

***CRY, THE PEACOCK* AND ANITA DESAI'S FEMINIST UNDERTONES**

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For times immemorial woman have been dominated by men all over the world, as they have been taken acquiescent to men. Patriarchal society has been constantly humiliating, silencing, torturing and afflicting matriarchal counterparts in each class of society. With the spread of education, awareness, modes of communication, confidence, able leadership, successful struggles and postmodern age, women as a group began to replace male gaze with their own subjectivity in comprehending the universe inhabiting them too.

Like in rest of the world, in India too, women struggling exploitation began active in inner struggle in literature, art and creativity against patriarchal ideology, and started filling silences and vying with those of men. Anita Desai is prominent figure in this daring category of the then Indian society. She is widely recognized as the pioneer of psychological novel in modern English literature. Desai has dared to highlight matriarchal struggle, self-identity, self-freedom and self-power against the male dominated world. In her novels, most of female protagonist are fragmented and estranged from the world, society, parents and even from themselves, because they are not ordinary people but individuals who fail to cope with the patriarchy, they slide into their own appropriated world where they whirl their great expectations, dreams, ambitions which automatically disappears in the realm of obscurity. Typically in postmodern state, Desai in her fiction and *Cry, the Peacock* has feminist message. In postmodernist style Desai has voiced women's questions, raised fiery voice and initiated an inner revolution against the traditional patriarchal ideology and dared to ask for equal human rights. As a new facet to the success of Indian women writers in Indian English fiction Desai in a strong pillar probing the inner lives of her women characters. Highlighting the strength of Anita Desai, K.R. Srinivas aptly states:

Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility. The particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among the barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists. Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters. The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions is necessarily reflected in the language, syntax and imagery, yet the readers first impression on reading Anita Desai's novels may very well be that the emotions are too many, and are often the result of

excessive celebration on the author's part and not always determined by the movements in the consciousness of the characters. Nevertheless, Anita Desai's is an original talent that has the courage to go on its own way. (464-465)

In order to understand the creative psyche of Anita Desai, it is important to know the position of postcolonial Indian women which is quite different from the western women. The colonizers (Britishers) during their rule in India had introduced a way of life which could not be adopted completely by the colonized (Indians). After independence, when the Britishers left there was a sort of union between pre-colonial and postcolonial life style of the Indian which threatened many indigenous entities and resulted in dissolution of traditional values while transmuting simultaneously rural and urban locale, which ultimately transformed the Indian psyche with the blend of native and borrowed components. The so called modernity fragmented and weakened Indians. Indian women were hit worst as neither could she adopt Western ways in totality nor could she leave Indian way of life. But the awareness and education that colonizers gave to Indian women made them aware of her momentous position in the future of Indian society. They knew their unique position, different from western women, hence understood that aping the West was not a solution. They understood that they are confronted with the challenge of defining herself by a set of relationships and postcolonial culture of a created society. In Anita Desai's fiction women as victims of confused cultural setup provide for fine psychological studies. Anita Desai completely portrays her women characters dealing with their inner and outer life, psychological and social life. Her women characters are not superficial, but real flesh and blood human beings governed by a sense of negotiation, submission and martyrdom rather than complete revolt against the system for the sake of physical and emotional liberty. In regard to her experience with development of her women characters lively she reiterates in an interview published in edited book by James Vinson:

Writing to me is a process of discovering the truth...the truth that is nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things. (348)

She has treated psychological condition of her female protagonists very ably to discover and aesthetically convey the truth. This can be seen through her portrayal of neurotic protagonist Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Desai uses Maya as her own mouthpiece to express her personal views about woman. As Cixous stresses, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." (78). Maya represents sensitive individual in her moment of forceful scuffle and her effort to seek neurotic solution. Desai weaves sequences in the plot to explore the emotional world of phobic Maya. Maya is portrayed as a psychitzophrenic character haunted by a premonition of her husband's death on account of her blind trust in astrological prediction. Apart from this, lonesomeness and unreciprocated love leads Maya to the clutches of demise and violence. Maya as a Postmodern Indian Feminist represents the Indian female personality structure which is very multipart and multilayered.

Maya is a representative of repressed female community and dealing with her neurosis goes for violence. She hardly enables herself to adjust to adjust with her family in the male dominated society and her husband Gautama, a misogynist lawyer is much older than her. Mayaseeks in Gautama her husband a guardian and a protector but finds that in him,

“understanding was scant, love was meager.”(89) Desai through Maya wants to expose the psychological anguishes and conflicts, atypical treatments and alienation behaviours of the heroine along with the dreadful fright, climaxing outrageous individualities and the suicidal act. Through, this novel the novelist successfully focuses on the fears, sufferings, inner gloomy mode, isolation, and stifled sanguinities of postmodern feminism of India. Desai highlights the cultural hegemony whereby the Indian female community evolves the mindset that they are weak, inferior, other, and fragile, which adds to their alienation.

