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FEMINISTIC VIEW IN ANITA DESAI'S *CRY THE PEACOCK*

A. BANUPRIYA

Assistant Professor, Department of English,

VISTAS.



A. BANUPRIYA

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, one of the best known contemporary woman writers of Indian fiction in English has added a new dimension and flavour to the contemporary Indian English fiction and has a significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. She is a keen observer of the society. The novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is faithful description of psychosomatic growth of a female character, which cannot cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Alienation, Frustration, Emotional instability, Liberation.

This study x-rays Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* as a unique example or an illusion of the feminist point of view. It is a story highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative about a woman told by a woman novelist. Maya is shown as a fast disintegrating woman under the pressures of marital discord. Married to an insensitive and unresponsive husband Gautama, she is pushed to the state of insanity and madness. Desai defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reaction and responses of the heroine. The incompatible temperament between Gautama and Maya results in tension. Maya is poetic, high-strung, dreamy, emotional and sensitive while Gautama is rationally hard, cold, detached, insensitive and remote. They are two poles apart which lead to her loneliness. Due to break down of communication it results in their detachment.

In a developing country like India, where the society is marching ahead, women are still being trapped under traditional roles. It is the male hegemony that traps them under customary roles. The identity of woman is generally connected to and defined by societal and cultural norms. She is deprived of identity, whereas she is defined only in relation to a man. As Simon de Beauvoir puts it in

the right way in her 'Second Sex', "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," (295)

The novel throws light on the preoccupation of Maya's inner world, frustration and storm raging inside her mind. This novel is considered to be the trend-setter in feminist writing. Desai portrays Maya as hyper sensitive, and cultured, she tries to explain in detail about Maya's trapped feminine psyche right from her childhood to her ultimate death as a youth. She falls a victim to the social and psychological predicaments.

The social status affects her psyche to such an extent the she becomes a victim to many known and unknown traumas. Though she has a comfortable upbringing she suffers day in and day out from obsessions and an astrologer's prediction of the death of one of the two spouses after four years of marriage. We see that Desai makes Maya her mouthpiece to express her views about woman.

As Cixous points out, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring woman to writing from which they have been driven from parental embrace but also from their bodies." (78). She is not alone driven from parental embrace but also from her own body. In Maya we find a lament on the loss of the self. Maya being a girl pampered

by her father suffers from neurotic fears and marital disharmony. She had developed a father-fixation which makes her expect the same kind of love from Gautama, where he stands as a poor substitute. Maya strikes Gautama in the mirror and tries to kill him. The gradual transformation of a sensitive girl to a criminal is hence shown. She tries to connect her present with her past. Gautama fails to heal her inner wounds as her consciousness gives it a dramatic turn. She continues to suffer from the feeling of suffocation and disassociation of her inner self even after the sugar coated pills of relief given to her by Gautama.

The cry of the peacock and the cry of Maya are similar. Maya says the world appears 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.

The theme of Cry the Peacock is marital discord. As her life with her husband results in rupture, because the two are temperamentally different, but opposed mutually. Maya is a woman who longs for the pleasures of life. She is a woman who was full of life and wanted to enjoy life to the utmost. Sexual satisfaction was a must and the total denial of it made her fall a victim of neurosis and schizophrenia. She loses herself in the enjoyment of beautiful sights.

When she finds herself to be lonely, she feels herself in mental crises. She shared an affectionate relationship with her father and is at pain to leave home at marriage. Her mother's death makes her detached from the outside world. 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". As time passes she becomes more and more restless, starts brooding over the feeling of emptiness in her heart.

Maya, a very sensitive character, a portrayal of woman who has failed to come to terms with hegemony and patriarchal order. Though she survives in a male dominated world she refuses to identify with it and revolts against it. Though Maya is an affluent housewife with all necessities of a comfortable city life fulfilled, yet she is neither

happy nor satisfied, nor is she the ideal housewife who compromises with her situation and suppresses her self-identity and feminine desire until her death.

There are other traits also in Maya's character – her search of new vista for a woman world. Rebuffed by her husband Maya is torn between her lone of life and the fear of death. Deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity, she says, "God now I am caught in the net of inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release'. This net is no hallucination, no. Am I gone insane? Father! Husband, Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am in love with living, I am in love and I am dying, God let me sleep, forget me, But no I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more only death and waiting."

We see that Desai represents the theme of uniqueness of sensibility of women compared with male counterpart and how they suffer on account of emotional as well as physical representation and become the victim of male-dominated social and cultural order. Desai seems to be aware of relationship between feminism as a political movement and movement within literary writing. The novel brings out the unique sensibility of a sensitive woman in sharp contrast to the detached and practical attitude of an insensitive husband. Prof K.R.S.Iyengar says "Cry the Peacock scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference in this world. Her insanity-rather she is sane, historical or insane fills the world book and gives it forms as well as life."(K.R.S.Iyengar,16).

Some critics like Som. P.Sharma and Kamal N.Awasthi point out that Maya despite her over-protective childhood does not seem to be a spoiled woman. Desai, by powerful search light of her observation dives deep down and presents the world with her findings which include her prime concern to bare the hand covering of emotions to bring out sheer womanliness in them, to prove that they are actually devoid of feelings but in search of a pit of love and life. Even though Anita Desai owes no explicit allegiance to feminist cause, she is preoccupied with the plight of woman in the male-dominated oppressive order. It is clear from the following statement regarding the marriage.

“... It was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of scared iron with which out of the prettiest superstition, we could not bear to part...” (40)

To conclude it can be said that an understanding of the male-centred world, its civilization, culture, institutions, discourse and practices is a precondition for woman’s liberation. The quest for identity leads to self-exploration. This quest enables a woman to be away from the mythological and constraining stereotypes.

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