

## WOMAN AS THE VICTIM OF PATRIARCHY IN THE NOVELS BY ANITA DESAI

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Anita Desai, one of the most powerful novelists of post-independence times, slaughters society for its farcical elements in decorum, marital life and human relationships. The growth of the individual self (both male and female) is stunted, oppressed and forced to oblivion. Her women, projected as a victim of social configurations, seek Truth, Love, and Belongingness. Sensitive and paranoid, they expose the barrenness of the modern age. The struggle for female identity takes shape in Desai's novels, as well as Sashi Deshpande's and Raji Narsimhan's. Despite relative expansion of 'space' and 'voice', the emerging image of woman in Desai's protagonists, is still that of a suffering being; confused and stuck up with no apparent solution. Their problem persists while Raji Narsimhan's fiction *Forever Free* (1979) proposes utopian solutions for women, Deshpande offers a judicious merge of tradition and modernity.

The pivot in *Cry the Peacock* (1963) is Maya, a young wife obsessed by a prophecy of disaster in her childhood. Brought up as a "toy princess in a toy world" (89), she is soft, sensuous, intensely afraid of death and disaster. Her husband, Gautama, is more of an adversary than a confidant. All her fears, anxieties, and upheavals are shut in her own self: "Fortune, guilt, dread, imprisonment – these were the four walls of my private hell" (102). Reality and mundaneness of life have not touched her. Her world revolves on a romantic creation from her picture books. With a pragmatic and down to earth husband, insensitive to the romantic beauty of Nature, Maya feels trapped and restrained. The albino's forecast "death to one of you ... four years after your marriage" (130-131), adds to her fear of death.

Gautama's intelligence, detachment to life, obsession with his duty, creates the alienation between the two. Maya's inability to realize that here is an eternal decay in the fairyland of butterflies, rubies and the beautiful Nature abounds her sufferings. Her intensity for sensual love and fulfillment unmasks her sexual need. The cry of the peacocks, their calling for their mates to dance, battle, and love and then die, signifies the rhythm of life. Desai's heroine wants to dance to the spirit of the rain clouds "Lover, I die" (95-96). Contrary to her emotions, Gautama presents a negation of physical and transient pleasures. He professes Bhagavad Gita's doctrine of non-attachment. Maya's intensity to love and life's experiences culminates in the exclusion of the male in her life:

The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact. What would it matter to him. It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (175)

Maya rejects masculinity as it was unable to provide her any respite from her emotional upheavals, neglect, loneliness and despair. Gautama's death can be an answer to the feminist principle

which holds the negation of man as the triumph of feminine identity. The final collapse of Maya ends on a note of bloodshed. She kills Gautama, but without remorse.

Desai dissects the disturbed psyche of a modern woman in all her novels. Shanta Krishnaswamy, highlights the predicament of the woman:

It is the woman, sensitive as she is, who is aware of the malaise in all human relationships. She tries to peel off the unwanted, the non-essentials, to limit herself to the purest core of feeling, the innermost sanctity of bare thought and to rid herself of the meanness of quotidian existence.... She has to choose between death and a mean existence, in order to avoid being caught and rebuffed and humiliated repeatedly in the human whirlpool. (240)

While Maya in *Cry the Peacock* suffers from excessive involvement, Monisha in *Voices in the City* (1965) suffers due to her inability to involve herself in her surroundings. Cold and observant, Monisha feels that attachment leads to a chain of reactions at the end of which one has to perish. She shies from love as it fetters human relationships; but seeks love that is unbinding “free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience” (135).

Brought up in the free air of Kalimpong, Darjeeling, amidst “the solitude of the jungles, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo grooves, and the earth laid with great fallen leaves” (116), Monisha craves for privacy, peace, silence and space in the big household of her in-laws. She is the intellectual, different from “those vast, soft, masses of rich Bengali women with a bunch of keys at her waist and nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry” (81). She wants to live a life of essentials, of ideals, of lucidity that hates the sham of middle-class lives; the monstrous vulgarity of everyday life, the display of spiritual and moral disintegration. She hates to preclude to the general predicament of women:

hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* in the dim light of the sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men, self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind the bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (120)

The trivialities of such mean existence overwhelms her. Privacy and individuality are the twin elements which she cannot ever sacrifice. So, when the inmates of her big house, discuss about her barrenness, her blocked fallopian tubes, and malfunctioning of her ovaries, Monisha shrinks to a private shell. Her diary reveals her loneliness in an atmosphere of distrust, envy, ignorance and monotony. As the joint family intruded on her privacy, her only recourse was death. The crumbling old religion in a modern setup could not offer her any substantial anchor. She admits: “I could have easily enough renounced all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair” (122).

