



LACK OF COMMUNICATION RESULTING IN NEUROSIS: PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction is very necessary to every individual, because only into the society one's individual thoughts and actions reflect, "social overtones" (Phillips: 90) and he can modify his ways of thinking and behaviour. So it has been rightly said, "Society teaches us to be human" (Phillips: 90). Anita Desai in her first novel Cry, the Peacock, projected the chief protagonist Maya, who is "a wayward and high strung child" (Desai: 48), an over protected by dotting father (Rai Sahib) was grown up as a privileged pampered child and strictly prohibited from social participation. In her father's house, she lived "as a toy princess in a toy world" (Desai: 78), away from the bafflement of life. Living in a completely isolated and alienated world of her own dreams, imaginary and fairyland, she is totally deprived of real-life experiences. Moreover, due to over-protected and sheltered childhood, her maturity level does not correspond with her age.

INTRODUCTION

Maya as a father obsessed daughter wants her husband to be her father's replica, but Gautama, her husband, a workaholic, solely practical, cold prosaic and devoid of emotions, is antithetical to her and moreover, he is exasperated with her childish tantrums. Such mental incompatibility between spouses creates an ever widening gap of communication. Albeit they communicate, but their ways of communication demarcate them between two different worlds; Gautama, in his world of 'detachment', while struggling for where-withal keeps himself busy with work, and Maya, a romantic, hypersensitive, emotional, passive and dependent young lady, always pines for company of her husband. About this incompatibility of behaviour Meena Balliappa, a renowned critic rightly remarks, "The incompatibility of character stands revealed – Gautama who touches without feeling, and Maya who feels

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without touching” (Wolf:131). Maya’s hypersensitive and emotional nature, on one hand, and the reserved nature of Gautama and his family, on other hands, alienates her from everything around her. In the state of desolation, she is clogged by the prophecy of the albino astrologer who once predicted that one of the spouses will die after four years of their marriage. Physical and emotional isolation tends Maya into the world of astrologer’s prophecy. Her isolation and loneliness lead her to the state of paranoid where she hallucinates her own death. She has a deep love with life and in the existential dilemma and under the fit of insanity, she pushes off her husband from the roof.

Desai, in her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, has made it clear that rather to portray the real picture of life; she is focused to delineate the inner reality of the mind of the protagonists. As a novelist of subtle human emotions, she poignantly describes the psyche of her protagonist Maya, through ‘Stream of consciousness’ ‘internal monologue’ and ‘impassioned soliloquies.’

The novel begins with death of Maya’s pet dog ‘Tatto’, whose body was rotting in a hot day of April. The vision of the dead body bears an apparent impact over Maya’s mind; she “screamed and rushed into the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house” (Desai: 7). Lonely and alienated Maya passionately waits for her husband Gautama. But Gautama, a famous and busy lawyer of the city, was dedicated to the solidity of thoughts and facts. In the first section of novel, Desai intentionally has cleared the mental incompatibilities of husband and wife. Gautama is over conscious regarding his duty than relationship. Being a hard-core realist, he never pays attention towards feelings and emotions of Maya and he fails to understand agony of her fractured self and leaves her alone and alienated when she needs him most, “Gautama rose immediately, ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether” (Desai: 9). Knowing all her anguish and agony, he left her all alone in the prison of depression to hallucinate her the vision of Tatto’s dead boy; a confrontation with her own death.

Through the life of Maya and Gautama, Desai foregrounds the theme of marital disharmony. Lack of communication and adjustment demarcates a gulf between mental compatibilities of spouses. Their approaches to life are antithetical to each other. Maya is ‘instinctively passionate’ and Gautama, contrary to her, an ‘essentially intellectual’. Both are egoistical. Nobody wants to make a compromise. Being childless Maya develops an over attachment to her pet dog Tatto and after his death, she feels lonely and horrified by the eternal truth; ‘death’. Tatto was a child substitute for her and the “death of dog means a lot to her, the loss of desirable companion, a warm and passionate child-substitute, but above all her own death, which she thinks imminent” (Ravichandran:161). But Gautama never tries to understand her emotions and unsympathetically leaves her on her own situations. Maya shares, “my words



