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POETICS OF FEMINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S "CRY THE PEACOCK"

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ABSTRACT

In the light of feminist critical theory, novels of Anita Desai can be examined as the manifesto of female predicament. We can candidly analyse the creative urge and energy of her writing in her own frame work. The most recurrent theme in Anita Desai's novels is the hazards and complexities, man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism. Women in literary expression reflect and represent the writer's sense of bewilderment and vulnerability. Nevertheless, her element concern is to explore and to expound human psyche and self. The present study will critically review Desai's special attention on the problem of feminine sensibility, in her first novel, *Cry the peacock*.

Keywords: social realities, feminine consciousness, emotional instability, hallucination, alienation, boredom, insanity.

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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly assumed that third world literature is caught in psychological realism while first world literatures have graduated into language games. In the contemporary socio-political setup, the predicament of modern man seems to be one of the dominant interests of the novelist. The most recurrent theme in Anita Desai's novels is the hazards and complexities, man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism. The women characters created by the novelists like ShashiDeshpande, Rama Mehta, Jai Nimbkar, Anita Desai etc., do obviously reflect the consciousness of individuality which has been suppressed for long. For example in Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, breaking the barriers of conventionality, fearlessly fights to assert her points of view. This very first novel has made Anita Desai establish herself as an excellent artist - like novelist focusing special attention on the problem of feminine sensibility.

Anita Desai no doubt came into the literary world by a storm with the publication of *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. The title of this novel belongs to the exciting dance of the peacock at the approach of rain bearing clouds. Maya, the heroine, is a neurotic, young, woman whose madness is fast disintegrating under the pressure of marital discord and of certain vague but frightening childhood memories. The chief protagonist Maya is a spoiled and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin and married to Gautama, a rather insensitive, pragmatic and rational advocate, who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father –

obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Being the most sensitive woman, Maya suffers from neurotic fears and marital disharmony. Her neurosis growth, development and crisis are painted in all the three parts of the novel. Maya has developed a father – fixation and after her marriage she finds Gautama a poor substitute. He proves just a medium to reach her father in her unconscious mind. Naturally, there is little in common and they, simply maintain matrimonial bonds. To Maya, freedom is not possible unless she removes her impression of Gautama in her inner consciousness. Maya strikes at Gautama's reflection in the mirror and tries to kill him. This shows a gradual transformation of her character into a criminal. But the novelist dramatizes the character and the situation simply to give a clear shape to the inner self of Maya and thus she proves a medium for refracting experience. Maya seems to be self - seeking for a change in life. She connects her present with the past and tries to go into sheltered life. Efforts by Gautama to heal up her internal wounds fail as her consciousness gives it a dramatic turn. Her continuous longing for something fails to establish complete communication with reality in life. Maya continues to suffer from the feeling of suffocation and disassociation of her inner self even after the sugarcoated pills of relief given to her by Gautama.

Maya is very much obsessed with the prophecy of disaster and in the very beginning longs for the company of her husband soon after the death of Toto:

“She sat there, sobbing and waiting for her husband to come home. Now and then she went into the verandah and looked to see if he were coming up the drive which lay shriveling, melting and then shriveling again, like molten lead in a groove cut into earth” (C.P5).

Maya wants to revert back to her childhood memories to escape her present. In this crisis she usually resorts to crying and bursting into a lot of pillow beating. In her such efforts her consciousness seizes sensations of colour, smell or sound. As Meena Belliappa observes: “She has a haunting perception of whiteness (white flower, white Toto) against a background of overwhelming darkness, a sense of foreboding expressing itself in ceric sensations – moistness of coiling Shakey and deafening roar of drumbeats thrust the memory on its trail of a lost object”. (P 9) The message of loneliness and the spell of darkness separate both Maya and Gautama. Even the sky does not seem to give her an inescapable fact of life. She seeks meaning in a dark universe.

The cry of the peacock and at the same time the cry of Maya frustrates her within. The world appears to her like ‘a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes’. Similar to the monsoon peacock dancing madly and crying for its lover and finally killing itself in a frenzy of love, Maya's heart cracks up with the presumption of same helplessness, and she admits “when I heard one cry in the stillness of night, its hoarse, heart – torn voice, pierced my white flesh and plunged into its knife to hilt in my palpitating heart”. “Lover I die. Now that I understand their call I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine” (CTP 97). Still Maya controls and watches her other self which dominates at the end. The dance within her becomes more and more feverish. She is no longer sane. She is borne by doubts and dread and the atmosphere around her indicates sub - human existence. Her hopelessness is not that of an individual but it spreads and becomes universal. Her neurosis is somewhat collective and poses a definite danger to the identity of woman as a whole. The mental agonies and tensions in her mind show miseries of her existence and narrow down the poetic beauty of her life. She continues to lead an explosive life and her feminine consciousness is felt from the bottom to the top and she comments on her unsuccessful married life as:

“It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon as from outside, and - therefore, neither true nor lasting. It was broken 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 sear to park” (CTP 45).

