

**AM I RIGHT OR WRONG? A STUDY OF MARITAL DILEMMAS IN
ANITA DESAI'S 'CRY, THE PEACOCK'**

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ABSTRACT

Women centered Indian English fiction has always struggled to figure out the dilemmas of involvement and detachment, of surrender and freedom in a female's life for psychological interpretations. Anita Desai's writings particularly focus on the psychological turmoil of women left at the crossroads. She demonstrates why the line of communication for these women is quite blocked because the society fails to understand the emotional value of their desires. Desai is a painter of moods, of will, of conflicting choices and inner experiences. In the current paper her novel *Cry; the Peacock* has been studied and understood. The novel speaks not only of the tumult in the human soul but also of its depth, its poetry and pathos; its beauty and compassion. Desai is concerned not only with the experiences of her character, Maya but also with her unarticulated unconscious life. This study shows how she has explored Maya's inner life in the face of her marginal status in the family in particular and society in general.

Keywords :- Women, female, female centered dilemma, psychological turmoil, marginal status, unconscious self, understanding and desires.

Anita Desai's work can aptly be hailed as a landmark in Indian English fiction as she brings into limelight the interior landscape and psychic odyssey of her characters. Her novels highlight situations in which "emblems of remonstrance and psychic protest, strive for the protection and preservation of their dignity and self-esteem" (Swain, *Feminist Literature* 253) in a recklessly dominating society. Unlike a photographer concerned with the portrayal of surface reality, Desai is a painter of moods, of will, of conflicting choices and inner experiences. She speaks not only of the tumult in the human soul but also of its depth, its poetry and pathos; its beauty and compassion. Her fiction is concerned not only with the inner experience of characters but also with their unarticulated unconscious life. It is apt to quote:

Most of her novels represent the uninterrupted, ceaseless, disordered and chaotic flow of consciousness of its characters, including their varied sensations, disjointed thoughts, memories, associations and reflections which find expression in a stream of words, symbols and images corresponding to the pre-speech, non-verbalized, disjointed illogical level of mental-emotional life. (Srivastava, *Perspectives on Desai* xxii)

Desai considers the unconscious to be ultimate source of reality for it is the evolutionary spirit of the world. In all her works, the problems of involvement versus detachment, of surrender versus freedom are viewed from the various angles for psychological interpretations. She focuses on the psychological turmoil of women left at the cross-roads. She explores her protagonist's inner life in the face of her marginal status in the family in particular and society in general. "She finds the links between female duality, myth and psychosis; each heroine is seen as searching for finding and absorbing or annihilating an identity that represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity". (Krishnaswamy, *Women in Fiction* 237) The current study focuses on her novel *Cry; the Peacock* which is a documentation of radical female resistance against a 'patriarchally' defined concept of normality.

The novel *Cry; the Peacock* demonstrates the conflict between the self and society because the latter prizes formalism over individualism. It evaluates the outcome of the female's suppressed and alienated role in the context of social, patriarchal and marital authority. The protagonist Maya, points towards the illusory quality of all human relationships, male and female. There is not only a rejection of the traditional female role, but a deeply felt and suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. She is highly sensitive and keeps on questioning the social and cultural conditions that generate neurotic trends in her. She yearns to live and experience life but conforming to society's norms is a great hurdle, and contributes towards making her neurotic, insane, alienated and mal-adjusted.

The plot of the novel is woven of three broad strands that cause Maya's psychic turmoil--her obsession with death, her father fixation and her incompatible relationship with her husband. From the opening of the novel, she is shown obsessed by an inadvertent childhood prophecy of disaster by an albino astrologer. According to the prediction, she or her husband would die during the fourth year of their marriage. Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. Obeying her father's wish Maya keeps the prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautama enters the fourth year.