Optimistic, tingling with life and vivacity at the advent of her career as an artist, Amla (Monisha’s sister) presents an elongated version of Monisha’s inner self. As the emancipated woman of the new century, Amla seeks fulfillment in love and in her vocation. Amla contemplates that the hollowness and futility of her life was an expression to Dharma’s medium of art. Love was only a foothold to bring forth the tender feelings in a woman. Monisha’s death helps her choose her “path or the jungle, of compromise or isolation” (256).

Desai suggests compromise as the only middle path between Maya’s attachment and Monisha’s detachment in Sita, the protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975). Sharp, pessimistic and whimsical, like all other Desai’s heroines, Sita is pulled by the strings of social order.

Entering her in-laws 'age-rotted' flat, she revolts against their 'sub-human placidity' and 'sluggishness'. It is hard for her to accept the typical conventions of life – "to eat and prepare something to be eaten". Irritated, she moves to another small apartment but with no respite from the aggressive violence of the city. Her journey from the metropolis to Manori, the island buried beneath the consciousness for years, is the voyage of self-discovery. Here, she is affronted with the vagaries and violence of Nature, and proceeds to attain freedom within the limits. She learns to accept life with responsibilities and duties.

Saddled with four children, pregnant by a fifth, Sita revolts to give birth in a world of violence, negligence and cruel insensitivity. She does not want an abortion either, but wishes it to remain still-born. She hastens to Manori:

that island's illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold the baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea, it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tide would lull the children too, into smoother softer beings. (72)

But the island holds no magic for her now; to subtle touch to heal her wounds. Confused and betrayed, she sees life as an arid stretch, full of treacheries and compromises:

Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct opposition to each other. (135)

Jaya's quest for her identity, in *That Long Silence* makes her realize that:

The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is an bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. (1)

Sita resumes her return journey to embrace tradition, loyalty and adjustment. She looks forward to the birth of her child, the pleasure and pain of the childbirth. The island, through its incessant rains, stormy air and lack of food and hygiene, make Sita reminiscent of the comfort of her home. She realizes the oneness of life – her husband, children and their belongingness, and relatedness. The grim and ramshackled life looks forward to a calm dawn. K. Meerabai defines that this new Sita can now face life with forbearance and courage.

Sita understands that the truth of life lies in relatedness and not in escapism. The harmony in her life is achieved by balancing the negative and positive attitudes of life... Past and present, both form a part of life. Escape from either will leave her incomplete. As the island suggests, there is change, yet there is continuation. The waves go on with their ebb and tide. (93)

Caught in the vicissitudes of life, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) makes an escape to Carignano in search of her self. Having suffered from disorder, fluctuating relationships, luxurious existence, she feels as if she has borne the cross of life, with duties and responsibilities, too far. Her marital life "was full on the surface but empty at the core" (Sharma 125). As old age beckons her, she sheds her past "a great, heavy difficult book which she had read through and was not required to read again" (30).

Raka's arrival shakes her peaceful life at Carignano. Her great great-child poses a threat to her utter privacy. Like Monisha's dread of love as an attachment, Nanda feels the presence of the child, and its responsibility as an involvement in waiting. Nanda's feigned isolation and forced banishment fails before Raka's natural and total rejection of society. If Nanda is a "recluse out of vengeance", Raka is a "recluse by nature". Her instinctive effortless refusal of discipline, order and obedience, her

exploring self is no match for her grandmother's guarded dislike for clamour. The child helps Nanda to come out of her shell and conform to life. P.D. Dubbe concludes:

Raka is the symbol of the new generation, like the fire on the mountain. The novelist spreads a burning awareness of woman's condition in our society. Anita Desai perhaps suggests that the myth of masculine superiority is somehow preserved in the area of physical strength. (33)

*Clear Light of Day* (1980) presents the bifurcated nature of the new emancipated woman in Tara and Bim. While Bim, independent, hardworking and determined, takes over the management of the house single-handedly, Tara seeks protection and shelter in marriage. Emotional and tremulous, like Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Tara sees marriage as an escape from the pall of decay and death that the old house casts on all. She never wanted to leave her shell, to "prove herself to be anything" (126).

