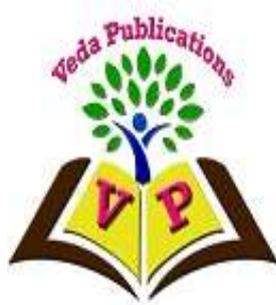


**ANITA DESAI AS A FEMINIST: WITH REFERENCE TO *CRY, THE PEACOCK***

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is one of the best-known contemporary women writers of Indian fiction in English. She has gained distinction in exploring the human psyche and the emotional feelings of her protagonists. She has added a new dimension and marvelous favour 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 examines the deep psyche of her characters, especially women characters. Anita Desai is a keen observer of the society and the position of the women in the contemporary society draws her special attention. They are the explorations of the family problems, which perhaps is the chief cause behind the estrangement of the women from their family. The novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is the faithful description of psychosomatic growth of a female character, which cannot cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected.

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Anita Desai is one of the considerable voices in the modern Indian English Fiction. She is regarded as an Indian novelist, short-story writer and children's author. Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, Desai has written sixteen works of fiction, some of the best ones being 'Fasting, Feasting', 'The Village By The Sea', 'In Custody', and 'Clear Light of Day'. Desai won many awards and recognition for her work and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize twice. She has been also actively involved in teaching and continues to be an inspiration for many young aspiring writers today. She announced a new epoch of Psychological realism in this genre with her debut novel *Cry the Peacock* in 1963. Anita Desai's novels work out the mystery of the inner life of her characters.

Anita Desai's works are totally different from other Indian women writers in English: Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social theme. Desai is concerned with the psychic life of her characters. Since her childhood, Desai was conscious of being a writer. Writing is a part of her character, temperament, nature and life. She has added to her genius by learning from other writers. When she was nine years old, she first read *Wuthering Heights*. Although she could not understand half of it yet it was a thrill. The novelist remembers the experience:

"It struck me with force of a gale and I still vibrate to it. Ever since; literature has seemed to me more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world. Later, of course, other writers meant more to me. In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly."

Anita Desai enters to explore the inner reality, or in her own words she is not concerned with "the one-tenth visible section of ice berg that one sees above the surface of the ocean" – but with the remaining nine – tenth of it that lie below the surface." According to her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social, religious and moral ideas, but an

exploration and an inquiry. Desai feels that besides having a creative genius, a novelist must be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he could give acute descriptions and "pick up the tiny details that others might not notice." Besides sensitivity and observation, a rich experience and a good training are also essential. It is not imperative, however, that a writer has all kind of experience. For in a writer "lack of experience may be a handicap, but lack of sensitivity, thought, intelligence of memory would be far greater one." Desai herself asserts that she has been influenced by European and American Literature. In an Interview she says: "Ruth Jhabvala always "inspired" and encouraged me although she did not help in any material sense, such as reading or editing my manuscripts."

Anita Desai came out with her first publication '*Cry, the Peacock*' (1963). In the following years, she went on to publish a slew of books including '*Bye-bye Blackbird*', '*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*', '*Fire on the Mountain*', '*Clear Light of Day*', '*In Custody*', and '*The Village by Sea*'. Apart from these, Anita has written short stories that have won her great fame. Most of her plot line are either a representation or influenced by her personal experience of life. While dealing with the psychic problems of her characters she finds longing her liberty in them. Most of her female characters are highlighted on their strained relationships. Anita Desai has managed to deal with topics on the death of Indian traditions and customs. She has an independent approach to women's problems in Indian society as well as life in general. Anita Desai is especially prominent for the insightful depiction of the inner life of the female characters in her writings. Many novels of Anita Desai explore the tension between family members and the alienation of middle class women.

The themes of the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De can be broadly classified under four heads for the convenience of this study. They are as follows:

1. The theme of marital discord owing to maladjustment affecting the nuptial relationship.
2. The theme of isolation and loneliness.
3. The theme of alienation.



4. The theme of family relationship in the society.

These four themes are mutually inclusive and run together. A study of the themes of the novels of Anita Desai is a fruitful critical exercise that will bring to light several features of the novels of these women novelists focusing on their attitudes towards marriage, world view, their feministic concerns and their art. While the novels of Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* deal with the theme of marital discord, her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* deals with the theme of alienation. The theme of *Cry, the Peacock*, is the marital discord. The married life of Maya and Gautama results in a rupture because the two are temperamentally different, but mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her, sexual satisfaction is a necessity and the total denial of it makes her a victim of neurosis and schizophrenia. She is interested in all the good things of life – nature, birds and animals, poetry and dance. She loses herself in the enjoyment of beautiful sights and sounds. The cries of birds evoke a sympathetic chord in her. She is presented in the novel as a woman who longs for pleasures of life.

