in an indifferent world' (Prasad 1981, 9).

Desai's acute awareness of the female sensibility and the complex problems of women are focused on in her novels. As Kundu (2005, 57) writes, 'Anita Desai has commented on her work: My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life'. Through the sensitive portrayal of the psychic conflicts and the psychological contour of helpless people the novelist seems to underline the undermined status of the women. Through her fiction, she has shown how Indian women are bound to the social structure. She portrays the strength as well as weakness of Indian women through the women protagonists of her novels. Desai's protagonist Maya in the novel *Cry, the Peacock* displays a different approach to the institution of marriage. Desai has been entirely concerned with the inner life of her characters.

Most of the novels of Anita Desai are divided into either three or four parts. Her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* is divided into three parts. Part one consists of Maya's complex personality forming the core of the novel. The climax occurs in the second part of the novel; and the third part narrates the cessation. The novel closes on a note of desolation. In the first part of the novel Desai describes Maya's longing for a child which is shown by her affection towards her pet dog Toto. After her marriage Maya longs to have a child of her own but her longing is not fulfilled. The second part highlights the unpredictable incongruity between herself and her husband. Finally the last part describes the condition of Maya who becomes insane. *Cry, the Peacock* is a story of Maya and Gautama. Maya belongs to a high class Brahmin family and her father gives her a good upbringing. Her mother died when she was a young girl and her brother Arun went abroad to pursue his higher studies. Maya lived under the care of her father and her ayah who helped her in many ways. Maya led a happy life before her marriage. She married Gautama who was her father's friend. The age difference between them becomes a great barrier to lead a happy life. Her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law, were living with them in the same house. Her husband Gautama is a famous lawyer who succeeds in his career but fails in his marital life. Maya and Gautama are a childless couple and Maya loves her dog Toto as her own child. There is no mutual understanding between the

husband and wife and this creates a rift in their relationship. The story ends in the death of Maya's husband Gautama and later Maya becomes insane. Maya's psyche is focused upon and is dealt with deliberation throughout the novel.

The communication gap between the husband and wife is well developed and felt throughout in the novel *Cry, the Peacock*. Although their marriage has been an utter humiliation, they continue living together, leading an unstable life. Maya reflects on her unsuccessful marriage and goes through very strange experiences in her life. 'To a certain extent, Gautama cannot reciprocate Maya's physical and mental needs as he is very much older than her. Maya too accepts Gautama only as a husband but one feels that she never makes any attempt to make the relationship work. She always tries to place Gautama in her father's place and this disappoints her obviously as he cannot equal her father' (Kalpana 2000, 39). As a result after her marriage with Gautama, Maya missed some element in her life which she possessed from her childhood which is the affection she got from her father. Maya is perceptive enough to note her father's life pattern. "A motherless child, Maya had been the centre of her father's affection, dependent on her father for the fulfillment of her emotional needs for love, understanding, compassion" (Das 2011, 22).

Gautama and Maya act as two faces of the same coin. Maya's quest for a relationship and attachment becomes complicated on account of two forces. One is her love for life with her husband and the second is her fear of death. When she visited the astrologer with her ayah in her childhood days, the astrologer insisted that either Maya or her husband will die after the fourth year of their marriage. Maya lives in this mortal agony in the dual mode of life and death. Maya lacks intelligence whereas Gautama lacks emotion and stimulation, and therefore they cannot approach each other. As the logical outcome of their unpredictable discrepancy, one of them has to perish and unluckily it is Gautama who perishes. Maya expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both eluded her through Gautama's intellectual pursuits and his age. Her extroverted emotionality is not noted by her husband. Her love for her father is, in due course, transferred to Gautama. In the transaction, she loses her real self. Self-alienation leads to the loss of identity. Through Maya, Anita Desai demonstrates how even the noblest impulses like love when pursued and pushed to the extreme can be disastrous and dreadful. But, as already stated, it is not the lack of love but love itself that tears them apart. Maya in Desai (2007, 167) wrote:

...there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that

would never have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much. He taught it the will to reflect as well, and, like a wild beast on a leash, it would strain and strain in fury till tiredness set in and, in the dark, I could say, 'He is right, and I was wrong.' He enlarged it, so that many new experiences could come within its compass, and it grew greater.

Anita Desai explores minutely the depths of these two characters and analyses thoroughly their frustrations, motives, dreams, fears and aspirations. Maya, being sentimental, believes in the world of sensations and emotions; Gautama, being pragmatic and rational, advocates detachment. Maya is dreamy and sensitive; whereas Gautama is realistic and insensitive. She could have sensual pleasure by touching things and playing with her cat but Gautama could hardly live without his books and his work. He remains like a stone—calm, dry, immobile and unaffected by the lapping waves of the sea. Gautama talks with Maya, reasons out to her, tries to make her understand the situations whenever he can. Maya on the other hand never accepts any of his explanations and thinks of him as cruel, and unmoved. However, he is not just a friend but a philosopher and adviser too, as Maya herself later realizes as he explains the concepts of death, detachment to her by stating examples from Bhagavat Gita. "Maya's longing for the sensuous enjoyment of life is dampened by liberal doses of the Gita philosophy of non-attachment. Her effusive emotionality is always counter balanced by Gautama's analytical mind" (Rajeshwari 2001, 21).

