

PSYCHIC DILEMMA OF MAYA IN ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

Dr.V.Suganthi

Asst. Professor of English
Thiruvalluvar Govt. Arts College
Rasipuram 637 401
Email: suganthidhanaraju@yahoo.com
Mobile: 94422272271

K.Rajmohan

Research Scholar
Thiruvalluvar Govt. Arts College
Rasipuram 637 401
Email: rajmohandheena@gmail.com
Mobile: 9047017074

ABSTRACT

Indian English Literature is the product of two great cultures-Indian and English. Indian English Literature expresses varying shades of human emotions, thoughts, and struggles blended with the petrichor of Indian soil. Before 1970s, it has dealt with themes like the country's independence movement, East-West encounter, tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism. The portrayal of human psyche as a prominent theme has been untrodden and unknown. It is only the younger generation of novelists that has shifted their focus from outer to inner realities of human psyche..

Psychology is the scientific study of human mind or soul in relation to various spheres of human activity. It provides the better understanding of human perception. Psychology includes many sub-fields of study such as human development, sports, health, industry, media and law. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have framed the principles of psychology and applied it in interpreting literature.

Modern Psychological Novel flourished with the publication of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913), Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915), and James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1914). Following the West, the Indian English Novelists also have started writing fiction dealing with the predicament of deep rooted anxiety, alienation, and aberration in their writings. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale and many others have shown the inner workings of women's psyche in their writings. They have exposed the psychological and emotional imbalance of Indian women realistically. This research paper talks about the Psychic Dilemma of Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*.

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Anita Desai has been considered as the pioneer of psychological novel in the modern Indian English Literature. She is well known as a novelist of psycho emotional situations. Her main pre-occupation is neither providing entertainment nor propagation of social ideas but to study the new lanes and labyrinths of human mind. She penetrates deep into the inner working of women and externalizes their passive reaction. She resembles Joyce and Woolf in implementing and evolving the psychological novel in modern Indian English Literature. She exposes minutely the inner working of her sensitive women characters who suffer passively due to their hypersensitive nature as well as the unromantic nature of their husband.

Anita Desai's predominant aim is not to reform society by her writings but to give a realistic sketch of an individual's psyche and its interaction with social values. She is interested more in portraying the psychological aspect of an individual. Her characters differ from the characters of major writers like Raja Rao, Sahgal, Narayan, Bhattacharya, Markandaya, and Malgonkar, who mainly deal with the socio-economic and political problem prevailing in the society. Unlike them, Anita Desai gives an opulent gallery of female characters. They are not from the common rung of the society and their problems are not related to food, clothing, and shelter. They are hyper sensitive females and their rebellion is not so much directed against society as against individuals. Their problems are neither physical nor social. They are psychical and emotional.

The depiction of feminine psyche is the common link in all Anita Desai's works. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is the story of an Indian woman protagonist Maya who is undergoing considerable traumatic experiences obsessed by mental tension. In *Voices in the City* (1965), she analyses the inner mind of Monisha who is alienated by conjugal conflict. In the novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), Anita Desai studies the mind of Sita, the protagonist from a

woman's point of view. In another novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Anita Desai has dealt with the emotional problems of the characters from the woman's perspective. These novels commonly express the frustration, disappointments, agony, and trauma experienced by women in male-dominated, conservative, and tradition bound society. A well-known critic, K. Meera Bai in one of her critical writings on Anita Desai writes:

Anita Desai breaks a new ground in the world of Indian-English fiction by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world. She creates a world of her own which she fills up with extraordinarily sensitive beings. She eschews social documentation and moralizing. It is not as though her novels are devoid of social purpose. Her novels delineate the inner lives of hyper-sensitive women who are in eternal quest for meaningful life in a way- 'the true significance of things'. (14)

These women characters undergo a strange psychic experience and suffer due to their hypersensitive nature and unhealthy family atmosphere. They are either women with affluent background or mere house-wives. They do not have the pressure of a career woman. The restricted surroundings make them suffer intensely. This leads to inharmonious relationship between the husband and the wife. They are too frail to cope with the dehumanized and artificial urban atmosphere and with the hardened unfeeling nature of the in-laws. It is disgusting for them to adjust with the changing scenario from the lap of the parents' family to totally different urban setups. They are peculiar and eccentric rather than general and commonplace. They do not have fixed personalities. They are an amalgam of several different characters. Their tragic flaw develops into a psychic malady making them neurotic and hysterical which in turn breeds a morbid and contrite temperament. They suffer from a metaphysical anguish, a matrimonial boredom or a tragic sense of loss.