Anita Desai's female protagonists are tolerant and submissive but do not seem to be ready to sensibly record the critical familial situations, especially in husband-wife relationship. They sacrifice their identity and individuality and they suffer from intense isolation because they could not reconcile with the demands of their psyche and with those of the world around them. They view the world as a hostile place and often take a negative stance, which generates psychic states of fear, guilt, anger, bitterness, anxiety, helplessness and depression. These women writers question the need to accept the man made image of a woman. A reflection of the situation of women in the male dominated world is also found in the novels of Desai. Being females they are represented incapable of reaching out to the wider world. Anita Desai portrays females' desire of liberty from social and traditional bondages in the patriarchal society in her novels. She denies a narrow feminist approach. She herself asserts that she writes about women for she knows and understands them best.

Women, in Anita Desai's fiction embody the author's quest for psychological insight, awareness and harmony. They are the focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the world from which they are alienated. Her women, therefore, have to face conflicts make effort to break away, to assert their individuality and think whether their decision to do so is the right one, how to resolve the identity crisis and emerge victorious from the trauma. These are some of the questions Desai seems to explore through her women characters. Her themes certainly touch the raw nerves of human experience.

Cry, The Peacock is mainly concerned with disharmony between husband and wife relationship. The incompatible temperament between Gautama and Maya results in tension. Maya is poetic, high - strung, dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Gautama is realistic, insensitive, rational hard and cold, detached, philosophical and remote. Maya and Gautama are poles apart and lack of interaction between them leads to loneliness. There is a breakdown in communication and Maya gets isolated and detached. The matrimonial bonds that bind the two are very fragile and tenuous; the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide. Indian society which, definitely, is marching ahead towards development but still women is assigned traditional roles. They cannot come out of these customary roles because of conservative outlook of the male hegemony. She is imprisoned within the four walls of the house and remains isolated because there is no one to share her grief.

Alienation is one of the major problems confronting the postmodern man. The present era can be rightly called as "the era of alienation". In the present era, alienation is due to the generation gap, loss of identity, fear, loss of credibility, isolation and so on. The novel opens with the depiction of husband-wife alienation and discord by exposing the relationship of the prominent characters Maya and Gautama. The theme of alienation is the outcome of the hypersensitive nature of Desai's female characters. In her novel the stress is shifted from the external and the internal world. The protagonist Maya is obsessed with the fear of death as a



consequence of an astrological prediction that one of the spouses will die in the fourth year of their marriage. She cannot establish any effective communication with her husband, Gautama, who is detached, rational and twice of her age. Her husband does not understand her feelings and grows her sense of alienation and isolation and consequently, she kills him in a fit of insane fury. In the novel the protagonist Maya receives hostility and in differences rather than delicacy and affection. In this novel Desai presents the silence, solitude, melancholy and dark world of shadows in Maya's life.

Gautama, a friend of her father, very much older than Maya is a prosperous, middle-aged lawyer. Cultured, rational, and practical, he is too much engrossed in his own affairs to meet the demands, of his young and beautiful wife. He cannot admire his wife for her great qualities but makes a disparaging remark about her that she has a third rate poetess' mind. Provoked by this she confesses thus:

"Because when you are away from me, I want you. Because I insist on being with you, being allowed to touch you and know you. You can't bear it. Can you? No. You are afraid. You might perish." (Cry, the Peacock, 113)

The marriage of Maya and Gautama is more or less a marriage of convenience as we can say a marriage of traditional bond. Maya's marriage with Gautama has been settled through her father's friendship with him. But Maya is not conscious of unpleasant realities of life. But ironically she is married to a non-Brahmin lawyer whose family does not know the joy of life, Instead of the individual's urgency and feelings; they converse of big things and national events.

The element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between husband and wife. Maya pines for Gautama's contact, but he cannot spare long hours for his wife. We can say that the couple lacks the emotional bond. It is the marriage which provided them only physical nearness, the union of two bodies. They don't have mental satisfaction at all. Maya's subjectivity and attachment is sharp contrast to Gautama's objectivity and detachment. Shanta Acharya rightly observes, "Maya and Gautama end up being two sides of the

same coin; in each case the exclusiveness of the self makes it unable to accommodate the other".

The affluence of Maya's father, the evenings of red sunset and the recitations of Urdu couplets are contemptuously dismissed by Gautama. He is entirely unresponsive to the beauty of nature. He cannot differentiate the smell of lemons from the smell of petunias. Due to the diverse opinion of both, there is a wide gap in their attitude. After all, Maya is oppressed by a sense of loneliness and thought of death. After the death of Toto one night both of them look at the sky. The twinkling stars do not evoke as deep a response in Gautama as in Maya: "The stars surgeddying ones to revive". Both doesn't share their feelings with each other. Maya always feels miserable because Gautam doesn't satisfy her inner feelings with great care. Their feelings of real are not shared together. Hence Maya feels miserable and lonely. She suffers a lot in her entire life. Gautama tries to console her outwardly, but of no avail. It is not her real relief from her husband. Prabhakar Pandey, a famous critic rightly says that-

"Maya's tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. Childless, with uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. And to cap it all, she is not even sexually satisfied".

