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“A CRY FOR LOVE” IN ANITA DESAI’S NOVEL: CRY, THE PEACOCK

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai has presented the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women in her novels. She is concerned with inner world of her heroines. The main theme is complexities of man-woman relationship especially husband-wife relationship. She is interested in presenting eccentric character rather than every day and an average human being. She tries to look for the deep desires, emotions and feelings felt by her characters and shows them as the influencing factors behind their actions. The present novel is a psychological study of hypersensitive childless young woman suffering from father-fixation. She basically portrays the plight of modern woman in the existing male dominated society where she makes an effort to voice herself. The novel expresses Maya’s strong desire to live life to its full as soon as she moves away from the protection of her father, and the harsh realities of life bewilder her. Desai basically portrays the disparity in temperament as affecting the man-woman relationship.

Key words: upbringing, marriage, emotions, practical view, marital disharmony, blunted relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards human predicament. She voices the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by problems and predicaments. (Prasad 139) A woman novelist Desai has created a niche for herself by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. She examines her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves forced into the uncongenial environment, fighting against the odds. The most common theme in her novels is human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. Anita Desai writes about the predicament of human being. Her main engagement is to study the human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. Desai insists on the loneliness of human being which is the characteristic of modern society. There is a breakdown of the communication between the two. Her novels unfold the inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters and tell the harrowing tales of blunted relationships. The novels are certainly reflective of social realities.

Nowadays the theme of human relationship is more important due to rapid industrialization, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism, and the Westernization of attitude and lives of people. D.H. Lawrence points out: The great relationship of humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relations between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary. She writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. So man-woman relationship brings characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication that frequently occur in her novels.

The present paper focuses on characters which are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. Much attention is given to the emotional crisis of her protagonists who live in a chaotic society. This novel is a faithful description of psychological growth of female character which cannot cope with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected, forlorn and demoralized. The novel deals with failure of the central character, Maya to have meaningful and sustaining relationship with other members of family and her husband.

Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known, the established. Due to lack of communication they become alienated and start brooding about their lives. The novel *Cry, The peacock*, is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship and its impact on wife. Desai looks into the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. She broods over the fate of modern woman in the male-chauvinistic society. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behaviour pattern of partner leads to strain and tensions in the relationship while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity that strained relationships occur. Through Maya's character, the novelist tries to stress the great yearning of woman to be understood by her male partner.

Her themes are mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. In this novel Anita Desai deals with the feminine sensibility through the reactions and responses of the heroine to the events and situations in the novel. A highly emotional, sensitive and sensuous woman, Maya has obsessive love for life, she is perfectly normal and healthy woman. Her only sin is she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous which caused disturbed psyche of modern woman. She tries to strike a balance between institutional needs and intellectual aspirations and is deeply bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is brought before her.

Maya and Gautama belong to two different worlds which is the cause of incompatibility and unhappiness in their marital life. Maya has a very happy childhood. She is left to enjoy the full share of her father's affection as she is motherless and her brother runs away from home at an early age. So she starts thinking about the happy childhood whenever she feels frustrated in her married life. Gautama has grown on the prescriptive norms and traditional expectations. He has been brought up in a totally different family atmosphere. His mother is a social worker. She works very hard and moves about pretty fast to attend to needs of her dispensary, her workshop for the blind, disabled, unemployed. His family members have various subjects to discuss. They used to speak on parliament, bribery, corruption revealed in government. His father is a freedom fighter and wants to write book about freedom struggle and free India. He has no time to make emotional attachment with his family members as he is busy in his activities.

Maya grows as a highly sensitive and emotional type of woman and Gautama is an over busy and intellectual type who is practical to the core. It is due to this temperamental difference between them that their marriage proves to be incompatible. Maya is a character who suffers due to tensions and anxieties of being modern in a traditional society. Meenakshi Mukherjee comments, "Maya's slow advance towards insanity is the theme of the novel, and the main pattern is the contrast between woman's response to the world through her senses, and her husband's response through his intellect."

In this novel, Maya and Gautama have strained relationship because of their incompatible temperaments. Maya was very much in love with Gautama and needed his companionship and understanding; but there were very much missing in their relationship. Maya starves for her husband's companionship and spends sleepless nights consuming with this starvation. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and

emotional by nature while Gautama is realistic, insensitive and rational in thinking. Maya is poetic in sense and high-strung. Gautama has detached and remote attitude towards the incidents. He keeps his philosophical view alive. Maya cherishes tenderness, softness and warmth in her behaviour. But Gautama remains hard and cold in his response to the happenings in their married life. They are just like the two poles apart in nature living together whose matrimonial bond gradually becomes fragile and tenuous. The tensions between them reach to the extreme state in which she kills Gautama and commits suicide.