made no sense to him, he was not a mind-reader at all” (Desai: 97). Being a laborious and responsible member of the family, he is egoistic about his practical wisdom and always tries to change Maya instead to understand her. In such a suppressive environment, she feels lost and alienated and time and again raises the voice of her real-self. But Gautama’s “coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me, talk and talking reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house” (Desai: 14). She wants to reveal her anguish and agony, but her callous husband has a condescending attitude towards her and leaves discussion considering her a child and immature. The deprivation and negligence of deprived soul, widens her sense of alienation, which ultimately leads her to the utter chaos of depression and turmoil. She desires to share all her agonies with her husband but Gautama silenced all the chances of communication even before it starts.

Desai presents Maya’s isolated state of mind through fantasy, nightmares, reverie illusions, delusions and hallucinations, etc. Maya, over sensitive, always pines for emotional and physical satisfaction. She tries her level best for communion and contact relationship but all her offers met with a sharp rebuff. Maya, a young romantic lady, always craves for the moment “where not union but communion is concerned” (Desai: 90). She makes effort to derive support from her husband but Gautama, always busy with his clients, tends to keep away from her. Maya a love sick, having a love impoverished heart feels uncomfortable in the bed of ‘hot itching sand’ gasps with perspiration in the ‘bat-tortured dark’. She shares the helplessness of her isolated soul.

Telling me to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me to either the soft willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed. (Desai: 14).

She is unfulfilled by the basic needs of married life and passionately longs to satisfy her biological urge. She boldly accepts, “it was not only his presence, his love that I longed, but mainly for the life that would permit me to touch him, feel his flesh and hair, hold and then tighten my hold on him” (Desai: 88). Maya, as a wife, always feels as an outcast from the physical world of conjugal relationship and alienated from the mental and emotional bondage. Mutual consent and communion are very necessary to make relations in balance and well-kit. It provides the chances of communication and sharing, which help the person to solve his relationship problems.

The constant suppression of feelings, desires and sexual instinct may provoke the illness, i.e. neurosis and the state of loneliness and despondency compel Maya to recall ‘tenebrific albino’ astrologer’s prophesy, which haunts her as a net across her. Through Maya, Desai describes the psyche of a depressed person, who, at the day time amidst companion, can



realize that prophecy would not harm her, but moments of her loneliness in bed at night hallucinate her innermost. She feels, “But, in the night, under that stark gaze of the moon, in that waiting silence, my memories came to life, were so vivid, so detailed, I knew them to be real, too real” (Desai: 84).

Desai, “a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters and astute interpreter of life” (Bande: 167), has poignantly delineated the psychological problems of an alienated woman. Through ‘internal monologue’ and ‘impassioned soliloquies’, she depicts Maya’s passionate longing for ‘libido satisfaction’ and propagates the issue as one of the most significant causes of marital disharmony. Sex is a biological urge, and the constant suppression of such natural instinct may disturb the mental equilibrium of a person. Maya who always longs for the physical intimacy has an obstinate and frigid husband. Her desire for the union of two bodies and soul is unfulfilled. She is untouched by the desirable flesh in her most private nights. She shares “we might never had brushed hand with hand, twined hair with hair, even in most private night” (Desai: 90). Maya’s love longings demand an attachment. But Gautama’s ‘detached’ attitude cruelly suppresses Maya’s ‘longing desires’. Temperamental disparities of her husband made Maya submissive and introvert which raises the chances of the gap of communication between husband and wife. Gradually, it becomes main cause of their marital disharmony. God has gifted human being with the distinctive quality of communication and “through the effective communication, a great many relationship problems can be solved, and many more can be prevented in advance” (Phillips and Wood : 275). The lack of ‘effective communication’ separates them at mental, physical and emotional levels and such mental, physical and emotional separation deepens her sense of loneliness and throws her into alienation. About the gap of communication, Maya herself accepts –

But those were the time when I admitted to the loneliness of human soul, and I would keep silent. The things we need unsaid would fill great volumes; what we do say, only the first few pages of introduction. (Desai:90).

