



THEMATIC STUDY OF *CRY, THE PEACOCK* IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai occupies a place of prominence among Indo-Anglican novelists. Born in Mussorie oriented in 1937, she got her preliminary education from Queen Mary's school and passed bachelor's degree in English literature from Delhi University. She received attention with the publication of her first novel Cry the Peacock. Her Second novel Voices in the City brought her due recognition. The present study attempts to describe Desai's expression of her pre- occupation with the modern ideal of building the society free from male domination. An attempt has been made to show, how Desai represents the theme of uniqueness of sensibility of women as compared with the male counterpart and how they suffer on account of emotional as well as physical repression and become the victim of male-dominated social and cultural order.

INTRODUCTION

As a novelist of considerable merit, Desai has enriched the thematic convention of the Indian novel in English. D.S.Maini rightly points out that her innovations go to make her "a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction. " (Indo - English Literature 216). Cry, the Peacock (1963) is a maiden novel and it presents an incompatible marriage of the protagonist, Maya. H.M. Williams has rightly said that "Cry, the Peacock is a disturbing novel, mostly takes the form of interior monologue, delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya" (Indo-Angla Literature,87). The novel begins: "All day long the body lay rotten in the sun" (5). The novel tells the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable alienation. The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband - wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Their fate reminds one of that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's novel To the Lighthouse.

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1P a g e



The title of this novel sensitivity relates the spiritual pangs of Maya, the half-child, half-woman romantic heroine, who identifies herself with the Peacock in the agony of ecstasy of their fatal love - experience : "Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine" (97). The central protagonist Maya is married to an older man, nearly twice of her age, Gautama, a reputed lawyer, member of a warm-hearted, socially - active family.

Maya, the heroine, a secondary character unfolds the mystery of the feminine psyche in several ways and she has her own individual personality. Maya is born of a traditional God-fearing Brahmin family whose father is a Rai Sahib, a patron of old culture and values. She is brought up in a protected atmosphere and is unaware of unpleasant realities of life. She tells in these words, "my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But was a pretty one"(89). Finding pagan pleasure in nature and world; she has lust for life and 'sensual pleasure in living.' Her husband, Gautama, blames her father for her immaturity and inability to cope with realities of life which is more often than not unpleasant.

Maya is a daughter of a wealthy artistic father and is brought up in an atmosphere of luxury. Though Gautama is a confident husband who takes care of Maya and loves her in his own way yet Maya is not satisfied and happy. She thinks that Gautama never presents an impression of the marital incoherence and encountered conjugal life. The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. This makes the situation worse and it becomes serious and unforgettable incident to her. This event upsets Maya and she loses her mental balance. Being childless, she is very much attached to the dog and it appears that the dog was a child substitute. Maya is highly emotional and hysterical due to the death of Toto. Maya cannot bear the sight of the corpse: she is shown "rushing to the tap to wash the vision from her eyes"(5). "She thought she saw the glint of a blue-bottle and grew hysterical, the evening sun appears to be 'swelling visibly like - she thought'- a purulent boil until it ripe to drop"(6).

Gautama a practical man takes this event easy and tries to adjust for its burial. He consoles his wife, Maya, in his own way and says that he would bring another dog for her. His disinterested tendency hurts Maya. The death of Toto may be trivial for Gautama, a rational and professionally busy man, but it matters a lot to Maya. Though they live together yet, as a matter of fact, Gautama knows very little about her. In order to console her he offers a cup of tea without realizing Maya's agonies. Here we see that without any ill-intention on the part of either Gautama or Maya tragedy takes its place. Gautama, in his own way, loved Maya. "Maya, he said, patiently, Do sit down. You look so hot and worn out you need a cup of tea"(7). "Lying here in the dark? he said, and drew a finger down my



cheek"(11). "Come, come, he said, and took out the handkerchief again, more stained than ever. Do get up, he said, 'The servants are coming to take the beds out for the night, and, really, it is much pleasanter outside. Wipe your face, and we'll go out, Maya' "(11). Her heart soared with that ecstatic agony of all-consuming love. Maya as the representative of 'feminine principle' is hurt to the core when Gautama dismisses her grief at Toto's death with a mere "it is all over" (8). The worlds of Maya and Gautama are sharply contrasted in that both represent the extremities of feminine and masculine principles. Maya is seething in agitation manifested in her multidimensional projections of companionship, maternity, of Keatsian sensuousness, of her identification with petunias. Gautama on the other hand is an Apollonian; he is into form, order, discipline, career and logic machines. Maya is not so much into aberration and insanity as she is into her longing for love "of the peace that comes from companion life from brother flesh"(18). She wants to bathe in the fickleness of contact, relationship and communion. Gautama has no sensation—he cannot distinguish the smell of petunia from the smell of lemons he is into abstract thought.