Maya being a prisoner of past lives almost perpetually in the shadow world of memories which engulf her, Gautama lives in the present and accepts reality and facts even though they are not very beautiful. On the contrary, Maya never tries to accept the facts, but she wants to live in her imagination and fairy world. She keeps on remembering her childhood days or the treatment her father meted out to her. She is a father-obsessed means; she feels that no one else loves her as her father did. She seeks other father in her husband. But he does not respond her. Sensitive Maya is terribly upset over the death of her pet dog that she loses calmness of mind and Gautama neglects emotional yearning of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. This mechanical behaviour reflects his insensibility towards Maya:

“Showing how little he knows my misery, or how to comfort me. But then he knew nothing that concerned me.

Giving me an opal ring ... no, no not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me.(Cry, The Peacock, p. 9)

As marriage is a union of two different minds and there is bound to be adjustment or maladjustment. According to the writer, most marriages prove to be union of incompatibility. Men are apt to be more rational and women – emotional and sentimental. Their attitude and interests are different. In a marriage woman is expected to adjust the surrounding which becomes the reason for the deletion of her individuality. It affects her psyche and behaviour which destroy her sensibility and there is a gradual erosion of marital relationship.

Maya and Gautama are the victims of poignant problem of maladjustment in marriage. Being emotional and sensitive, her favourite pet Toto's death upsets her so much that she finds it difficult to endure the psychological strain. The sad demise of Toto produces a terrifying vacuum in her life. Gautama's detached and matter of fact attitude towards the incident multiply her misery.

Being alone in the family, her mother being dead, and her brother having gone to America, she gets the most of her father's attention and affection. Her father without thinking much married her off to his lawyer friend Gautama, who was a middle aged man. Maya, who lived a carefree life under the indulgent attention of her loving father, and desires the similar attention from her husband, but totally fails in marital journey. Their relationship gets fractured. She fails to establish rapport with Gautama and finds no meaning in her life.

Anita Desai portrays Maya as a most sensitive woman suffering from psychological fears and marital disharmony. Maya looks at Gautama not as a husband but a father substitute. Gautama tries to heal up her internal wounds but fails. He cannot redeem her loneliness. She is torn by doubts and dread. Maya cannot comprehend the philosophical attitude of Gautama. She expects emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both of these are denied to her by his cold attitude and age. Their marriage becomes unfruitful and punctuated all along by “matrimonial silence.”

Maya seems to be self-seeking for a change in her life. She connects her present with the past and tries to go into a sheltered life. Gautama remains unperturbed when Maya calls him a betrayer. The novel is about Maya's cry for love and relationship in her loveless wedding with Gautama. Maya's childlessness exaggerates her loneliness. She becomes highly sensitive as a result of it. She wants to enjoy life to the utmost. She enjoys life in all its forms. She enjoys beautiful sights and sounds. She is an epicurean to the core. In contrast, she is married to Gautama, a friend of her father very senior to her age and a prosperous middle aged lawyer. He is kindly cultured, rational and busy with his own affairs of business. He looks upon her love for good things as nothing more than sentimentalism and once makes a disparaging remark about her that she has mind of third rate poetess. The novel echoes in the cry of Maya the desire of a married woman to be loved with passion which few tend to get.

"Because when you are away from me, I want you." (113)

On another occasion, in spite of her seductive posture, Gautama remains rigid and cold;

"I turned upon my side, close to him, conscious of the swell of my hip ... about my rounded forms."
(41-42)

These above words reflect Maya's physical dissatisfaction and it leads to their death. Being a motherless she becomes more sensitive and as a result develops much attachment for her pet Toto. Her husband hardly realizes the emotional bond thread existed in her heart for Toto. He is cold and practical to her grief. He is only concerned with a cup of tea. Dog's death reminds her loneliness. She says: It was not a pet's death alone ... but another sorrow ... me with despair.(13) She becomes more lonely after that Gautama's insensitivity is highlighted when he calls her chattering monkey when she tries to share her feeling regarding her pet.

"On his part understanding was scant, love was meager"(89)

He treats her like a child. We come to know that their marriage was based on friendship between her father and Gautama. Maya's other causes of suffering are her marriage to Gautama, a man of her father's age, his detached and reserved attitude towards her, her physical and emotional dissatisfaction, indifferent behaviour of the other members of the family, solitude and silence of the house, death of her pet dog. This leads her to a state of neurosis. It is Gautama who is solely responsible for Maya's condition. Her intense absorption only enslaves her. In the typical condition of an unfortunate woman who is alienated through and through her obsession, her frustrated state of mind, her total withdrawal from the world of purposeful action and meaningless relationship, Maya pushes him off the parapet wall. She kills her husband in a fit of insane fury by pushing him from the roof and commits suicide.

