



THE THEME OF ESTRANGEMENT IN ANITA DESAI NOVEL “CRY THE PEACOCK”

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze Anita Desai 's novel “Cry the Peacock “ tries to focus on the predicament of women in the society. This novel is one of the best works of Anita Desai. She is an Indian novelist, she is noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her women characters. She explores the tension between family relations and the alienation of the middle class women. “Cry the Peacock”, Anita Desai’s first novel. Has been described as a trend setter in the field of psychoanalytic realism. It explores the inner world of alienation, loneliness and suffering. Maya the chief protagonist of the novel is described as a hysterical character, whose impending tragedy is suggestively foreshadowed, time and again. It is an effort to portray the estrangement of a woman on the verge of insanity.

Key Words: Alienation, Estrangement, Protagonist, Insanity.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is a dominant figure in the twentieth century Indian century English fiction. She deserves accolade for her remarkable literary output. By persistent unraveling the mystery of the inner life of her characters, she shows her perpetual interest in their psychic life. Solitude and self- exploration are the recurring themes of her novels.

Women novelists necessarily have a special way of looking at things because they live in severely confined spheres; but being a woman has neither distorted Anita Desai’s vision nor made it inferior. It actually adds some more sharpness to her attitude to life. Through her depiction of women, she projects on the environment unfriendly to women, shaped by predominance of patriarchy. It is in the presentation of this confrontation of the female protagonist with the patriarchal oppressive environment that Anita Desai feminism surface.

The study of estrangement experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend. In the Indian society women are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. They are ignored or brushed aside. Anita Desai tries to focus on the predicament of such women in the society.

According to Anita Desai “writing is a process of discovering the truth- truth that is nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call as reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring the underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance and sensation than with action, experience and achievement.

Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. she excels in writing psychological novels. Her novels reveal inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. Each of Anita Desai’s novels tries to tackle the central aesthetic problem of the modern writer- the problem of rendering “complete human personality in an age of lost values, lost men and lost Gods” (Bande, 43).The twentieth century has been rightly called “ The age of Alienation” (Bande, 43). The modern man is doomed to suffer the impact of alienation which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the credibility loss or gap, the compartmentalized of life, the stunting of personal development and the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life and so on.

ESTRANGEMENT: A THEMATIC APPROACH

Anita Desai’s first novel, Cry, the Peacock(1963) is one of the most poetic Indian novels in English. It gives expression to the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the protagonist herself. The novel presents the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in term of immeasurable loneliness.

As the very title suggests, Cry the Peacock is about Maya’s cries for love and tolerant in her loveless marriage to Gautama. The Peacock’s cry is the symbol of Maya’s mournful cry for love and life of involvement. Names of the character in the novel are also symbolic. Gautama, as his name suggests believes in the philosophy of detachment. Gautama is just opposite hates sentiment but Maya believes on that. On the other hand Maya, as her name suggests is too much in love with life. She



“rejoiced in the world of sounds, senses, movement, odors, colors, tunes”(CTP,44). Thus, Maya and Gautama stand poles apart in their attitude to life.

Desai's has delineated the self-alienation, despair, death, desolation and socio-psychic fragmentation of the protagonists. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* she has given the reader a path to discover the meaning of estrangement and the inner life of her protagonist Maya in the novel. “ I was being human, born alone; I am , being woman, hard beset; I live by squeezing from a stone the little nourishment I get” (CTP,42).

The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband-wife estrangement theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Maya, an introverted favorite daughter of a wealthy artistic father, is married to an older man, a detached, sober, industries lawyer. Their married life punctuated all along by “matrimonial silences” . She fails to understand Gautama.

Inner psyche

Maya is unable to get over the trauma of a prediction. An albino priest had forecast the death for Maya or her husband in the fourth year of their marriage. The novel opens with a third person narrative depicting Maya's shattered mental balance at the death of her pet dog, Toto. But soon she realizes: another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced” (CTP,44) that fills her with and unnamed terror. On his return from work Gautama finds her grief over a mere pet too unrealistic. Unaware of the prophecy working on her, he tries to pacify her neurotic outbursts by preaching to her the virtue of non- involvement.

Every life yearns for the intense intimacy with her husband. In the *Cry the Peacock* the protagonist Maya receives hostility and indifference rather than delicacy and affection. In this novel Desai presents silence, solitude, melancholy and the dark world of shadows in Maya's life. All through her novels she has shown some sort of common identity in the women characters. All her women undergo a lot of tension and love-hate relationship in the family. Maya's estarngement leads her on to utter desolation.

