

ART OF CHARACTERISATION IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the concept of feminine sensibility and quest for identity as it is reflected in Anita Desai's first novel 'Cry the Peacock'. Anita Desai occupies a unique position among contemporary Indian novelists. The study of women's writing developed in the post independence period is considered an area of specialization in its own right. The female authors' experience of an anti-patriarchal rage is reflected in their writings. Anita Desai portrays various themes in her novels. The concentration of the author in 'Cry the Peacock' is exclusively on woman's feelings and thoughts, her sufferings and struggle in a patriarchal society. Her portrayal of man-woman relationship is influenced and conditioned by complex social milieu. The novel is mainly concerned with the theme of marital incoherence between husband Gautama and wife Maya. The play is about Maya's cry for love and relationship in her loveless wedding with Gautama. The 'Cry of Peacock' symbolizes Maya's agony for love and life. My paper attempts to study how Desai portrays feminine psyche of a common woman in the existing patriarchal society, and thus the paper would also like to focus on the deft handling of imagery, symbols and metaphors which enrich her art of characterization.

Keywords: art characterization, woman, love, relationship.

Anita Desai is a product of her age. She chooses those parts of society which she knows deeply and presents them with her vision. She mainly explores the emotional world of women with admirable insight and sympathetic perception. With her psycho-analytic method, Desai has given a new direction to novel writing in modern India.

Anita Desai published her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock' in 1963. The novel written in a monotone, presents a single point of view and the major part of the novel is in the form of an interior monologue. *"Cry, the Peacock is a disturbing novel, mostly takes the form of interior*

monologue, delienating, the tragic mental background of a young Indian woman Maya” (H.M. Williams, 1976, p.87). Though the novel appears more like a ‘heap of broken images’ it aptly reflects the disintegrating psyche of its protagonist.

Desai’s characters are neither social types nor representatives of any marginalized groups. She prefers to portray characters “*as individuals always and invariably*” (Ramesh. K. Srivastava. 1984, p.212). It is evident in the observation that she makes in her article “women writers (Anita Desai, 1970, p.40) that the novelist is conscious of some of the problems faced by women. Anita Desai is a sensitive novelist and deals more with the inner world of characters. Therefore any deviation in the normal attitude attracts her. Though Desai claims that her interest is only individuals, and the human conditions her novels exhibit an evident feminist consciousness.

Maya, of *Cry the peacock* is Desai’s fully developed female protagonist. She may appear unusual, introverted, child like, but is not aware of the freedom which is denied to women. The novel starts with an elaborate description of Toto’s death which causes unexpected havoc in Maya, but to practical Gautama, it is no more than a natural phenomenon, which can be wiped out with a cup of tea. Soon after the incident the agony of missing the pet lurks in the blank spaces of her mind making her more and more restless. Maya is born in a traditional Brahmin family. Having been brought up in a protected atmosphere she is unaware of unpleasant realities of life. In her own words “*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*” (p.89). Her life according to her has not been different from that of “*a painted butterfly*” (p.94).

In ‘Cry, the peacock’ what really renders Maya insecure and timid in life is the fatalistic attitude to life which marks her upbringing. She was taught to mould herself according to the circumstances and leave the rest to fate. Brought up in such an environment of timidity and fatalistic attitude Maya has grown progressively insecure. She however clings to herself with a passion born of love and affection and has no desire to abandon it. Albino’s prophecy plays the major role in shaping the mental attitude of the protagonist. The astrologer predicts that Maya will be married young and four years after marriage either she or her husband would die of unnatural causes. It is significant that her father burns her horoscope which prophesied death in the fourth year of her marriage, but he does nothing to alloy the fears of Maya.

Maya is married to Gautama a ‘protege’ (p.42) of her father and a brilliant ambitious, serious minded lawyer and also a man much older than herself. But Gautama leaves Maya emotionally and spiritually starved and insecure. Here Anita Desai explicitly shows interest in portraying the incompatible married relationship of Maya and Gautama. A highly sensitive cultured woman coming directly from her father finds her husband clinically insensitive.

Gautama is a promising prosperous and over busy practitioner of law engrossed in his profession and does not care for Maya. Gautama is a faithful husband who takes care of Maya and loves her in his own way. But Maya is not happy. She thinks that Gautama does not understand her or her own emotional needs. So she feels frustrated, alienated and isolated. Maya is not physically satisfied. Gautama does not respond- *“to either the soft, willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed”* (p.9) Many critics have pointed out this incompatibility- *“Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other”*. However, *“the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama”*- (Usha Pathania, 1992, p.14).

