

## **‘I Cry’ Establishing Women in Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Anita Desai is a modern Indo- English writer, widely acclaimed not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She emerged on the literary horizon after independence, focusing on the contemporary issues. Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She has secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. Her preoccupation is to explore the deep psyche of her characters. The fiction of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. She digs into man’s inner psyche and goes beyond the skin and flesh. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoid the traditional grooves of external reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the exploration of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters. Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* is the story of a hypersensitive young woman, Maya, who cannot get over the trauma of a prediction. An albino priest forecasts death for Maya or her husband in the fourth year of their marriage. Hearing this prophecy, she loses her peace of mind. And this is the reason that Gautama’s long discourses on detachment appear to her life- negating. In a fit of insanity, she kills him in order to find life for herself. So, the philosophy of detachment is the main cause of the failure of their married life.

### **KEYWORDS**

Discourse; Inner Psyche; Trauma.

Nativity and Modernity are two different terms which developed in English literature. Each contributes to the other individually like the two sides of a coin. Nativity brings into being the various aspects such as language, culture, new innovations in linguistics. Modernity refers to the post- transitional, post- medieval historical period marked by the move from feudalism towards capitalism, industrialization, nationalization, secularization etc.

There has been always an antithetical relationship between culture and modernity in the Indian context, with women being seen as the representative of that which is uniquely Indian in the country’s culture. The burden of being the culture- bearers of India, since the nineteenth century, has very often taken its toll on women, who have been reduced to cultural artifacts. There is an incredible charge of nativity in India, which does not allow women to get out of this role to firmly ensure the continuance of age-old

forms of repression and subjugation. Like fundamentalism in other parts of the world, Hindu fundamentalism in India has directed its attention mainly at the women, in the name of protecting Indian culture and tradition. Recent attacks on women in pubs and restaurants and incidents of witch-haunting in various parts of the country, provides clear evidences of the ways in which modernity and science have been proposed as the antithesis of culture. These incidents are thereby facilitating the continuance of exploitation of women, particularly those who are lesser privileged economically, or belongs to the 'lower' rung of the caste ladder of Hindu Society.

Anita Desai, a well-known Indo-Anglian Novelist of Post-Independence era is considered as a significant figure in the development of Indian Novel in English. For K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, she has added "a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers in India." (Seshadri 50). Most of her work deals with inner life which is crowded by psychological problems. Her novels highlight the themes of love, marriage and sex. Her characters are usually women who are haunted by a peculiar sense of doom, withdraw themselves into a sequestered world of their own, become neurotic, self-destructive and unhappy. These women characters are too introverted to be able to cope with their personal circumstances and adjust themselves to life and meet its problem both courageously and adequately. Sensitiveness is a dominant feature in all her novels. She portrays the pathetic picture of lovely married Indian women who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. Her characters are not political big-wigs or socialites. They are concerned mainly with their personal problems, born of their signed psyche. Her characters are, in fact fighting in a hostile world. But their problems remain unresolved. Therefore, all her novels breathe in the air of tragedy.

Ann Lowry Weir examines the feminine sensibility of Desai's and states: "Anita Desai is the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness... she gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists." (Dodiya 3). Her artistic skill primarily lies in the delineation of the psychic conditions of the characters that often indulge in a self-analysis and discover themselves in the process. The hall mark of Desai's fiction is "to focus on the inner experience of life." (Dodiya 6).

Like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha of *Voices in the City*, dies because she could not bear the strain of living in her husband's house. Monisha's brother, Nerode makes experiments in failures. He says: "I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom." Adit and Dev of *Bye- Bye the Blackbird* face the problem of alienation in settling in England. Dev though tries to be unobtrusive finds that the migrants feel like strangers in "enemy territory". Sita of *Where shall we go this summer*, is disgusted to see that people have no mission for life - "they are nothing - nothing besides appetite and sex." She rebels openly against social and domestic norms, but her husband, Raman, accommodates and continues his relationship with Sita who finds that life is meaningless because she has not achieved anything to distinguish herself. A study of her novels reveals that she is interested in the exploration of psychological states of her women characters. Prasanna Sree emphatically comments that she "penetrates psychologically deep into the inner working of women and externalizes their passive reaction" (Sree 22). Desai uses the fiction as a site for studying the role of women in society and there by indirectly offer a critique of the existential social set up that marginalizes women.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* ideally deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonist and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The protagonist Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much, married her off to his own lawyer friend Gautama who was a middle aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband.