The novel concentrates on Maya's inner psychological turmoil caused by a limited vision of the world. Even in the end, Maya's identity is not complete; she has only dealt with what has been distressing her so far. Her inability to communicate with Gautama proves mysterious for her, as in the process of suppressing her emotions she grows insane. Maya is not free to express all her feelings to everyone at her in-laws house. She is not cared for by any one in that house. Maya in Desai (2007, 81) wrote:

In a sudden, impulsive longing to be with him, be close to him, I leapt up, full of decision to make haste in undressing preparing myself, then joining him at last; so that we could go out into the garden, together, where the beds had been made for the night and were cooling in the moonlight. But when I went to rouse him from the couch, with a touch, I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep, and was very far from any world of mine, however enticing. I hesitated, wishing to summon him to me,

yet knowing he could never join me. It was of no use. After all I sighed—and, once more, was sad.

The problems of alienation are dealt with more care and elaborately by Anita Desai as she explains alienation very clearly in her novels. "Maya's extreme sensitivity never alienates the reader because it is rendered in terms of measurable human loneliness... How well Desai does in the business of carrying her narrative through to a satisfactory, even explosive end" (Desai 2007, back cover). In her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, the alienation is psychological rather than physical. The novel explores the various conscious and unconscious dimensions of Maya's emotional alienation. Her married life is drenched with matrimonial silences rather than with the springs of joy, romance and understanding. The physical dissatisfaction and mental distance further heighten the decrepit loneliness. Even when Maya is in the company of her husband, the feeling of helplessness and loneliness continues to afflict her. Maya's feelings for Gautama are portrayed in Desai (2007, 90-91):

... One might think it a lovable face. But it was not the face that a man like Gautama could love. He might be charmed by it, momentarily, diverted by it, for a while, but to capture him entirely, if a fleshly face could do it, it would have to be a finer one, the elongated, etiolated one of an intellectual, refined by thought and reflection, bereft of the weakness of impulses, aloof from coarseness and freshness. This I told myself in calm, still words, and I gazed long at each feature of the image before me, so like a painting on a chocolate box, and hated in fiercely. Hate was a new emotion to me, and, in, trespassing upon it, I entered a new vista of knowledge. I forced myself into believing that I could see now what must be the reason for my hating it so, for Gautama's spurning it – visible to our subconscious only. It must be a mark upon my forehead, which had been so clear to the opaque eye of the albino who had detected it upon which the stars now hurled themselves vengefully, and which prophesied a relentless and fatal competition between myself and Gautama.

Maya suffers from father-fixation because of the excessive love she gets from her father. She longs for love and affection and her quest for identity is concerned with her mental journeys in the world of reality and in the illusion. The clash between Maya and Gautama is a clash between illusion and reality.

Maya is very sentimental whereas Gautama is too practical in his marriage life. He accepts everything as it comes whereas Maya is not able to do the same. Maya is a childless woman who longs to have a child but has failed in her attempt of bearing a child. Maya's alienation is also reflected in her attitude towards animals as is made clear from an incident from her childhood. When she happens to see the caged monkeys on the railway platform she compares her life to them and her desire to release them from the cage is not possible as she is not the owner of the monkeys. She seems to be caged within as she never comes out of the house after marriage. The image of caged monkeys on the railway platform symbolises her loneliness and loss of freedom as is clear in her own words. Maya in Desai's (2007, 129-130):

I, too, went towards them, looked at them through tears, watching them move, feverishly, desperately, in cages too small to contain their upright bodies. Some clung to the rails, staring out with the glazed eyes of tragedy, at the horrible vision of hell before them, close and warm and stifling.... Then it spied something on the platform beside it, and, with famine swiftness, shot out one arm and picked it up, brought it close to its face for inspection, and sniffed it. It was only a monkey- nut shell, empty. A small whimper broke from the animal as it dropped the shell, then was silent again, waiting.

Maya withdraws into her shell and loses her hold on the outside world. Even with her husband she finds it difficult to speak about her feelings and loses control over herself because she lives in delusion. Anita Desai, in her novel, presents the image of the suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within. Through her characters, she makes a plea for a better way of life for women. Anita Desai attempts to explore the psychic conflict of her characters in her novels with woman as her prime focus. Alienation and feminism are the most prevalent themes of Anita Desai. An in depth study of her novels proves that she is mainly inclined to probe the woman's psyche. In her novels, the reader is brought face to face with the legitimate longings, dreams, hopes, fears, disappointments and traumatic experiences that have been faced by a lot of women. Most of the protagonists of Desai in her novels are women who suffer mostly in the hands of their husband, in-laws, and from the family and society.

The sufferings of women in Indian society and their plight is one of the major themes of Anita Desai. She deals with the themes of women's oppression, quest for one's identity, the demise of traditions, alienation,

loneliness, crisis of conscience and values, human relationships particularly that of man and woman, lack of communication, love, betrayal, marital discord, feminism, isolation, bereavement and the problems of compatibility and failure in relationships. Alienation has been the thematic motif that originally connects Desai's novels as alienation is more related to the emotional and mental moods, and attitudes of her characters. She breaks new ground in the world of Indian fiction writing by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world. Most of her protagonists are women some of whom are alienated among themselves, some from the family and some of them from the society. Her concentration is exclusively on the feelings of women and their thoughts, and their search for self-identity. Her novels are remarkable for the range of human experiences and present the existential struggle of women who refuse to flow along with the tide and refuse to surrender their individual self. Thus, *Cry, the Peacock*, is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of Maya. By this exploration of Maya's mind through images, conscious, unconscious, the author Anita Desai has firmly established the psychological novel in the annals of Indo-English fiction (Upadhyay 2000, 52).

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