The solution of all relationship problems of Maya were laying under the fact of “effective communication.” In this reference Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood rightly equips “people use communication to form social systems that enables them to do together, what they cannot do alone. They manage their lives and they find ways to feel secure” (Phillips: 272) but in case of Maya and Gautama their inability to talk apart them into two separate entities.

Thus the main cause of Maya’s lonely and insecure life is unhealthy communication, and Gautama is exasperated with Maya’s childish and ticklish behaviour. In communication, they both are never assertive but always try to dominate the other. Their conversation is



“desultorily, not really listening to each other, being intent, on our paths” (Desai: 21). Gautama’s participation in active life and his connection with society enables him to subdue his alienation, but Maya has no social interaction. She is completely dependent; disjointed from society and alienated from self. Her all hopes are centered to her husband but they “end up being two sides to same coin: in each case, the exclusiveness of the self makes it unable to accommodate the other” (Acharya: 53). Maya desires for overall involvement of her husband but their behavioral polarities and different mindsets alienates them from each other..

Marriage is a meeting of two souls. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the marriage of Gautama and Maya was not based on mutual consent and enthusiasm but basically it was a compromise between two friends. Maya reveals, “our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else” (Desai: 39).

Maya’s childhood upbringing by her dotting father may be listed one of the causes of her tragedy. No doubt she is too much impressed by her father’s personality and her adjectives to her father, i.e. ‘smiling father’, ‘gentle father’, ‘amused father’, ‘rejoicing father’ apparently prove her as a completely father obsessed daughter. Rai Sahib had two children Maya and Arjuna. Arjuna was a boy of free will and loves simplicity of life. He neither feels satisfaction nor enjoys the sophistication of upper class life. He does not want to live in his father’s world of limitations and rebels against him to enjoy the life of his choice. Maya shares, “my brother was always the rebel – unlike me” (Desai: 120). The attitudes of father and son were opposite to each other. Arjuna’s rebellious attitude annoyed Rai Sahib. Rai Sahib wants to make full control over his children but never becomes a mother substitute to motherless children. Arjuna, who was “a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed that fought for its liberty” (Desai: 123) was bitterly scolded by his father in front of servants, but he refuses to live in the world of restrictions and accepts the challenges of life rather to live in an alienated and isolated world of his father. Unlike Arjuna, Maya, a father obsessed, does not want to lose her father’s love and affection, so her personality develops to meek and submissive nature. She becomes completely dependent on her father. Such upbringing distorts her personality and obstructs her to lead an individual and independent life. About Maya’s blind adoration of her father a psychologist Karan Homey words seem appropriate–

A blind adoration may inflate his feelings of significance. He may feel wanted and appreciated not for what he is but merely for satisfying his parent’s need for adoration and prestige and power. A rigid regime of perfectionist standards may evoke in him a feeling of inferiority for not measuring up to such demands... moves towards autonomy or independence may be ridiculed.(Homey: 87).



Rai Sahib's attitude toward his children was a "manifestation of power than of love" (Jain: 17) and after Arjuna's revolt he tightens his holds on Maya and showered all his affections on her. Excess of everything is bad. Maya, as a pampered daughter, though physically she grows but mentally she always remains a child. Gautama's words seem coherent when he says, "neurotic, that's what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse word. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya – that is what her father taught her" (Desai: 98).

In this concern, Rai Sahib failed to give a proper up-bringing to his children. Neither Maya nor Arjuna could lead their lives in a good direction. Through the life of Maya and Arjuna, Desai attracts our attention towards the significant role of mother in the proper upbringing of children. The role of a mother in family creates a healthy atmosphere. She provides emotional and concrete support to her children. Undoubtedly, she is involved in the direct care of the children and such emotional support tends to enhance the quality of parent-children relationship and nurtures positive adjustment in their children.

