

Sociological critique on Anita Desai's Novel "Cry, the peacock"



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There are a large number of educated Indians who use the English language as a medium of the creative exploration and expression of their experience of life. Their writing has now developed into substantial literature in its own right and it is this substantial body of literature which is referred to as Indo Anglian literature. Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand are the forefathers of Indian writing in English. Apart from Indian men writers such as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, V.S. Naipal, Girish Conard there, are also a large number of Indian women writers in English named Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praware Jhabvala, Anita Desai etc. Among them Desai is a major woman Indian novelist writing in English today. The Indo-Anglian writer faces formidable obstacles during writing about the complex and confusing Indian society. Any writer with traditional orthodoxy of cultural and religious anchorings of a Hindu society would be incapacitated to show Raja's romance with Muslim culture. It appears nature has some larger purpose to fulfill through the writings of Mrs. Desai. She will not go in the annals of literature as a prophet of Indian culture or metaphysics, but she would always be related to the cosmic tradition of Weltschmerz & humanism as good for India as for the west.

Anita Desai, Indian novelist and short story writer is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Anita Desai's several novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle class women. In her later novels, Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-semitism, the demise of traditions & Western stereotypical views of India. Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station north of Delhi. She is the daughter of D.N. Mazumdar, a Bengali business man and the former Toni Nime, of German origin. Desai was educated in Delhi at Queen Mary's higher secondary school. Desai received a B.A. degree in English Literature and graduated with honours from Miranda House, the University of Delhi. Anita Desai spent her nascent childhood years in New Delhi. Growing up she spoke German at home and Hindi to friends and neighbours. She first learned English when she went to school. English was the language in which she

first learned to read & write; it became thus her literary idiom. She began to write at the age of nine. Her literary excursion began shortly after her marriage to Ashwin Desai, a businessman on December 13, 1958. Growing up in a house full of books led her to the early decision that writing would be her life. Later, even as the very young mother of four children, she managed to carve out productive time at her desk. Desai is praised for her broad understanding on intellectual issues and for her ability to portray her country so vividly with the way the sociological eastern and western cultures. Anita Desai is the most significant Indian novelist in English today. In her novels, she has depicted the sociological aspect through man-woman relationship, religious taboos, male dominance, alienation, existential predicament of an individual, culture and tradition, childlessness, superstition. Among man-woman relationship, she seems to have devoted her attention to marital relationship the most. All the female characters are presented by rifts between the partners. Period around which these novels were published was a period of social upheaval. Older concepts of woman's slavery were being rapidly demolished and woman was trying to free herself from the shackles of male dominated society. Further industrialization and urbanization had poured selfishness in minds resulting coldness in relations.

Anita Desai's work represents a unique blending of the Indian and the western society. Her novels catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the everbeckoning modern promise of self gratification and self fulfillment. In the face of the dual onslaught, her protagonists, male or female Maya, Sita, Monisha and Amila; Sarali, Wanda and Raka; Bim and Tara; Devan, Baumgartner are seen poised rentalizingly at different junctures of the philosophic spectrum. She has written about one dozen novel which are as under in which she describes the social issues prevailing in our Indian society.

1. Cry, the Peacock (1963)
2. Voices in the city (1965)
3. Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971)
4. Where shall we go this summer? (1975)
5. Fire on the Mountain (1977)
6. Clear light of Day (1980)

7. Village by the Sea (1982) 8. In Custody (1984)
9. Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) 10. Fasting, Feasting (1999) 11. The Zigzag Way (2004)

I would like to choose the novel "Cry, the Peacock" for writing (as an article) in this article. The first section of the novel "Cry, the Peacock" functions as a sort of "exposition scene". A number of things are done in the most economical manner. In the second section of the novel Maya, the protagonist of the novel comments that their marriage was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon with which out of the pettiest superstition we could not bear to part. The death of Toto with which the book begins is one of the series of happenings, which mirror and even widen the impassable gulf that separates the two characters. Though Mrs. Desai makes an occasional comment to persuade the reader to adopt a certain attitude towards her characters, more often her comments are implicit; the necessary mood is evoked, the right emotion is elicited from the reader through a series of objective descriptions.

Anita Desai has depicted the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautama. Maya marries Gautama who is quite senior in age to her but the two persons are entirely opposed to each other in their temperament and emotional responses. The gulf that separates the two is communicated in a significant episode when Maya suggests to Gautama to have their dinner in the dining hall with the lights switched off. Even at this place, the unimaginative and unromantic Gautama remarks that there is brightness enough for him to spot a fly if it falls into his dinner. He continues complaining of heat & smoke there, but Maya concentrates herself on a salad of pomelos and chilies, sadly reflecting that on another day, this vision of crisp pink fruit speckled with fresh green would have illuminated an entire evening. Gautama also turns down the wish of Maya to go to some hill station in summer because he thinks it as a luxury of the rich. Further, Maya feels interested in drum beating whereas Gautama does not care to see, to hear. Maya enjoys the life in the lap of nature because of her instinctive impulse but Gautama does not show any interest for it, for he is a creature of intellect. As such, Maya & Gautama live like strangers in one house without bothering about each other's personality and individuality. This novel is about Maya's cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama, the peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's agonized cry for love & life of involvement. While Gautama is a practical man to the core, she is a highly sensitive and emotional type of woman. She is neither able to get company from him nor physical, sexual satisfaction. Maya is full of life, of elan, vital and

she wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her, sexual satisfaction is a must and total denial of it makes her a victim of such abnormal mental disease as neurosis and schizophrenia. Her involvement is opposed to Gautama's philosophy of detachment. While Maya believes in a life of total absorption and involvement. Maya is sensitive, high strung female while Gautama has abstract thinking. He is concerned only with the basics of life in monetary terms. "It's always money, or property.... never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exciting things that----- Not for love, or life, or basic things - like Toto dying."