The novel exposes an impression of marital incongruity and unhappy conjugal life. Anita Desai tries to produce a neo-psychological vein and introduce a sensibility generally not confined in the novels of other Anglo-Indian writers. *“No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is”* (Suresh Kohil, 1970, p.3) But above all the novel becomes a significant testament of feminist view by frequently referring to the oppression of women. For example the conversation of two women at a party gives a clue to the nature of Maya. When one of them mentions that she has only daughters and no son, Maya feels-

“... the word brought up visions of dowries of debts, humiliations to be suffered and burdens so gross, so painful that the whole family suffered from them. Why? I was angry with myself, yet could not shake off the truth...” (p.71)

This feminine perspective is once again clear in Maya's reaction towards Cabaret dances. It is typically feminine and has several explicit references to the sexual exploitations of women. Cabaret dancers earn their livelihood through their bodies, sometimes only by displaying and sometimes by selling them. The cabaret girls may have appeal to the male but to Maya the sight of these girls displaying their “fleshy wares” (p.83). Maya's sympathy of this incident is a reflection of her own oppression. The oppression that Maya suffers is subtle and spiritual while the oppression of these women is explicit and overt. The cabaret scene is followed by Maya's memory of the dance of the bear. The bear is helpless in the hands of the trainer, and expresses one of the important facts of feminism- that is masculine domination. When Maya sees the sad and quiet caged monkeys in the railway station, her state of mind makes her identify herself with them. *“And Gautama came, too my arm, and led me into one of the cages.. let me out! I want to live, Gautama, I want to live!”* (p.156). This is certainly the essence of the feminine perspective in a moment of simultaneous awakening to inner agitations and social limitations. The chilling identification with the animal cage is significant. The identification also reveals her fighting spirit, the refusal to bow down to meek obedience.

Maya's spirit gathers into an intensity of liberation during the dust storm. It is a correlative of her own barren spirit which breaks beyond fear and repression into a scene of

freedom. She participates in it with all the vigour of the scene. The imagery of dust storm suggests Maya's discovery of an authentic feminine spirit of freedom strength, and a new knowledge of the self that she loves life more than Gautama. The storm symbolizes her liberation from bondage and initiation into an independent existence. She finds the realization of this feminine sensibility personified in the full moon image. The stars make her aware of the loneliness of life and her existential agony. As Maya's consciousness is deceased and gloomy and cannot perceive reality in its true form most of the time the stars and the moon represent to her either the distance between herself and Gautama on her isolation and fear of death. Moon becomes a demoniac figure to her as it is a constant reminder of her insanity and impending death.

But Maya is not destined to survive. She withdraws in the shell of her inner world haunted by the prophecy and the cry, she loses her control on the outside world. She finds it difficult to relate with her husband. The tension unshared by anyone else builds into the certainty of death. The certainty of death and the desperate attempt to live splits her mind. She is not pessimistic about her situation. She does not see her turmoil as something which cannot be stemmed. Her deepest yearning is for love and affection which she fails to receive. It is the total dread of death and immense longing for love and companionship that drives Maya to a neurotic state of mind. When the frenzied permitting calls of peacock fail to shake Gautama out of his complacency Maya makes another decision-

"The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him" (p.175).

Since one of them was supposed to die- why not Gautama? She herself was so intense and sensitive to all the emotions of existence. Finally the ugly, crooked grey shadow of patriarchy interrupted her vision. In this psychotic state of her mind Maya pushes Gautama down to terrace to his death.

In the probing of the protagonists psyche, the peacock symbol plays an important role. She shares some characteristics with the peacock symbol most notably yearning for love, lust for life, separation, sorrow and also a sort of fierceness ultimately finding expression in Gautama's killing. In a moment of exasperation, she kills her husband and for a time she asserts herself her identity and attitude, towards life. It is the victory of life, love and tenderness, over lifelessness, reason and down to earthiness. But being a Hindu woman she suffers from guilt and remorse for killing her husband and in spite of her rationalism in the end she kills herself.

Maya, believes that meaning and fulfillment come through tenderness, mutual sharing and commitment to deeper things in life. On the other hand, her husband Gautama dismisses these feelings as childish sentiments. She felt insecure and this anxiety creates a *"feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile"* (Bande Usha, 1988,

p.26). Marriage is a union of two souls and two bodies. It is to be established very consciously and carefully. General situations in society are such that no apt time or notion is offered to these affairs. Its outcomes are the clashes, desperation, obsession, alienation and loneliness. It would be no exaggeration to say that most Indian marriage are 'obscene'. Countless generations of women have been victims of loveless marriages and husbands fail to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise but a real individual of flesh and blood.

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