The most significant factor of social learning is 'family'. A child watches the activities of other family members to acquire basic knowledge and learns to channelize and to communicate the thoughts to others. But in the case of Maya and Arjuna, there is a void of mother's tender and unconditional love, and their father could not fulfill the vacuum.

As a humanitarian, Desai through the character of Maya, encompasses the dilemma and aspiration of an individual in the contemporary society. Maya couldn't cope with her memories and present reality and her hypersensitive fixation with past and escape from present agony throws her into alienation. The gap of communication with her husband leads her to insomnia and fear psychosis, "I listened to the throb of my pulse" (Desai: 14-15). The constant lack of communication develops inferiority complex which leads her to a paranoid state. She assumes "they spoke to me, the synocete, only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping, marriages" (Desai: 15) and in her disillusionment, she believes "winter was over, summer had not yet arrived" (Desai: 16-17). She hallucinates tense, musty atmosphere all around her.

Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment – these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain (Desai: 88).

In physical and emotional dissatisfaction, Maya always longs to mitigate her desires. "Desire is an attitude aiming an enchantment" (Sartre: 511) and it is "the general name for that peculiar experience which arises in every mind" (Dougal: 141). But Gautama, always "in the



unhurried tones of a logician, a philosopher” (Desai: 125), simultaneously starts talking about ‘Bhagavad Geeta’s theory of detachment and tries to instruct her in order to keep her away from her ‘fairy land’ and suggests a philosophical solution of detachment. Moreover, he starts preaching her the lessons on the adversities of real life. As a romantic young lady she craves for physical intimacy to achieve emotional security and fulfillment. But for Gautama, life is not love and romance but “living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man” (Desai: 98). Their differences on love and romance never let them to keep in contact. For Maya, it is painful to suppress the emotions of love but for Gautama the display the emotions of love, and romance are vulgar. So he refuses to co-operate with Maya and leaves her alienated.

Maya, a motherless child and a childless woman is bound to suppress her maternal sentiments. So to be devoid of emotional intact, she comes to her husband for the same but he, rather to empathies with her, teaches her the theories of ‘detachment’. Maya and Gautama are two binary poles, and between them love does not seem possible. Through the polarity between their thoughts, Desai perhaps wants to evaluate that –

Perfect love on this planet is difficult to achieve. Desire for loving and being loved in return in physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions to the point of perfection is beyond attainment; hence life of those gifted with higher love sensibilities is bound to be partly tragic (Tripathi: 13).

Through the character of Maya, Desai penetrates into the psyche of a woman who finds the environment of his in-laws house as a ‘different world’ from her native home. Here Maya represents the condition of the newly married woman who finds a different world where she creates the feeling of nostalgia. Up to a great extent, environment of Gautama’s family let her be the part of their communications. In her in-law’s house she always feels insecure. In Gautama’s house Maya never feels comfortable in their conversations and discussions. Among them, she feels more alienated. Their conversations on “discussions in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries across the sea” (Desai: 43-44) make her to realize that she is not the part of their world. Moreover, she is not allowed to interact. She thinks herself an abandoned member of ‘shared culture’. She is supposed to keep her concern only with the silly household works. She shares –

They spoke to me, the synocete, only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping, marriages, for I was their toy, their indulgence, not be taken seriously, and the world I came from was less than – that it was a luxury they considered it a crime to suffer, and so dammed it with dismissal. (Desai: 45).



The deprecation and negligence from the 'shared culture' of the family makes Maya repugnant and she feels completely disconnected and disjointed from the socio-cultural world around her and due to cultural and value differences she always seems lost in the very environment of her in-law's house. Sometimes, she thinks to raise her-self high: "living in a competitive society, and feeling at bottom-as it were- isolated and hostile, he can develop an urgent need to left him above other" (Horney: 21). But in the conflict between her prompt desire and conscious mind, the voice of her desire is being suppressed, which leads her to feel inferiority complex in this 'knowledge society' and transmits her sense of alienation, whereas she cherishes her childhood memories to seek comforts and relief form alienated world around. She recalls:

As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well, that were read out to me by him, that inveterate reader aloud, so that a doll dressed in pink. (Desai: 741).