Whenever Maya discloses her mind to Gautama, he does not appreciate her, he does not understand her, on the contrary, he rejects the things out – right. He calls her neurotic, a spoiled baby and her life a fairy tale. Her intense pain is revealed in her worlds as

“Poor Gautama, not to be alive to notice the odour of lives, nor to hear the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, not to have time to count the stars as they came out one by one – too Gautama, my poor, poor husband” (CTP 237).

Maya’s loneliness and isolation, her aching heart and gradual deterioration of psyche make her an emotionally disturbed character taking her to a world of feminine sensibility. Even though the problem in *Cry, the Peacock* is complicated by the emotional instability of the heroine Maya, there are “moments of lucidity followed by the murderous clarity of an insane woman with a frightening logic of her own”. (Rao 12) She feels that should never sleep in peace. Therefore, she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death. She has no rest any more – only death and waiting”. Maya herself admits:

“Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment, these were the four walls of my private hell one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain” (CTP 117).

At many places one could see Maya changing psychic states of mind and moods. She lacks something to communicate: “But there was a moon. A great moon of hot, beaten, copper, of molten brass, living and throbbing like a bloody human organ, a great full bosomed woman, who had mounted the sky in passion, driven all silly stars away from her, while she pulsed and throbbed, pulsed and glowed across the breathless sky, I spun around, clutching the Baby, to stare at my relations, whose names I knew, whose moods I sensed, whose hands I touched, and found there was not one amongst them to whom I could cry, “ look, look, there is a room in the sky” (CTP 51).

Maya seems to cherish always a continuous longing for something which is impossible for her to attain. There is something lacking in her which she sees far from her goal. This emotional stability she wants to capture but all her efforts fail miserably. This emotional alienation between Maya and Gautama makes her fight with the courage of a ‘new woman’ to assert her points. She has the courage to tell Gautama, her husband “you know nothing of me and how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you’ve never loved” (CTP 112). In another situation, Gautama wants Maya to listen him, but there she says, “No” and further adds, “you listen to me tonight” (CTP 113). This is the voice of a new woman.

The novel *Cry, the Peacock* oscillates between two poles: on the one end, we have Maya, obsessed with the feelings of love, compassion and sympathy – features of feminine quality – whereas on the other end is her husband Gautama, the embodiment of rationality, logic and pragmatism. The novel begins with the death of Maya’s pet dog Toto which upsets her so terribly that she seeks consolation from her husband but the letter being practical remains complacent towards the loss and assures her that the dog would be replaced. This indifference hurts Maya very much. One could get a number of such examples throughout the novel where Gautama, a rational and professional busy man, neglects the emotional yearnings of Maya. It is the absence of a companion on her way to the final end which becomes the cause for the mounting desperation. Gautama constantly reminds of her place as a woman of deep – rooted feminine sensibility.

In *Cry, the Peacock* , Maya lives “in a state of fear and with hallucination..... she clings to fantasy because she is unable to cling to reality. However, her relationship to reality passes through three different stages, her childhood, in marital life and finally when she surrenders herself to the world of insanity she stands as a victim of the constant tension between the vain glory of city life and regressive tendency to recapture the childhood world of innocence and purity”. (Gopal 12) The city of Delhi with its glamour, parties, dances, drinks and gossips in clubs disturbs greatly the inner quiet of the female protagonist. The members of Gautama’s family, his mother and sister are like the city itself. They are fond of luxurious epicurean life style. Again, there is a contrast between the two ladies in Gautama’s family, while Nila is an unhappy married woman trying to divorce her husband. Maya feels imprisoned in her in – laws’ house rather she likes to cling and clasp her husband in her bosom. By so, picturing the female characters in her novels, Mrs. Desai, as a feminist author has excelled in delineating domestic life creating contrasted characters acutely bringing to light feminine consciousness. .