Anita Desai has presented a pen portrait of Maya who was brought up and nurtured in opulence by a doting father but had been married to an advocate who had little regard for emotions as reasons and arguments were his forte. She thought that love is the *primum mobile*, while her husband took his cue from the Gita which, according to him, preached the principle of detachment. This contrariety hurt Maya's emotions so much that she was led gradually to the verge of nervous breakdown.

The main problem of Maya is that her doting father had rendered her unfit to live in a middle class society. Maya remembers that her father had pampered her by treating her as a princess- "As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of the Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of the princess and regal queens..... People say he spoils me..... I can get anything I want from him. "Maya was a motherless child. It was perhaps for this reason that the father showered all his love on her. She had the best of life that one could imagine. She used to stroll with her father amidst the vegetation, and would wait for her father under bougainvillea if he was called by a visitor. There she enjoyed the light turning from black to mauve to purple, from peach to orange to crimson. Her

father had shown her a ruby saying it would be hers when she was old enough to attend her first grown up party, if she would stop crying. Her father had kept her away from all harsh and unpleasant realities of life. To save her from the heat of the summer, he would take her to Darjeeling or any other hill station of her choice. Her father had given her full freedom to do whatever she liked to keep herself happy and would never show annoyance howsoever trying she would become. She would play battledore- and shuttlecock with small oranges which would fall down broken, egg like, on the grass, but her father would only laugh to see her laugh, to see her leap and fly. She remembers- "It is only for me that he tolerates such things.

It is not difficult to presume that a princess like her will find it difficult to be at peace with the world, more so in the family of Gautama. The married life of Maya and Gautama results in rupture because the two are not only temperamentally different but mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her sexual satisfaction is a must and total denial of it makes her a victim of neurosis. Daughter of a wealthy father, Maya is married to Gautama who is very senior to her age, a friend of her father. Maya is interested in all the good things of life- in nature, in poetry and dance and also in the life of birds and animals. On the other hand Gautama is dry, matter-of, fact and prosaic personality. He looks at Maya's love for the good things as sentimentalism. He is indifferent to the beautiful and pleasant things around him.

This agony is portrayed in this novel. Agony is intense pain, unbearable suffering which is caused by cultural loss. And as culture is not a process to be created in one day, thus in absence of Cultural Revolution women either commits suicide or kills the person. Western influence distorted cultural plot of India. Amalgamation of diverse cultures,

sub cultures, caste and creed, dialects change of socio-cultural environment, the ways of living and the roles of men and women changed the cultural values, customs and morals in India. After coming under British rule for several hundred years India lost her wealth and cheerfulness. If a husband only comes to wife to sleep with her considering her as instrument of sexual pleasure with minimum communication then naturally wife gets deeply hurt and the cultural wound becomes irreparable loss for her. Women are not made of mere flesh and blood rather they too have soul. On early stages of marriage if women gets favorable, positive condition they fit very well in husband's family but if they get opposite and negative condition marriage can break. It is also the period during which the bride either becomes popular by her behavior in her relationship with each member of her husband's family. In the process of realizing inconsistency, Desai's characters undergo a process of suffering and purgation. The declaration of the existential reality of the individual against the forces of chaos and disintegration creates a profound sense of tragic tension.

A woman marries to find security and soul attachment from her husband. When a man does not play his role a family cannot live organized. The problem is temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaos and inharmonious man- woman relationship that's born out of cultural difference, social – cultural environment illustrating biological, psychological differences. Women are alienated from the world, society, families, parents and even from their own selves. They are not average people but individuals who have lack of communication with their husbands and unable to relate themselves with new family and cultural setup. Thus they drift into their own cocooned world where they spin their dreams, which never materialize. Maya herself reflects upon her marriage which has become a misalliance: It was

discouraging to reflect as how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and, therefore, neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again. (Desai 45).

Incidents after incidents occur to shock the fine sensibilities of Maya. She had the desire to attend the Mushaiyra going on outside her room, but women had no place among men, no matter she had greater capability to appreciate the Urdu couplets. She found that Gautama in particular had asked her by his gestures that she should not go. She was shocked as if "I had truly found a blemish in my unscarred skin." She felt that Gautama had no love for her because she didn't have the longish face of learned women.