Bim had envisaged life as an adventure, wishing to explore the wide world. Like Attia Hossain's Laila, she too had dreamt of going round the world, to seek the vistas of knowledge. Marriage, to her, holds a promise of bondage and losing oneself in an oasis of relationships. Destiny confines her to the dull, routine life in the old house; with the imbecile brother as her only companion. Bold, courageous, and aware of her potentialities, Bim hides her anguish and bitterness under a cloak of brusqueness. She rebels against gender-bias and the crushing of her feminine identity. The family depends on her for both financial and mental strength. Jealousy, guilt, loneliness and betrayal form the keystones of her life. Her teaching at college provides her emotional stability and the balance to maintain her true spirit amidst all decay, destruction and death. Dr. Krishna Sharma hints that:

Mrs. Desai underscores the hypocrisy and discrimination of the social system, which does not recognize the identity and rights of a woman in her parental house. She laments the fate of such women (Bim and Uma) who, despite fulfilling all the duties and struggling hard to bear the responsibilities, not theirs, have been reduced to just caretakers or tenants of the house – the prize they get for their laboured tests and tribulations. (150)

Desai's latest novel, *Fasting Feasting* (1999), sketches the female as the eternal mother. Uma, the ugly duckling, is dissuaded in pursuing higher studies on the reason that nursing her only new-born brother was of greater importance. With a failed marriage and thwarted dreams, Uma, like Bim, lands up as the efficient caretaker of the household. If Bim struggles to live a life on her own terms, Uma suffers in silence and stoic resignation. Pretty, determined, highly possessive and ambitious Aruna, resolves to move out of the family for fresher pastures. Life seems to bow down to her aggressiveness. Uma's cousin, Anamika is Desai's concept of ultimate beauty, "A lotus, with her deep, creamy, still beauty" (68). The female is the subject of oppressive male dominance. The hypocrisy and the discrimination of the social system which limits female identity, finds expression in Anamika's fate. The loving girl, radiant and peaceful in her embodiment, also fails as a wife and daughter-in-law and is returned as "damaged goods" (71). As Krishnaswamy opines:

... she (woman) is the failed quester who tries hard to hurtle past the emotional blocks set up by an unheeding, insensitive social environment. (*Woman* 238-239)

In an interview to Yashodhara Dalmia, Desai herself admits that this questioning spirit, this endless quest for identity, is the only essential ingredient to self-realization:

It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it (her heroines), whose heart cries out "the great No", who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (73)

Her protagonists present the progressive phases of the feminine self perception. Her women cast in the moulds of Maya, Monisha, Tara, Bim, Sita and others, travel from negation to an affirmation of the self. From Maya's self-destructive sensuous involvement to the meaningless detachment of Monisha of the outside world; from Sita's dilemma between life's realities and her acceptance of them; from Nanda Kaul's living a life devoid of pretences, deceptions and unfaithfulness and her coming to terms with Death. The finality of the journey ends with Bim, who perceives the truth of life that in order to keep oneself sane, whole and balanced, one has to relate oneself with others. And this connectedness is a truth that is achieved through love and forgiveness. K. Meerabai sums up:

The theme that runs as an undercurrent in almost all the novels of Anita Desai is the irreconcilability between the inner and the outer worlds, the imponderable gulf between expectation and reality, resulting in the deep anguish of the sensitive soul in eternal search of peace. (23)

Various socio-economic changes, in the post-colonial times, protected the rights and status of the woman. In spite of the implementation of such principles, male dominance is acutely experienced within familial relationships. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* asserted that, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole" (33). In the sophisticated ethos of the upper-middle class society, psychological turmoil abound in the female self. Male supremacy corrodes the woman's self-esteem and devours her identity.

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