Gautama preaches to her the need for detachment. In a moment of extreme bitterness Maya tells Gautama in so many words how she loves him. Gautama's attitude to Maya is that of a typical husband who wants to keep her at an arm's length. He treats her as a child, a light headed woman who is not worthy of his confidence. The tragic end of Maya's and Gautama's married life is seen in her act of killing her husband and afterwards killing her own self by committing suicide. The novelist's own attitude in the matter does not appear to be ambivalent. She does not want to justify Maya's action and seems to give an implied suggestion that the private vision of every individual be made open so that mankind may have a sigh of relief from the endless tortures of the unconscious.

In this novel, the parent-child relationship has been depicted in a poignant manner. Maya has been a pampered child, a darling of her father. Surrounded with all the comforts and marks of affluence, she can regard as a fortunate person. The fact, however, is otherwise. The early death of her mother often makes her feel neglected in spite of the fact that she has a doting father. Whenever she suffers from a sense of loneliness, she longs to see her father. Maya suffers from a type of Oedipus complex, idolizes her father but becomes miserable as her search for a father substitute in her husband does not measure up to her anticipation. Maya's father - fixation is to a greater extent responsible for the marital discord between Maya and her husband, Gautama. In the words of R.S. Singh, "the marital relationship between Maya and Gautama had suffered disintegration on account of the wife's regressive tendencies symbolized in her father complex and infantilism." The main cause to marry Gautama, almost twice her age, was that she found in him the real image of her father and she wanted to reach her father in her unconscious through him. Maya considers Gautama not a loving husband but a father substitute. She expects something more than love from him, but he "though a father - substitute for Maya, is also her lover who miserably fails not only to feel the intensity of her inner - most cravings but also to listen to the pathetic

cry of her anguished soul." Her barrenness coupled with an albino fortune teller's prediction of impending demise of one of the partners after her marriage agitates her mind, occupies her wakeful thoughts and precipitously pushes her towards her insanity. Maya is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with the gloomy prophecy of an albino astrologer. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage.

Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. Obeying his wish Maya keeps the prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautama enters the fourth year. Now triggered off by the death of her pet dog, Toto, it assumes during the course of the novel the shape of an obsessional neurosis and keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized post feeding on a tender leaf.

It is strange that Maya should so superstitiously believe in the veracity of the prophecy although she knows that Gautama and his family hoot with derision at the mention of superstition. In the beginning of her neurotic affliction she frequently tells herself that it was she herself who was fated to die. But she is in ardent love with life and so she soon begins to wonder whether it was not Gautama's life that was threatened. Taking this line of reasoning further she fears for her life and would keep the secret for herself at any cost. Now she is almost convinced that Gautama is certainly fated to die and the thought makes her more and more secretive.

It is said by the critics that Maya is obsessed with the prophecy because of the romance involved in it. But the knowledge of depth psychology holds the promise of examining her irrational and superstition belief from an entirely new angle. Maya has been an absolutely submissive and obedient daughter, sister and wife and so it may sound outrageous to accuse her of harbouring cruel impulses. But probing into her

unconscious would reveal that there is immense suppressed hostility in her unconscious against her husband and to an extent against her father. Being a creature of instinct she seems to hold Gautama responsible for her unfulfilled instinctuality in the marital relationship. She grows anxious on account of the threats to herself preservation and neurotically perceives Gautama's death as a solution. The prophecy comes as a convenient external justification to her unconscious wish and for that reason she tenaciously clings to it. The psychosomatic growth of a female character, who can't cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected, forlorn and demoralized which ultimately gains catastrophe, when the wife kills her husband out of this frustration.

In traditional Indian context woman is denied all freedom and privacy in marriage. She has to subject her wishes, joys according to her husband's will. Anita Desai advocates that in marriage a couple is constituted by two individual and they have entities of their own and also each should learn to respect the otherness of the other. Anita Desai has not depicted man folk absolutely devoid of attachment. She has portrayed Gautama not indifferent to her wife's miseries but the wife's extra-sharp sensitivity fails to understand her husband's love. All this is depicted in 'Cry, the peacock', by the major woman Indian novelist, Anita Desai. Meena Belliappa underscores the importance of the incompatibility between the husband and the wife. She says that the real success of the novel lies not so much in the exploration of the social side of life as in the exploration of the lonely spirit. She is of the view that the success of the novel lies in working out the configuration of the inner world. The author "helps to establish the subjective reality of being as the most crucial part of living. The ardent introspection of Maya marks a valuable introversion in Indian fiction. It points to a line of significant development - exploration not of the social man, but the lone individual."

REFERENCE

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