It is important to mention that Maya's happiness is not related to the reality of her circumstances instead it is the product of her own consciousness. Her unhappiness is in part related to the process of her growing up: she has led a protected life and has been brought upon fantasies and fairy tale. However when she has to confront the reality of life and its disappointment; she is unable to face it. She is like 'a snuffed rag doll' that is thrown from the world of fantasy into a world of reality where she feels herself to be an alien. Her situation stems out of the suppressing forces encircling her. Maya is well aware that her relationship with the adult world is tenuous. When surrounded by her husband's family she is quite aware of this, and accepts being left out of many discussions. Her position was similar in her father's house where she was not involved in any matter because it was thought that she was just too small to be asked anything—

For they knew I would not understand a matter so involved, and I knew it myself. They spoke to me----only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping, marriages, for I was their toy, their indulgence, not to be taken seriously, and the world I come from was less than that—it was a luxury they considered it a crime to suffer, and so damned it with dismissal. (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 55)

The day the novel opens, Maya is experiencing the height of psychological unrest because of the death of Toto, her pet dog. Being extremely faithful to her instincts, she does not want to forget that the dog that meant so much to her is no more. According to Freudian tenets, normal people in her circumstances would have affected a withdrawal by influencing the instinctual urges at the psychic level. But her life is intricately woven by her instincts.

Triggered off by the death of her pet dog, Toto, Maya faces insecurity in the shape of an obsessional neurosis and keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on tender leaf. (Rajeshwar, *Feminist English Literature* 239)

After the whole day of crying and mourning the death, she feels worst when Gautama arrives in the evening and arranges for the systematic disposal of the corpse. She feels that he is doing it just as a routine duty. She, as the representative of ‘feminine principles,’ is hurt to the core when Gautama dismisses her grief with a mere, “it is all over”. (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 08) She feels disturbed when he acts unsympathetically and asks her to stop crying and have tea. His matter of fact behaviour makes her think that he cannot understand the intensity of her grief. The two are not on one side, “but across a river, across a mountain and would always remain so.” (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 114) Gautama lacks the necessary imagination to sensitively respond to the death of the dog as a loss. By contrast, Maya’s reaction appears to be hysterical, but it represents a certain capacity for restore; intense and rich, which sets her apart from others. The lack of communication between her and her husband obstructs her from confiding in him. This gap between them leaves her lonely to brood over some of her morbid thoughts.

The conflict between the romantic Maya and pragmatic Gautama makes them incompatible. Maya’s longing for the sensuous enjoyment of life is dampened by liberal doses of *Gita* and ‘its philosophy of non-attachment’. Her effusive emotionality is always counter-balanced by his analytical mind. *Cry, The Peacock* is built on a series of contrasts between opposed modes of perception, and contradictory and mutually exclusive attitudes towards life. The comparisons between Maya and Gautama acquaint the reader with their polarities, two principles that despite their intrinsic interrelatedness and inter-dependence stay separated.

Maya feels destabilized because even after four years of marriage, Gautama has failed to fecundate. The failure of their marriage both of bodies and minds has rendered everything unemotional and sterile. As she finds Gautama inadequate, she marches on her own way, and strives for a more meaningful life. She is on a quest for real love and an urge to lead a fuller life. Standing in a position of sexual inferiority and emotional vulnerability, she tries but is unsuccessful to have an imaginative escape. At the level of family, the theme of marital discord has obvious existential implications. The struggle between Maya and Gautama is literally a struggle between life and death, a struggle between authentic and unauthentic, between passionate attachment to life and indifference towards life.

Cry, The Peacock, presents a continuous conflict between the inner and outer worlds of Maya. “It is an externalization of the interior of her cocoon.” (Srivastava, *Perspectives on Desai*,

xviii) Maya has all the qualities of an authentic individual but due to her neurotic behaviour she regresses into infantilism. Her rootlessness keeps on increasing and enlarging because she feels the sting of alienation in her psyche. It culminates in a kind of schizophrenia into “a body without a heart, a heart without a body.” (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 68) She is pulled further into this fatal mechanism by Gautama because apart from being pragmatic, unimaginative and deeply engrossed in his work, he lacks any sexual urge in her. The line of communication is quite blocked because he fails to understand the emotional value of her desires. While working on his papers, he pays no attention “to either the soft, willing body or the lovely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.” (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 70) She realizes his coldness towards her and painfully becomes aware of her loneliness, as she whispers, “I am alone.” (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 09) In a few tender moments, he looks down upon her as a tiresome, pretty but wayward infant, the spoilt daughter of a rich father. He knows enough Freud to suspect that she consented to marry him readily as she saw him first as a surrogate father and then as a husband. There was in a way an inkling jealousy for her father in Gautama’s heart.

