

## FEMALE DILEMMA IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK

JAYASREE K

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Velalar College of Engineering and Technology, Thindal,  
Erode, Tamil Nadu, India

### ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's, *Cry The Peacock* is a unique example or an illusion of the feminist point of view. She defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reactions and responses of the heroine to the events and situations in the novel. The study also means to investigate the role and contribution of patriarchy and patriarchal values towards the misery, suffering, loneliness and unhappiness of women or other psychological, social and economic problems experienced by them. It brings out the unique sensibility of a sensitive woman in sharp contrast to the detached and practical attitude of an insensitive husband. 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. The novel can also be seen as spectrum of presentation of the ways of dealing with the binary opposition of male versus women as object. All the options from girlhood through motherhood and man less life –style is open to here. Equality and Liberty are two operative words here. It is seen to be difficult for a woman to reconcile with the reality of life, bend down as she is weighed by the traditional Hindu values. It is seen to be difficult for a woman to reconcile with the reality of life, bend down as she is weighed by the traditional Hindu values. 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 psychological status in the family in particular and society in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, Female Dilemma, liberation and Patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

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)

She defines the uniqueness of 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 that she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous and thus represents the disturbed psyche of modern Indian woman. She tries to strike balance between institutional needs and intellectual aspirations and is deeply bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is brought before her. When she experiences loneliness and lack of communication, she feels herself in mental crisis. She is seen to share a very affectionate relationship with her father and is at pain to leave her home at marriage. Her problem upbringing caused by her mother's death makes her detached from the world outside. Thus she wrote, "... my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more-restricted, unnatural even, in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was a pretty one. The expectations she had at marriage of her husband, who is much older than her are not fulfilled. As a result, she becomes stultifying. She funds her husband Gautama, as a man in whom understanding was scant, love was meagre. But as one reads through the novel, one funds that her husband loves and cherishes her, but does not take her seriously and that too because she is a woman. He identifies her with "Maya", which repulses her and to which she objects. As time passes, she becomes more and more restless, starts brooding over the feeling of emptiness in her heart. She says, I had yearned for the contact that goes deeper than flesh – that of thought – and longed to transmit to him, the laughter that gurgled up in my throat as I saw a goat nuzzle secretly a basket of sliced melons in the bazaar while the vendors back was turned or the prolonged thrill that lit a bonfire in the pit of my stomach – when I saw the scene unfurl like a rose in the west and farther west ... But those were the times when I admitted to the loneliness of the Human soul, and I would keep silent." Maya is thus an extremely sensitive character, a portrayal of woman who has failed to come to terms with Hegemony and patriarchal order. Though she lives in the male world surrounded by male dominancy, she refuses to identify with it and revolts against it in her own way. As the story unfolds, she seeks her mother in the natural landscapes and gardens, gets solace in it, but her inner feelings and deepest desires would not be rejected. Though Maya is an affluent housewife with all the necessities of a comfortable city life fulfilled, yet she is neither happy nor satisfied nor is she the ideal, content housewife who compromises with her situation and thus suppressing her self-identity and feminine desire in her heart till she dies.

Maya is a rebel woman who fails to identify herself with her husband Gautama'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. There are other traits in Maya's character which transcends the idea of femininity. She is in search of new vista for a woman's world, a space in which she is at par with man. The dance of the peacock's who destroy each other in spite of being madly in love. Maya thinks of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. Rebuffed by her husband, Maya is torn between her lone of life and her fear of death. She is deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity.

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 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 counterbalanced 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)

*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.

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.

Post independence Indian woman novelist in English or even in regional genres show educated woman in the changed socioeconomic conditions, revolting to their exploitation, skeptical to the traditional roles assigned to them, the inevitability of marriage, patriarchy and male-chauvinism. Post independent literary writings of Indian woman writers have redefined discourse on women. They have given a voice to the revolting consciousness of the womenfolk. The current case study Anita Desai has performed a significant function of instilling a positive "feminine" identity rather a female identity, role model women who deters the dependence on men. She has given a voice to the new Indian woman. Like Virginia Woolf of western feminist literary paradigm, Desai has created woman characters through her novels who are no more symbolic "Shakti" mother Goddess, subverted and suppressed in the "andarmahal". They are human beings who seek liberation, move from bondage to freedom from meek indecision to self assertion from weakness to strength.

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