Cry, the Peacock is the story of a neurotic girl namely Maya who becomes a psychic and pathetic figure as a result of it kills her husband Gautama because she thinks that he is the hindrance in her life. According to R.S. Sharma, *Cry, the Peacock* is "the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English" (*Cry the Peacock* 127).

In this novel, Anita Desai exhibits the hidden and dormant impulses of Maya's psyche by using the mythological and archetypal images. Her psyche experiences a lot of conflict due to

several factors like despair, frustration, loneliness and fear. The novel starts with the death of Toto, the pet dog of Maya and ends with the death of Gautama, the husband of Maya. The death of Toto affects Maya's psyche bitterly. Being a motherless child and a childless wife, Maya attaches high emotional bond towards Toto. Thus, she is unable to lead a normal life. Bidulata Choudhary remarks:

Toto's death is the first sign of her abnormality which evokes a series of consequent reactions. The usual decaying flesh seems unusually terrific to her and it is this peculiar insight that suggests her highly emotional and hysterical response to worldly events. Soon after the incident, the agony of missing the pet lurks in the blank spaces of her mind, making her more and more restless. (55)

Maya is a romantic girl who finds "so much to look at, to touch, and feel and-be happy about" (118). She desires for outdoor life. As a child she has enjoyed the cool weather of Darjeeling under the care of her father. Now she wants to go to Darjeeling with Gautama. But he rejects by grudging, "Why don't you? ... Your father would take you wherever you wanted to go. He can" (40). Likewise, the Kathakali dance is a thing of great amusement to her. So, she pleads him:

'I want ... I want,' 'to see the Kathakali dance. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages. ... And the dancers are all men. ...' The masks they wear ... you must have seen them? And their costumes. And the special kind of music ... And it is all out in the open, at night by starlight ... and perhaps they have torches. (42-3)

Gautama abruptly refused because he does not want to take a tiresome journey down to South in the sweltering summer. Maya is disappointed by the insensitive nature of her husband. Even her simple love for music is not fulfilled. It hurts her and creates a chill scar in Maya's psyche. She feels that her husband is a hindrance in the way to fulfill her desires.

Both Maya and Gautama have opposite views on life and matters. Being a creature of instincts, Maya wants to enjoy life whereas Gautama behaves like a saint preaching the philosophy of detachment. He has a mechanical attitude towards life. They do not share anything common at emotional level. In fact what is real to her is shadowy to him. What are facts and hard

realities to him have no interest for her. He is twice her age. She realizes his coldness, painfully becomes aware of her “loneliness in this house,” (9) and whispers “I am alone”(9). Although their marriage has been an utter fiasco, they continue to be together. Maya reflects this as:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with, which out of the pettiest superstition, we would not bear to part. (40)

Gautama's professionalism and the practice of detachment widen the gap in their relationship. They always disagree and quarrel over trifling matters. They live in an iron cage of marriage without any intimacy. They continue to chase their disparate visions about life on different levels. It is this incompatibility that makes Maya unhappy, unfulfilled, lonely, disappointed, and alienated from her husband. This temperamental incompatibility is the root cause to Maya's neurosis.