Maya belongs to a traditional Brahmin family who believes in astrology and other prophetic strain of Brahmanical order. On other hand, Gautama's family represents the rational side of life. Maya loves Gauthama passionately and desires to be loved in return; but Gauthama's coldness disappoints her. They are different from each other as traditional and modernity, trust and distrust in human relationships, brahmanical and non-brahmanical order of society. Gauthama as a rationalist fails to understand Maya's emotional mental state. In the first part of the novel the death of her pet dog Toto serves as the symbol of an abandoned self, doomed to loneliness. Maya feels alienation at its peak due to the death of Toto. It was intolerable to her. The death of the dog is symbolic of the eternal truth in human life. The idea of death terrifies Maya and she is obsessed with the loss of Toto. She is badly disturbed by the indifference of her husband Gautama, to the death of the dog. This is the typical condition of an unfortunate person who is alienated through and through. Her observation drives her to curious insanity. She herself admits: “I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already”(CTP,45). The artificiality of her life keeps on haunting her. It is Gautama's detachment that comes the way of her involvement. Under the stress of this fear she loses her sense and argues that since Gautama is not involved with life, it is immaterial to him whether he is alive or dead.

Maya and Gauthama have different approaches towards life. She is very sensitive and cannot ignore her feelings. Maya wants to fulfill her identity as a woman and as a wife. She asks Gauthama to hear the call “Pia,Pia”, but Gauthama remains listless to the cry. Maya , the “Pea-hen” fails to have her instincts fulfilled from Gauthama, the ‘ peacock’. She feels lonely and isolated and deserted. He does not try to soothe her. The word “please” reflects the pangs of a modern sensitive woman and her helplessness in the inhuman world around her. The hallucination born of her isolation and lonely temperament makes her a psychic patient.

Cry the Peacock is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Maya's moods, observation, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed very effectively in it. The novel is profound study of human psychology. Much of its success lies in its working out the configuration of her inner world. This trauma leading to an obsession in her psyche. Another shocking effect upon Maya's psyche is the prophecy of the astrologer about her future that after four years of her marriage one of them would be die; either husband or wife.

One should remember that a novel cannot always adhere to only one point of view. The point of view could vary from one part of the novel to other. The novel of Anita Desai normally employs the protagonist to narrate the story. The main character while telling the story, present her own view point as Maya does in *Cry the Peacock*. As the character is not omniscient, it is

subjective and personal. Any person can see only a bit of landscape from a window but not the whole, similarly the protagonist, Maya also sees the people around her especially her husband from her own personal point of vision which leads to misunderstanding and destruction.

The central figure Maya an introvert fond of art, literature and music is a colorful hypersensitive lady...Gauthama with all his wit and intellectual does not seem to value a woman any more than a chattel. Another interesting and significant development in the novel is the attitude that Gauthama is accused of not loving his wife. The accusations are: Gauthama does not love his wife. Neither has he showed love towards to his. He does not understand her nor does he make any attempt to do so. He does not reciprocate to her sexually; he does not talk and discuss things with her. He does not console her nor confront her. These are the only lacunae that a reader finds. There could be many more. Also terms like love and affection cannot be defined or measured as they are abstract terms. A marriage between two people needs lots of adjustment for both the husband and wife are natured in difference households.

The impact of the environment would have shaped their mental outlook and attitude. Two people will not have exactly the same behavior, nature, likes and dislikes. Maya is treated by Gauthama more as an indulgent child than a grown up. Maya could have lived a happier life if she had been more involved and taken up some hobby or vocation. One notices the joy that she gains when her mother-in-law comes for a short visit. " I drew away from the shadow into the pool of light, closer to those two women who had roused me, and my home, and given us the meaning supplied by their activities and ideas. They had no time for thinking and imagining little of it"(CTP,144).

Gauthama as portrayed in the novel is an ideal husband who has no vices. He does not believe in breaking up a marriage and refuses to act as a lawyer for his own sister, Nila when she wants to separate from the husband. This novel where the sensibility of the Indian house wife is shaped by the house wife's own immature beliefs, self-centeredness and self-pity.

In novels where Anita Desai delineates a female protagonist, the struggle against the oppressive environment assumes the form of a patriarchal domination in one or the other visage, revealing the real sufferings of the women protagonist. She cares more for the individual, in comparison to the plot as pointed out by many critics, with an amazing insight into her psyche. Women protagonists are unable to liberate themselves from the society around; her character undertakes an inner voyage for the purpose of discovering their own selves. Desai concedes that "nobody is born in an exile" in the society and the individuals should strive to integrate themselves and find fulfillment. Maya was unable to express her feelings to her husband or outburst herself.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes the theme of estrangement and inner psyche as depicted in the fiction, *Cry the Peacock* The most significant social issue that Anita Desai focuses on is the institution of marriage- particularly in the novels where the woman is the protagonist. When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage she is unable to come out of the responsibilities. She has only one way left that is to languish in misery. Somehow she reveals evidence that is lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in "lack of communication". This lead to the theme of estrangement.

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