Maya has to constantly pay for Gautama’s coldness by lying awake all night stifled by the hunger she felt because of him and for what it meant to stay with him. Eventually Gautama begins to appear to her as a “guest who might never be encountered again” (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 09) or as an unreal ghost. She looks upon her relationship with him as a relationship with death. Her fears lead to hallucinations of death and in order to get free of her fears she kills him and becomes insane. In a way Gautama’s failure in the traditional role of a husband as a protector, acts as a potent catalyst for her collapse.

Throughout her life, Maya longs for a sympathetic understanding and ‘real love’. Her father who has been a perfectionist himself has dictated all her moves. In his house she grew up physically but not mentally. Instead of giving her freedom he gave her a lot of protection which made her submissive and dependant. Her father thought of these qualities in her as her devotion towards him. After her marriage with Gautama, she depends on him for solace and comfort. She wants his love so that she can give meaning to her existence and help her fulfill her desires. But Gautama proffers logic instead of emotional warmth which leaves her unfulfilled; she is unable to accept it. Anita Desai through *Cry, The Peacock* stresses that Maya’s story is not just one woman’s tale instead it is the saga of entire female race that has to put up in the ugly shackles of patriarchal society. Maya feels suffocated in the atmosphere around her and diverts her attention to pets who like her are as much victims of society, which refuses to give them of independence.

Anita Desai through the character of Maya unfolds the modern feminine sensibility of isolation and trapped psyche. Maya’s alienation is reflected in the loneliness of the bear and the caged monkeys. Her desire to get monkeys released and her faith that her father would open their cages and let them out symbolizes her own suffocating loneliness. She also compares herself to the peacocks that mate only after fighting.

When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. Hundreds of eyes upon their trail have seen the truth of life and death and know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life. ‘Lover-Lover’, you will hear them cry, in the forest when the rain-clouds come, ‘Lover, I die’. (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 95-96)

This reference to the peacocks as ill-fated lovers occurs because their cries match Maya’s agonized cry for love and a life of involvement. The peacocks’ ecstatic pre-mating battle serves

as an appropriate correlative to Maya's unfulfilled eros. Maya knows about Gautama's imperviousness to her feelings, sensations and to all that is part of eros, so the albino-priest's forecast about death continues to haunt and hallucinated her. Disturbed by the peacock's cries and finding Gautama unruffled by her side, she makes a decision through which she is able to resolve the tangled boughs of her consciousness and of her fear of death. She becomes freer of any ambivalence in her relationship with Gautama when she thinks:

The man who 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, who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 175)

This progression in her consciousness is because of "her disenchantment with all that is domineering, rational; all that is pure Logos and all that is masculine. So the theme of death "is pivoted on the unfolding of the illusions that the 'unconscious will' weaves. There is a consequent release of the idea that willing and searching for satisfaction in an otherwise wrenching life can be possible... only by murdering Gautama". (Paul, *Critical Perspectives* 19) Thus, despite the numerous facets of Eternal Feminine in Maya, her abysmal frustration unfolds the "terrible *Kali* side in hurling Gautama down the low parapet of the roof." (Sharma and Awasthi, *Perspectives on Desai* 148)

Some critics are of the opinion that Maya, in her desire to live a life of her own style could not have become what she ultimately becomes -- a killer of her husband. As a psychological novelist, in portraying the inner lives and motives of the characters, Anita Desai in Maya's case portrays her neurotic sensibility and depicts her being ill at ease with her disordered and unplanned life, without tranquility and happiness. The introduction of the image of the pet dog Toto at the outset denotes "not only Maya's psychic disorder but also her incalculable pre-occupation with death". (Madhusudhan, *Perspectives on Desai* 56) Toto is not just a dog for her, it is a symbol of desirable companionship — warm, passionate faithful and everything that Gautama is not. In her post-marital loss of freedom she is totally a love starved person desperate for a meaningful existence.

Desai depicts the gradual disintegration of Maya's vanity, wisdom, calm and her approaching the stage of madness. But the question arises who was really insane. Was it Maya? Or was it the world around her which drove her to insanity? The prosaic world around her, which consists of dry astringent Gautama and his equally dry and busy mother and sister, suggest that she is in need of some affection. She is denied the fulfillment of marriage that is visible in her friend Leila's married life with her ailing husband. She is denied the warmth of motherhood that Pom, her friend exhibits.

