Marital Disharmony portrayed in Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*

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**ABSTRACT**

Marriage is a basic institution in every society. It is the recognized social institution, not only for establishing and maintaining the family, but also for creating and sustaining the ties of kinship. Marital disharmony is defined as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concern and it is also seen as a struggle between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. The disharmonized personality’s search for fulfillment is a common place theme in modern fiction. Anita Desai is considered as the unacknowledged authority of exposing the predicament of modern women in India. She is more concerned with the inner plight of her alienated protagonist in the existing man dominated society. In the patriarchal culture, the personal conflict of identity of the Indian women gains a dimension in the hands of Anita Desai. In her novels, she has portrayed the man-woman relationship and the untold sufferings of women out of the marital disharmony. Desai’s debut novel *Cry, the Peacock* is considered as the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. This paper discusses the marital disharmony between Maya and Gautama and its consequences in Anita Desai’s debut novel *Cry, the Peacock*.

Among the post-independent Indo-English writers, Anita Desai holds a prominent place because of the immense popularity she commands as a novelist of human predicament of anxiety, frustration and loneliness in the insensitive and inconsiderate contemporary world. Her novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the women’s inner world, frustration and storm raging inside her mind intensify her predicament. Desai’s concern with the emancipation of women is found page after page in her novels. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which she projects through incompatible couple, very sensitive wife and ill-matched husband. She reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology.

Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, published in 1963 can be considered as a trendsetting novel as it deals with the mental rather than the physical aspects of its character. The novel exhibits the theme of
incompatibility and lack of understanding in marital life. It portrays the psychic tumult of a young and sensitive married girl Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. The novel centres on the estrangement in the relationship between Gautama and Maya that leads to the longing for a soul mate of the female protagonist. The purpose of the novel is to study the matrimonial crisis “The hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding of individuality and the establishing of her characters” (RajiNarsimhan, 23). The very concept that women need something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in this novel. The title indicates the analogue between a peacock’s cry in the wilderness seeking a companion with Maya’s desperate agonized cries for making real genuine human contact that remains thwarted.

The novel begins with the death of Toto, Maya’s pet dog. Toto could be seen as a surrogate child to childless Maya. Anita Desai puts it: “Childless women do develop fanatic attachment to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child; no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance” (9). Gautama fails to understand this attachment and promises to bring another dog. It is this non-sharing of grief on Gautama’s part makes Maya lonely and alienated. Maya comments on this:

Showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me…His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talks of cup of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking, reveal myself. It is that- my loneliness in this house. (9)

Being motherless she becomes more sensitive and as a result develops much attachment for her pet dog, Toto. Her husband hardly realizes the emotional bond that existed in her heart for the pet. Toto’s death reminds her of her loneliness which had been supressed by her. “It was not pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps, as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair” (13). She becomes more alienated after that. Gautama’s insensitivity is highlighted when he calls her a chattering monkey when she tries to share her feeling regarding her pet’s death.

A motherless child, Maya had been the centre of her father’s affection, dependent on her father for the fulfilment of her emotional needs- for love, understanding, and compassion. Her father showered his love to her to the fullest. He never allowed her to taste the fruits of adversity. To save her from the heat of the summer, her father would take her to Darjeeling or any other hill station of her choice. She received a comfortable upbringing. Those are the unforgettable golden days to her in her entire life. She remembers her life in her father’s house:

As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology. When I play battle-door and shuttlecock, using the small oranges as shuttlecocks that shoot, bird-like, through the air and are broken, egg-like, on the grass, he only laughs to see me leap and fly. (41)

On the contrary, in her husband’s house the situation is totally different. She faces there a totally different code of conduct. She finds that her feelings are not cared for and that she is being neglected, isolated, and alienated in her own home. This disturbs her terribly and so she is utterly defenceless and alone. Her new family treats with disdain the basic emotions of love, attachment, compassion, empathy and concern. Maya comments:

In Gautama’s family one did not speak of love, far less of affection. One spoke-they spoke-of discussion in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused in libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries. (46-47)

Gautama, the husband of Maya, is an advocate, depending wholly on argument and logic in all matters of life to the complete excluding of faith and emotions. Gautama fails to satisfy Maya’s intense longing for love and life. She is left to the solitude and silence of the house which preys upon her. She muses over her husband’s lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight to his face: “Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you’ve never loved. And you don’t love me....” (96). Temperamentally there is no compatibility between Maya and Gautama. Maya has romantic love for the beautiful, the colourful and the sensuous. She
wants to enjoy life to the utmost. She loves life in all its forms. She is an epicurean to the core. As symbolised by her name she stands for the world of sensations. Gautama’s name on the other hand, symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is realistic and rational. He has philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagwad Gita. He quotes Gita: “He who, controlling the sense of the mind, follows without attachment the path of action with his organs of action, he is esteemed”(116). Such irreconcilably different temperaments and disparity between them are the prime causes of Maya’s alienation. This gap of communication makes her alienated.

Gautama fails to satisfy Maya’s physical needs as well. On one occasion, in spite of her seductive postures, Gautama remains rigid and cold. On another occasion, Maya laments: “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). Thus she remains physically dissatisfied.

Maya’s preoccupation with death had been actually planted long ago in her childhood by the albino astrologer’s prophecy foretelling of the death of either of the couple after marriage. She, being intensely in love with life, turns hysterical over the creeping fear of death: “Am I gone insane. Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my saviour? I am in need one. I am dying, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no I’ll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore. Only death and waiting” (98).

Maya suffers from headaches and experiences rages of rebellion and terror. As she moves towards insanity, she sees the visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her, slipping their club-like tongues in and out. Her dark house appears to her like her tomb and she contemplates in it over the horror of all that is to come. Tortured by a sense of neglect from her husband and obsessed by a childhood prophesy of disaster spelt by an albino priest, Maya finds the world an uninhabitable place. With every day her sense of rootlessness keeps on increasing and culminates in a kind of schizophrenia. Her unfulfilled longing for an congenial atmosphere and relationship leads her to utter desolation. At last, out of insanity, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Gautama thinks that she is immature and has never been brought face to face with the mundane realities of life. According to R.S.Sharma, “the novel becomes a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony and compounded by age-oldsuperstition”(24). Thus Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock clearly exposes the psychological problems that are caused by the disintegrated marital relationship of a disharmonized woman.

REFERENCES


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