The death motif is built skillfully into the novel. Toto's death fills Maya's mind with a premonition of some impending tragedy, as she exclaims in chapter 1 of part two:

...it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair (8).

Like Macbeth, She is haunted by the sire prediction because "four years it was now' we had been married four years....I knew the time had come. It was now to be either Gautama, or I" (32). The prediction of the albino creates a terrible commotion in her conscious. On the receipt of a letter from her brother, she argues with herself that, for the fulfilment of the prophecy, her own death was not necessary; it might be Gautama's, for "The man had no contact with the world, or with me" (175). This way Maya turns insane and kills her husband may contain an indirect comment on their different values of life. But being a Sanskrit (cultured) Hindu woman she suffers from the guilt and remorse for killing her husband and in spite of her rationalisation in the end she kills herself. Maya's tragic story may be the story of any woman, anywhere in the world. It is the story of a Hindu woman whose religious-cultural aspects of the symbol or title of the novel which enriches its meaning.

The Peacock's association with wisdom as described by Maya is to be seen in respect of the eye symbolism, the eye which is the window of knowledge. The hundred eyes of the Peacock may be compared to the hundred eyes of India, also named Sahasarksha. India was cursed by Gautama for seducing his wife to have his body covered by the Yonis, pudenda which later after Indra's penance were changed into the eyes, hence this epithet implies the one with



hundred eyes. In Hindu pantheon the goddess of wisdom is Saraswati whose mount is hasa (goose) and she has also been depicted with the face of donkey and mare. However, in South India and in Buddhist and Jan iconography Saraswati is shown with the Peacock. A thirteenth country Jan work Pratishtasaroddhar contains the following mantras of Saraswati showing her riding a Peacock, hence also called Mayurahini:

*Vagavadini Bhagat Saraswati him namashityanen Mulamantrana
Veshtayet.Om him mayurvahenyenamaiti Vagadhidevatam
Sthapayeta. (151)*

"This very aspect of Saraswati is based on religio-cultural myth. Desai presents the reference of Shiva which is interesting according to Puranic legend. Kartikeya is the son of Shiva" (Iconography of jail goddess Saraswati, Journal University of Bombay 218). Karthikeya's association with knowledge is mentioned in the Chhandogya Upanishada where he is equated with the Vedic sage Sanatkunara who taught Narada how to overcome ignorance. In the "Kathasritasagara, an 11th century work of fiction there are stories where Karthikeya grants Vidya, knowledge" (Karthikeya in India Art and Literature 50). Thus we see that the symbol of Peacock in the novel, the central symbol to manifest feminine psyche, has religio-cultural roots that enrich the meaning by providing undertones to the symbol.

The title of the majestic bird or the national bird which is associated with Kartikeya, the general of gods, has several epithets e.g., Mayurketu, Shikhivahana, Shikhidhvaga, Mayurratha and Shiahibhu etc. "This bird is presented to Kartikeya by Garuda whose son Peacock is. Garuda is the chief of birds and great enemy of the snake like the Peacock. At the Abhisheka, consecration Kartikeya, different gifts were given to him by the gods and Kamadeva, god of love presented him Kama Shastar, ArsAmartoria" (Brahmavaivarta Purana 57). This splendid bird, Peacock, is also a fast-moving bird described in 57th chapter of the Vamana Purana. Kartikeya is the son of Anita (Fire) is also called Agni-nandan and Pavaki, hence his association with passion. The Shakira (female power) of Kartikeya is Kumar and she also rides a Peacock. In the Durga Saptashati she is described as Kumari Shikhivahana. This aspect of the bird also suggests violence. From Karthikeya's point of view, the Peacock in the novel stands for violence before mating:

*Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other's breasts
to strips and fall, bleeding (95).*

It is laudable that the Peacock an Indian bird is also used allegorically in west: "The Peacock, which in Greco-Roman world may have symbolized man's hope for immortality, is of Indian origin" (The Encyclopedia of Religion 226). There is a mysterious illustration of Kartikeya in



relation to the Peacock. Also known as Kumar he "rides on the Peacock, the killer of serpents, for he defeats the most subtle instincts that bind the spirit of man in his body. Kumar changes venom into ambrosia. The serpent furthermore, represents the cycle of the years. The Peacock is thus the killer of time....Skanda rides on a peaPeacock called the year (parvani)" (Hindu Polytheism 300).

Another occult aspect used in this novel is that of Shiva. B.RamachandraRao finds Natraj a symbol of liberating and observes "the Natraj reinforces Maya's love of life;she feels that she has a greater justification of love" (The Novels of Anita Desai: a study 18).