The novel highlights the marital discord between Maya and Gautama, the wife and husband. Lacking romantic emotions and feelings Maya identifies herself with the peacock in the conflicts of the extreme joy and trance of their terrible inner experiences of love and warmth. She is burdened with her cruel past related with the astrologer Albino who had predicted that either she or her husband would die too early within the four years of their conjugal life. She had forgotten the fear associated with the prophecy but with the demise of their pet dog Totto she again falls in the clutches of the impending tragedy. She is frequently haunted by unexpected incidences and unpleasant memoirs. The brutality of the past of her motherless childhood, the constant fear of impending tragedy, her craving for life, her deterioration, all these factors are intimately related with her recall of the her recollection of the oracles of the Albino astrologer.

Maya is portrayed sharing deep affectionate relationship with her father, Rai Sahib who has pampered her as a child especially after the untimely death of her mother and Maya is aggrieved to leave the parental home at the time of her marriage. Her hidden mental agonies caused due to her mother's untimely death makes her alienated from the outer world. All her hopes and affectations related with married life remain unfulfilled by Gautama which makes her fragmented, incoherent and upset mentally. Maya desperately needs her brother, father and husband to save her from her psychological quandary and cries, “Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying.” (84) As a hysterical woman, Maya fails to cope with the patriarchal order and revolts silently and helplessly as *other*. She ultimately adopts an escapist path and becomes a nature child wherein she attempts to find out sympathy in the realistic milieu and landscapes. She tries to solve her nothingness by getting mixed with birds, animals in her storming life. Maya is an unconventional and modern woman who fails to be an ideal wife in a middle class family of Gautama. Despite her economic reliance upon her husband, being insecure, helpless and powerless she as a postmodernist female she searches out for a purified world where she expects equality without any difference between male and female.

Gautama fails completely to understand Maya and cannot save her from her withdrawal alienation and eradication. Comprehending her psychological condition, Dr Sanjay Kumar's observation seems quite pertinent here:

Maya's fear is aggravated as she fails to relate to Gautama her husband.

Between the husband and wife; there exists a terrible communication gap as both of them seem to live in different worlds.(45)

Together with the prediction of the Albino astrologer is the myth of the peacocks' cry that adds to Maya's psychological deterioration. The peacocks are mythologized to fight before they mate. The juxtaposition of the ominous prophecy and the myth of the cry of the peacocks in the mind of Maya causes a frightening uncertainty in her existence. One day both Gautama and Maya are on the roof after rain and dust storm, Gautama all of a sudden blocks the vision when Maya is enjoying her natural world and the beauty of moon. Irritated Maya pushes Gautama over the parapet consequent to which Gautama dies. Immediately after Gautama's death Maya feels

comforted. The prophecy of the astrologer comes true when now ensures that she will live a better life without Gautama and without the fear of premature death, but soon she starts feeling guilty which destroys her mental equilibrium.

In the third part of the novel, we meet her in a state of shudder and later she suffers from lasting restlessness. As a result she commits suicide. Maya's cry like/unlike the cry of peacock is the cry of a tormented woman who suffers the pangs of solitude unable to find any compensation in her life and in the moment of her death. She only hopes for the same fate as of peacocks that after cry she may have happiness in compensation/consolation. Unfortunately her hope remains unfulfilled even after the cry and her suicide.

Unlike the stereotype traditional women who cares and gives to others, even at her own cost, Anita Desai as a feminist has produced Maya that does not lose her identity, but asserts the necessity for her individuality representing individuality of all women. Maya is presented to be making efforts to shape her life to be herself, even to the point of disrupting the conventional stereotype of conjugal life, but Maya does not succeed in creating an identity for herself and in leading a steady life. The ambiguity of Maya's psychological problem is precisely impacted in the titlic fable of the peacock's cry. The cry of the peacock is the cry of a woman who is not mentally, physically or emotionally satisfied. Maya experiences that she misses Gautama's presence, her normal conjugal life, and her husband's love and care. She as a normal woman is capable of compassion which enables her to experience what the peacock and peahen experience but this makes her feel all the more agonized that although she craves emotionally, there is no physical relationship leading to orgasm, hence she starts hating Gautama. This sense of dissatisfaction makes Maya gloomy and regressing eternally. Unable to socialize, she being an introvert fails to face reality and does not have any other option than being at home brooding always.

No doubt, *Cry, the Peacock* is the tale of disparaging love in which suspicion, misinterpretation and inflexible attitude lead to marital discord. As feminist inspiration Anita Desai presents Maya unlike conventional idea of an Indian wife who is expected to be a sustaining force creating harmony in marriage by her constant unending sacrifices. As a feminist Maya demands her husband's attention too much and this unfulfilled demand leads to the tragedy. Attitudinally, both are poles apart Gautama is applied and peaceful man, whereas Maya is too imaginative, self-centered, over demanding and possessive. In her reveries, she is forever in search of meaning in life. She is afraid of disloyalty. She is unable to fix the responsibility of discord in her marriage. Unable to find proper answer to her queries she closes to herself only and realizes that she does not even know herself, but comes to conclusion that if one needs to be punished why it should be herself just because she is a female and why not Gautama as he too is a human being as herself.

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