Naturally, Maya felt as if she was brought from the shade and protection of a Banyan tree out into the heat of a desert. She was hungry for love. She didn't have any child; she had her dog, Toto, to give her love to. But, as the fate would have it, Toto died, leaving her alone. She had a mind to give a befitting farewell and an honorable burial to the dog, but her husband came home in the evening, rang up to the Municipality, which sent the truck to take away the carcass. Maya was shocked by such an unsentimental and unemotional treatment given to her beloved, Toto. She was dejected to find that Gautama's family were devoid of emotions for beauty and love- "I spun around, clutching the baby, to stare at my relations, whose names I knew, whose moods I sensed, whose hands I touched, and found there was not one amongst them to whom I could cry, "Look, look- there is a moon in the sky!" . (Desai 29)

In spite of her neurosis, Maya commands sympathy of the readers because she reminds one of Nora of A Doll's House. "...our home's been nothing but a play pen. I've been your doll- Wife here,

just as at home I was papa's doll-child." 6 (Pandey 13).

Maya's marriage with Gautama was more or less a marriage of convenience. Her marriage was only serves to highlight her total involvement with her father. She constantly thinks of him and unconsciously searches him in her husband. However, it is a fact that her helplessness and an intense longing for love are the root cause of her trouble. Besides, her childhood world of fantasies and adult world of realities clash, and create imbalance in her life. She expresses her agony with the help of the imagery of withered flowers.

Maya was already disenchanted by Gautama's lack of emotions, manners, and tastes when she received a letter from her brother, Arjuna, who had left the house at the age of twenty- two. He refreshed her memory of the horoscope which was once cast for her. She was also reminded of the prediction that one of them would die within four years of their marriage. She found that Arjuna's letter had in a way endorsed Gautama's view point about love- "The stagnant days of sentimentalism are available only to the decadent". This could be the statement of Arjuna as well as Gautama.

Meera Bai who rightly observes: "The opening of the novel wherein Maya is shown to be washing her eyes in order to wash off the sight of Toto's dead body gives a glimpse of Maya's obsessive compulsive neurosis." 5 (Sujit 5). The frightening words of the prediction ring in her ears and unnerve her. She is so haunted by the prophecy that she begins to think of death of either of them.

Maya became desperate like a gentle soul among the boors. Gautama's continued indifference to her advances exasperated her to the degree that she thought, "The man had no contact with the world or with me. What would it matter to him if she died and lost even the possibility of contact?" She cried with the peacocks for a mate but Gautama did not hear it. The

peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's agonized cry for love and life of involvement. Names of the characters are also symbolic. Gautama, as his name suggests believes in philosophy of detachment. Gautama is a dry type of matter of fact person who shuns all sentimentality.

On the other hand, Maya, as her name suggests, is too much in love with life. She delighted herself in the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes. Meenakshi Mukherjee, who believes that imagery reveals the author's natural mode of awareness, commends Anita Desai for her distinctive style and intensely individual imagery. It is marked by "sensuous richness, a high strung sensitiveness and for the sounds of words". Thus Maya and Gautama stand poles apart in their attitude to life.

This situation agitated her so much that she started feeling the pressure of circumstances on her mind, "Innocence turning to guilt. Lilac to purple. Ochre to ugliness. Step by step. "In her state of desperation she saw her past life in her mind, and bade good bye to her father. When Gautama met her in the evening, she somehow felt that she would not meet him again- " I rose and went up to him, beginning to feel as tenderly solicitous towards him as towards a departing guest who might never be encountered again. " The story of Maya is not the story of a neurotic woman, it is the story of sufferings of a noble woman, who was subjected to several psychological jolts which finally threw her off balance. It was the tragic end of a grief stricken woman. Her father had injured her decent living by marrying her to a man who was bereft of emotions of love, devoid of such human values as kindness to animals, and lacked in good tastes, yet the father tragically advised his princess daughter to put up with the person. All this caused the tragedy.

Thus *Cry, the Peacock* is a brilliant study of the abnormal psychology of its neurotic protagonist Maya. She is an enigma. Her moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed effectively by Desai. Her fears, insecurity, strange behavior, loneliness, and sufferings indicate how Desai has succeeded in portraying her female protagonist Maya making her one of the most enigmatic characters in Indian fiction. Desai's novels are truly appreciated for

depicting love, failure of marriage and women in struggles against the patriarchal setup. Desai throws light on the influence of multiculturalism and customs of India. Desai's novels have depth which forces to think deep on culture and cultural agony of women. It shows how traditions are sometimes so deeply ingrained in us that, it does not occur to us to rise above them and cry for change.

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