Maya and Gautama are the poles apart. The novel is not only the story of Maya, the heroine but it also contains many other female characters that represent different problems. Maya stands for poetry of life, Gautama for prose. Gautama blames Maya's father for the upbringing of Maya. He blames her father for her immaturity and calls her a 'spoilt child'. It damages her female psyche and affects their relation.

She sought her guardian and protector in her husband. Maya's predicament can be linked to the failure to find a refuge either in marriage or in family as she is childless woman. She is trapped with the fear of albino's prophecy that one of either she or her husband's family would die within four years of her marriage. She confines herself in a world of superstition and is unable to come out of the constraints imposed by the orthodox society.

The novel is a family play mainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between Maya and Gautama. The story is about spiritual prays of Maya, the half child half woman romantic heroine. This novel presents an impression of the marital incoherence and encountered conjugal life. Maya has been deprived of a mother's love. This painful void in her emotional life can be one of the factors responsible for her marital discord. Maya sense of insecurity is further intensified by the absence of her brother Arjuna who could have been dear childhood companion. It is worth mentioning here that her father's behaviour with his son was entirely different. Towards him, her father was harsh and strict. With his daughter he was delicate and indulgent. So she noticed difference and felt uncomfortable. Perhaps her father was aware of her mental weakness and treated her like a delicate child because doctor had advised him not to make her anxious or sad. Maya has not attained emotional maturity which comes through facing facts and is content with the false notion that her husband can substitute her father and she can still behave like a child.

Maya is a rebellious woman who fails to identify herself with her husband's world and finds herself alienated from the affection she got from her father and besides her total economic dependence on her husband makes her feel rather insecure and powerless. Maya thinks of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. She is a torn woman and deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity. She says:

"God, now I am caught in the net of the inescapable ... God, let me sleep, forget me ... There is no rest any more only death and waiting."

Here Desai portrays a hyper-sensitive, and cultured Maya and dives deep into her trapped feminine psyche from childhood to her untimely death. She is the victim of many social and psychological predicaments. Her

social status affects her psyche to the extent that she becomes an easy victim of many known and unknown inner traumas. There is no denying the fact that Maya receives the comfortable upbringing. She has no shortage of material comforts, but the high intensity of pains she faces at mental level takes her to tragic end. Maya's predicament can be linked to the failure to find a refuge either in marriage or in family. Maya's abortive marriage to Gautama and its lack of attachment stands in sharp contrast to her jolly and love-laden infancy. Her childhood memories overshadowed her present with gloom. What pains Maya is her "utter loneliness in this house." (9) So she establishes no communication with her husband Gautama.

The split in her personality results in her loss of belief in herself. Her obsession with the father figure, separation from the mother along with her failure to identify herself with Gautama has led her to isolation. She is trapped with the fear of albino's prophecy. Though her father defies these false beliefs, she is unable to overcome her fears. In the fourth year of her marriage, she is seen building this fear to such an extreme that it leads to an unexpected explosion. Her unconscious desire to kill Gautama is a revenge reaction arising out of her basic frustrations like unhappy married life, unfulfilled longings, a reaction against her husband's cold unresponsiveness. Maya's worldly nature makes her well inclined to derive the fullest satisfaction from the intimate experience of sex. But for Gautama's age attitude to sex, she remains a much disappointed woman. Maya admits frankly of her sexual dissatisfaction born of Gautama's negligence: "How little he knew of my suffering Telling me go to sleep ...the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed." (9)

Desai has an extra-ordinary sharpness and penetration of vision. Instead of presenting the outer spectacle of the world with her creative imagination she peeps into the female psyche. The novel *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) is a "remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience.

Repressed desire is repeated, disguised and sublimated. Its appearance in various forms at different levels of mental life creates the intelligible structure of psychic continuities. Either in disguised or in manifested form, desire affects an individual personality or character. Psychological consequence of sublimated desire may be transformed into suicidal melancholy. Death is not an escape from present but also is a form of sublimated desire. Both Maya and Gautama talk about death. Maya refuses to ignore her sensitive, emotional world where Gautama advocates a detached view. He defends his indifference to feelings and. For him real man of wise wisdom is "he who is free from all attachment neither rejoices in receiving the good nor is vexed on receiving evil, his wisdom is well established." The novel thus gives expression to the long smothered wail of a lacerated psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the chief protagonist herself.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Anita Desai has presented the complexities of human relationship which is a big contemporary problem and human condition. She focuses on the anguish of individuals living in modern society. The theme of marital discord in Anita Desai's novels reveals her consummate craftsmanship. She broods over the fate and future of modern woman in male-chauvinistic society. Her female protagonists are generally caught in a web of painful circumstances, their struggle and the outcome of which is usually the basis of the novel. The memories of her past are acting as a comforting balm to her wounded psyche. Excessive love and caring attitude between father and daughter can be a sole cause of her tragedy and depression.

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