Maya did not find relief from any quarter and the dimensions of her psychological insecurities kept on widening. When she looked around for some guidance, the advice available to her, clashed with her inclinations. Her friends, her father's fatalism, Gautama's pragmatism and her surroundings all led her to feel trapped. Therefore, with her sickened imagination and neurotic mind, she began to form many frightening images from remotely corresponding objects. During the night her, "memories came to life, were so vivid, so detailed, I know them to be real, too real. Or is it madness". (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 12)

Cry, The Peacock, explores the dimension of psychological uncertainties in a woman's life. The story of the novel operates from two levels -- from the eyes of Gautama and as fancied

and experienced by Maya. However the realm of fantasy is better explored through the working of Maya's sensitive mind. Thus the novel becomes a story of a hypersensitive married woman who would like her husband to die because she thinks that he cannot grasp things as her perspectives. A gentle shake does not move the machinery of Gautama's mind for hours whereas in Maya's case, the wheels of the machinery of the mind do not stop at all. "No dark passages, no hidden labyrinths seem to exist in Gautama's mind as they do in Maya's case." (Srivastva, *Perspectives on Desai* 140) The darkest passage of her consciousness and the deepest recesses of her mental experiences are illuminated by Desai for understanding her hypersensitive nature.

In the course of the drama which takes place in the novel a handful of major incidents happen: the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto; a visit from Gautama's mother and sister, and a shopping trip on which Maya accompanies them; the visit to Lal's home and the ensuing trip to the cabaret; and the arrival of a letter from her brother Arjuna. These incidents would not have shaken the earth for someone else but for Maya they were of grave significance. For instance, a pet's death is to be mourned but needs to be forgotten soon but for Maya Toto was not just a dog, it was a devoted companion. Because of being a childless woman she attributed the relationship to the dog as "no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child". (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 09)

Maya reacted strongly to the happenings in her life, which shows how heightened her general level of perception had become. She becomes a representative of the 'new era' woman whose thought process is walking the tight rope of sanity. She, with no outside concerns or social contacts, lived a life which was by its very nature self-centered. Her childhood had been carefree -- perhaps more so in memory than in reality. She had been free to roam with pets or smell flowers or do what her father thought was right. She was almost as free in her latter years, except for two constraints: Gautama and the astrologer's prediction. She could not deal with them rationally.

Maya's failure in associating herself with people and things around her makes her surrender her 'unique identity' and mould herself for 'role-based security.' Despite this transition, her unconscious mind continues to be at work. She thinks about different things and their images keep on haunting her. For instance, the subtle transformation of the image of moon from an object of beauty to that of terror implies the coexistence of beauty with ugliness—the beauty of the moon calling forth the ugly idea of pushing Gautama to death in some way as the Queen of Nights "attracts snakes. Beauty and evil, evil, beauty." (Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* 70) For Maya, death lurks in the dark spaces between the stars and speaks of loneliness.

Desai makes Maya fight against the tradition which typically categories her as short-sighted and micro-headed. Tradition for her becomes a hydra-headed monster and her encounter with it reduces her to a "stuffed rag doll." (Jain, *Writing Women* 238) But the fact of the matter is that Maya does not question tradition: she accepts it as given and withdraws, yields, buckles and destroys herself.

As the black and sultry mood of hushed expectancy deepens, the atmosphere of the novel pants for a cloudburst of relief. In the end, the fury of the tornado outside matches the fury of the emotional tornado whipping and knocking Maya's heart and mind. She hurls down Gautama to death in a blinding moment of unbearable agony. Thus becoming an instrument of her crazy destiny, she proves the astrologer right. Therefore, Maya, forever a prisoner of the past, lives almost perpetually in the shadow world of memories, which engulf her, wave upon wave. Memories and desires become nodules of pain and keep throbbing in her consciousness.

For Maya, the very Achilles heel of being genetically and socially programmed as being more susceptible to emotional frustration and depression is double edged. If Maya feels deeply and intensely she also suffers more the harsh sting of dislocation between ideology and reality. The discrepancy between what she aspires or sets out to do in life and the harsh reality, plunges her into abysmal anguish. Therefore, she is a loner and inevitably a loser who grapples to win some understanding out of an intensely privatized world of personal emotions.

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