Another variety of dance, as Mrs. Desai has mentioned, is that of cabaret dance. In such a dance girls earn their livelihood through their bodies, sometimes only by displaying and sometimes by selling them. The cabaret girls in the novel are what have been described in Sanskrit as RoopaJeevas because they live by their beauty. Albeit the cabaret girls do not have all the qualities of a Ganika, courtesan as described in Kam Sutra, yet they have dancing skill with emphasis on showing their fleshy wares. Maya has nothing but disgust for them but they are described well. The female body which has been stock them of poetry both in English and Sanskrit has been reduced here to saleable commodity:

...Their protuberant posteriors, and of which they made much, arousing chuckles of delight...bouncing movement that made her bosom more prominent...so that more and more of that white, tallow like flesh would rear out of her blouse...with a little provocative upthrust of her rump, etc. Their provocative display and movements such as they say, "see what I have ? Like it ? Take it, gentleman, take it, it's yours'..."Beautiful !B-beautiful b-bitch! (85).

The cabaret girls are described realistically and they represent the dank cellar of feminine psyche emanating from "the privacy of dank, small rooms that smell of unclean latrines and panting beast" (81).

Prabhat Kumar Pandey, a reputed critic, rightly says that Maya's tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. Childless, with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. And to cap it all she is not even sexually satisfied" (The Lonely Voyage: Feminine Psyche in Cry, the Peacock, 83). Maya, a sensitive wife, seems to Gautama a petulant, pampered, childish and immature, unable to cope with hard facts of life. The sexual starvation presents another blow to Maya who is internally shattered. Physical association, the sheer warmth of flesh may relieve and mitigate her suffering. Once coming



after a cabaret show Maya attempts to tempt Gautama dropping "the sari and clasping my hands in eagerness to communicate with him, unfold, at least, at last, completely all before Gautama who, being sleepy, might so easily miss the point" (91). Craving for sexual pleasure Maya prepares herself "longing to be with him, be close to him...Make haste in undressing....But when I went...he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable, sleep, and was very far from any world of mine, however enticing" (93). This is because of this very need she becomes sad. Ultimately this insatiable physical hunger presents expression in an act of delicate violence.

The novelist pervades the prophecy of death throughout the novel. The Cry which ominously suggests the ecstasy of love has the finality of death: 'Lover, I die, PiaPia' is like the dancer and the drum beating, the rhythm on which Life dances. If 'boom boom' in A Passage to India echoes the mystery of the East, the Peacock's Cry echoes the mystery of the prophecy. To borrow Brown's phrase we can call it an expanding symbol, which denotes the disaster after union. The theme of husband-wife alienation -a recurring motif in Anita Desai - is not developed in a slow, incremental manner such as we find in typical psychological novels. It may be noted that in Anita Desai the theme of Alienation does not acquire sociological or even philosophical connotations.

Some Other female character in the novel are Pom and Leila who are Maya's friend. Silly plump Pom who did not speak of fate wants to move away from her in-laws with her husband but does not succeed: "Logic, tact, diplomacy - nothing mattered to her who chattered so glibly and gaily...and never, referring to family, tradition, custom, superstition" (61). Pom is the typical culturally uprooted woman of India who swarms the big cities. Maya compares herself with Pom in the context of the prophecy. Another woman in the novel is Maya's friend Leila who has married a tubercular man against the wishes of her parents. She is a teacher of Persian in a girls' school. She married a man knowing his disease. Her attitude towards life is fatalistic. She is gloomy and ascetic wearing no jewellery or bangles. She is contrast to Pom. Desai aptly comments that she "was one of those who require a cross, cannot walk without one" (58). If Maya is observed with albino priest's prediction, Leila has conceded her destiny and does not grudge or complain." It was all written in my fate long ago" (59)

The two friends of Maya are two different woman but fatalism is common to Maya and Leila. Mrs and Mr.Lall are penportraits of hypocrisy personified and Mrs.Lall reveals it in no uncertain terms. The Sikh wife publically denounces her husband as a charlatan and opportunist, revealing the deep-seated antipathy of maladjusted wedlock. Gautama's sister Nila, a divorcee, declares: "After ten years with that rabbit I married, I've learnt to do everything myself" (162).



Even plump, pampered Pom complains petulantly against Kai lash who is not ready give in to her wish for having a separate house of their own. Mrs. Sapru, who comes to Maya's father, as a client to plead tearfully for her case, received disdain and criticism for herself though Mr. Sapru is blamed more for having lost his control over the affairs. All these wedlocks present the qualities and vices, abilities and weaknesses. That is why it's results are the classes, desperation, separation and seclusion.

Cry, the Peacock, is typically a feminine novel, a novel of sensibility rather than of action. It has the quality of an orchid and of a flute about it. Its concern is almost wholly with the terrors of existence, and it achieves its effects through a series of exploding and multiplying metaphors.

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