The father-obsession and the hypersensitivity make Maya's nervous system tense. Maya marries Gautama only because he resembles her father. She identifies Gautama with her father. Unfortunately, both of them fail to fulfill the love-wish of Maya. Maya fails to realize her identity as a wife. She finds her past memories as a consoling force to her tense mind. Gautama hints at her father fixation tendency as:

If you know your Freud it would all be very straight forward and then appear as merely inevitable to you-taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious father obsession- which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that you mature rapidly; you will not be able to deal with, to destroy. (146)

The father-fixation, unfulfilled womanhood, weak husband and death phobia make her a neurotic patient. The inner psychic turmoil of Maya's mind is shown by using different images like window and mirror. Sigmund Freud views that sexual dissatisfaction is one of the major causes for neurosis of women. A continuous negligence of the pleasures derived from body can produce great disaster to somebody like Maya. A healthy sexual life is necessary for a healthy

growth of mind. Sex enhances love and understanding between any couple. It will give a sense of security. But to Maya, it is completely neglected by Gautama. Had she been given sexual satisfaction, she would have not become a victim to neurosis. Freud emphasizes this in the following statement:

Experience shows ... that woman, who, as being the actual vehicles of the sexual interests of mankind, are only endowed in a small measure, with the gift of sublimating their instincts, and who ... When they are subjected to the disillusionments of marriage, fall ill of server neuroses which permanently darken their lives. (47)

Another problem is the unhealthy environment in which she is forced to live in. The environment is unhealthy to her because no one in the family is ready to share the feelings and emotions of Maya. Thus her family environment is not at all conducive to her psychological well being. Moreover, the long lonely hours make Maya to feel the boredom of life. She is not a career woman. She has nothing to fill her lonely hours. Adding to it, she is childless and thus becomes psychic.

To Maya, life seems to be an endless boredom without any significant events. Neither is she given any importance nor does she plays any vital role in any family event. Her sphere of social activities is limited. Even though she has a secure home, earning husband, and well-defined future, her unconscious mind desires for unbridled freedom which is denied to her.

Maya finds it difficult to reconcile her unconscious mind with her conscious mind. Her conscious level of mind signifies the associative approach to human behavior whereas her unconscious mind signifies her identity as a woman and as a wife. When the conscious and the unconscious mind repel each other, anxiety enters into the mind. If the anxiety enters into the unconscious mind, it makes a person abnormal. Thus, this constant anxiety in Maya makes her to develop a negative approach towards life and see life as stressful and meaningless. Hence, Maya says:

All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar. Thoughts come, incident occur, then they are scattered

and disappear. Past, Present, Future, Truth and Untruth and I am tired of it. My body can no longer bear it; my mind has already given way. See, I am grown thin, worn. (179)

One of the major causes of Maya's abnormal psychic behaviour is the prophecy of albino astrologer that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of their marriage. This prophecy becomes troublesome to her unconscious mind and leads to the psychological trauma in Maya. Maya always ponders over the astrologer's prediction. "My child, I would not speak of tit saw it on your face alone. But look at the horoscope. Stars do not be lie. And so it is best to warn you, prepare you ... Death to one of you. When you are married and you shall be married young ... Death – an early one – by unnatural causes" (33).

Thus the prophecy affects the psyche of Maya and creates an obsession in her mind. This obsession is the root cause of her insanity. She speaks boldly:

Yes, I am going insane, I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope, that encounter with the albino, his prediction, my fate? ... Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity. (108)

Gautama fails to stop Maya's growing desperation. Maya's visions become chaotic and her dreams turn nightmarish. She neurotically perceives Gautama's death as the only solution for the fulfilling of her quench for self-fulfilling life. She feels that otherwise she will lose her rudimentary self. The prophecy becomes real to her unconscious wish. Maya hurls down her husband into death. In the end, Maya begins to fear her own death, "I am in love and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore-only death and waiting" (98).

Three days later, Maya jumps off the balcony of her ancestral house and dies. Maya herself becomes the nemesis of her own destruction by killing first Gautama and then committing suicide in the end. Madhusudhan Prasad observes, "In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity" (3).

Thus *Cry, the Peacock* is a psychological novel which analyses the abnormal psyche of a hypersensitive, married, and childless young woman Maya, who is infatuated with a childhood prophecy of death, kills her elderly husband in a fit of anger, becomes mad and at last commits suicide.

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