Escapism is not a solution to any problem rather it widens the gap of communication and leads the person to live on self-pity.

Maya, by nature, is reticent and introvert. In communication with her husband, she couldn't reveal her inner grief and agony but always used to churn these problems in her mind and in the communication with Gautama's mother, she found herself in a comfortable situation and wants to divulge all her predicaments to her. But time doesn't allow her to live with her any more. She was a social lady who is always duty conscious "And I have to go back to my crèche" (Desai: 131) although she had a soft corner for Maya but she couldn't spare time for her.

The moment Gautama's mother left for Culcutta Maya feels more lonely and alienated and away from the 'shared culture' she feels like a wounded alienated soul, dejected and disappointed. Here Desai lays more emphasis on the significance of the human company as the best way to come out from neurosis and only in human company people can sustain human relations into well pattern. But in the materialistic world, people are hard pressed by the time. Maya feels miserable and mentally distraught in stony silence of her alienation and loneliness. In her encounter with loneliness, she cries, "what, the house empty again, and I alone with my horrors and nightmares? No! They stayed a while, they might help me, as my own father could not, by teaching me some of that marvelous that was not vital, immediate



and present. I did not know how they could do this, but somehow it had to be done” (Desai: 136). She cries for human company, and the news of her mother-in-law’s departure deepens her sense of alienation. In lack of a human company she obsessed with ‘death’ which horrifies her sense of existence. She cannot think of any support from her husband. For a moment she thinks of her father, but he was on the trip to Europe. To avoid the fear of death and to divert her attention from astrologer’s prophesy she makes desperate looks into the past to convince herself. She recalls her father’s words –

It will all be well, it will be well soon, Maya.... It is best to accept, Maya. 'What does it do to cry?' 'Why must you get so upset'. Surely it is all for the best; It cannot be undone now, and it must be accepted as it is – you will find that to be the wisest course. (Desai: 48).

She recalls her father who often affectionately used to hold her in his arms and wipe her tears. She requires same love and care form Gautama but Gautama’s detachment makes her longing for her father’s company, “I should like so much to see him, Oh, I should like to see father again. It has been so long” (Desai: 48).

Her communication with relatives and friends reminds her about astrologer’s prophesy and in this process she suffers from existential dilemma and the prophesy that one of the spouses will die after four years of their marriage, occupies her mind with negative thoughts. About such complex situation of existential dilemma Jasbir Jain, a renowned critic of Anita Desai, rightly observes-

Her friends her surroundings, her father’s fatalism all these lead her to feel trapped in the shadow of the astrologer and the belief that she is condemned to die. This certainly leads her to value every moment of Gautama’s company, only life is so very unaccommodating to her demands. In her need for comfort, Maya turns to Gautama’s advice of detachment. But detachment is difficult to attain and attachment leads to self-destruction. (Jain: 19).

As an extremely sensitive and romantic young girl, she cannot detach herself from astrologer’s prophesy. Time and again, she tries to involve Gautama in her matters, but he does not want to be involved in the sufferings and woes of his wife. His detached attitude deepens her sense of isolation, which aggravates the vision of death. Lack of physical and mental communion disturbs their marital relation and through Maya’s perturbed psyche Desai, “transforms the conventional story of marital disharmony into moving study of the psyche of a woman who seeking love must die at the altar of her marriage moment by moment” (Sharma: 25). She identifies her own cries with the cries of peacocks. Their



neurotic. Moreover, when one has nobody with whom he or she can communicate this fear, it becomes more traumatic and the person feels himself/herself all alone – isolated and alienated. The consequences are terrible and to sum up it can be rightly said that after all it was the physical, mental and emotional alienation that makes Maya to take this extreme step and leads her on the verge of insanity.

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