Cry, the Peacock discusses richly the mind of Maya in feminine framework. Feminism is deeply into feeling and sensation whereas masculine is into intuition and thinking. Maya and Gautama are opposed to

each other and both of them represent the extremities of feminine and masculine principle. Maya feels desperate and de-potentiated because even after four years of marriage, Gautama has failed to fecundate remarks to Katha kali dances delineate her detest of the masculine and his liking for feminine principle. Maya's relationship with her husband, father, brother Arjuna reflects archetypal feminism. Ann Lowry Weir examines the feminine sensibility of the novelist and remarks:

Anita Desai is the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness. She gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists. (PP 154 – 155)

In fact, the title "*Cry, the Peacock*" conveys Maya's neurotic sense of life, her mental working, her agony and death. There is always a conflict between Maya's conscious and unconscious mind i.e., between life and death. There are binary oppositions in the novel such as : Fantasy / reality, individual / social, inner / outer world, dream / reality, emotion / reason, past / present, white / red colour, morning / evening, involvement / detachment, the rising / falling of musical notes and so on. The temperamental difference between Maya and Gautama leads to marital discard as Maya likes to enjoy life to the utmost, while Gautama is a dry and prosaic kind of person. Whenever Maya's sensuousness tends to be sensual, her needs are again left unanswered by the elderly husband who has "a bent of spine" projecting ribs and "long paper match face" – all of which show that he is sexually cold and unattractive. The situation is further deepened when Maya with her seductive posture initiates in love making and Gautama still remains cold and frigid. Maya's predicament at that particular moment is narrated in the lines that follow:

I turned upon my side, closer to him conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded form. His eyes remained blank of appraisal of any response. It was as though he had seen only what he had expected to see, nothing less and nothing more" (CP 41 – 42)

Gautama fails to understand the sexual needs of his wife K.B.Goel rightly remarks: It is difficult for the lawyer, Gautama – a man of reason, logic and practical world knowledge to realize the intensity of Maya's needs and then to bend down to her requirement "(Goel 23)

In fact, Maya desires to idealize her marital love like Radha and Krishna establishing a communion and a unity with her husband's mind, body and soul. Her desire is not fulfilled and therefore it leads to despair, frustration, alienation, boredom and psychic disorder and finally insanity. Her morbidity forces her to kill husband. Then, she commits suicide. The reader is now faced with a moral question after reading the tragic tale of the novel. This question is recorded in the following lines by one modern critic Shashi Khanna as:

"Can Maya's act be condoned? One can't get away by the reply she is mental patient and it is on account of father fixation that she married a man much elder to her own self. The novelist's own attitude in the matter does not appear to be ambivalent. She does not want to justify Maya's action to seem 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" (P 29)

In *Cry, the Peacock*, a conflict between wife and husband has been depicted with great skill by the novelist. While the wife is active and dynamic, the husband is passive and inert especially in emotional and sexual matters. Anita Desai, "rejects the western feminist base of binary, male- female gender, hostility, for women's emancipation in India was pioneered by men starting with Raja Ram Mohan Roy" (Shyamala 45) However, it has to be accepted that in this novel, Anita Desai as a feminist' has portrayed Maya, a woman as a social class who is exploited by patriarchy atleast, at familial, social and finally in her private life. She feels oppressed and her personal feelings and emotions are ignored, checked and suppressed by her husband as ours is male-dominated society. In a nut- shell, Mrs. Desai as a feminist novelist has depicted Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* as a female protagonist with her heightened physical, sexual, emotional, and romantic needs and greedy of his wife. This temperamental gap leads to alienation, despair and frustration. However, Maya asserts her identity and individuality. She longs, claims and reclaims for love of her husband and even initiates for it but all in vain and therefore, it breeds boredom, loneliness, neurosis suffering and finally, it intensifies Maya's insanity

resulting in the tragic end of both. So the tale told by Anita Desai in *Cry, the Peacock*, her treatment of man – woman relationships, and her feminist viewpoints are artistically, aesthetically and psychologically sound and effective in all respects.

Conclusion

What sounds notable is that Maya's feminist consciousness protests against society which devalues women and forces her to realize that her socialization was not typical. Maya is a heroine from the feminist perspective: she defines her signifying self as separate and distinctive (as marginal) She struggles to maintain that identity even though at odds with the society around her (patriarchy, religion, female stereotypes) and she finds validation in her own voice (life- affirming) Maya's feminism is her struggle for personal fulfillment in countering the female stereotype of her friends and the expectations and criticisms of her husband. As a heroine with feminine sensibility, Maya dares to maintain her "aesthetically and morally coherent unique" individualism despite lack of support from friends, family or religion. In fact, Maya is energized to action in order to maintain her individualism, her "signifying self ". Labeling Maya, insane as a result of killing her husband thereby marginalizes her resistance to subservience and her effort for self-identification. In short, in *Cry the Peacock*, Anita Desai is found presenting Maya as the dissenting female fighting against three traditional forces in her life; male authority expressed by her husband; her female friends playing stereotypical submissive- wife roles; and her religion's beliefs in karma and detachment.

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