After all, it is the loneliness that separates them from each other. Maya seems to cherish a continuous longing for something which she never attains. What ever experience of love she got with Gautama was a transient one. The prediction of the astrologer shocked her a lot. The prediction was that one of them would die after four years of their marriage. She is haunted by this prediction of the Albino priest.

As a feminist writer Desai introduces the theme of women's freedom in her novels. Her young women characters yearn for freedom. But quite unfortunately none of her characters could free themselves from the bondage. Maya thinks, "I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible" Monisha describes her plight:

"Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? . . . They put me away in a steel container, a thick



glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret."

The women novelists of recent times have very strong links with Western life and culture, either by virtue of their parentage or through marriage. But they all show a special attachment and love for their mother country and its life and culture. Their writings are characteristically Indian in spirit and tone. "They represent a significant creative surge in the Indian English literary scene which was set in motion by writers of great promise like Toru, and being carried forward by writers of much greater promise like Anita Desai". Desai's women characters are always seen hypersensitive, lonely and helpless and they are tormented by the patriarchal domination. Ogunyemi says, "A feminist novel is not just one that deals with women and women's issues, but it should also posit some aspects of a feminist ideology". Desai's early novels best illustrate that they are feminist novels. D.S. Maini has rightly said, "Cry, the Peacock is typically a feminine novel, a novel of sensibility rather than of action".

The characters sometimes react strongly and sometimes sensitively to the male-dominated society. She writes about sensitive women in an insensitive male world. Her theme is the existential predicament in the present social milieu where the male is the ruler and female is ruled over. Through the characterization of Monisha, the novelist presents the plight of women who are like caged birds. Her female characters are beleaguered by men. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's integrity is dissolving under various pressures mainly because of her life partner of intellectual sensitivity. Though she had a European tradition, her novels remain essentially Indian. Desai challenges the image of Indian women stereotypes, especially of the middle class. She presents their original pathetic situation with a longing for fulfillment in the family and society. Most of her women are housewives, but they are unhappy one way or the other. Desai thrusts a voice and desire into the being of these women.

Feminism is the ideology of women's liberation, and Anita Desai is awakened and

conscious about women's life and problems. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2004, when she was asked about her reaction on being addressed as a feminist writer, she comments:

As an intellectual woman, one can only be a feminist. . . . Of course, feminism is a stereotype with which one demolishes all uncomfortable and unpleasant achievements of women. It is easy to be part of a general opinion and then to joke about these women. The patriarchal system that still prevails has the power to make fun of every woman whom they don't like."

Anita Desai's novels work through a feminine consciousness. She has by and large written about women characters and is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples. Her women characters suffer in one way or other at the hands of men or in the society. She exploits the situation of women's suffering in her novels to present problems that confront women in a male-dominated society.

Through Maya's character, Anita Desai upholds a new vista of feminist writing. Maya stands apart from all the women characters in the novel. She is the most interesting and psychologically mystifying among all Desai's female characters. She represents a class of women who silently suffer at the hands of the men. Her actions and reactions may not always draw one's sympathy and can be dismissed as the useless thoughts of a luxurious mind. Her suffering is also luxurious suffering but the demands of the social changes put forth by the novelist can't be ignored. The fashion of living away from the parental house, the mother living away from the children and the increasing busy life, are some of the fractions of changing patterns.

The gloomy state of affairs is unacceptable to Maya. Hence she eases her tension psychologically by thinking how peacock stamps its feet and strikes against rock, and then how it seizes the snake to break its body to relieve its pain. This affects her consciousness badly and she craves for an urgent outlet of her emotions. Thus she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband is a revenge reaction arising out of her own basic frustrations- unhappy married life, unfulfilled



longings and a reaction against her husband's cold unresponsiveness. Through this murder and suicide, she experiences fulfillment and is relieved from the anxiety of past and present dilemmas.

Anita Desai has dwelt upon problems of love, marriage and sex in her novels in a very convincing and realistic way. She seems to champion the view that marriage alone does not provide a ready-made solution to life's tension, chaos and turbulence. Instead, mental satisfaction and happy married life means better understanding between husband and wife. One needs the genuine help of the other. A proven and trusted sense of co-operation at every stage and phase is required. Psychological adjustment is safe key to a healthy compromise and cordial existence in a conjugal life. Husband and wife need to nurture the strong feeling that they are complimentary to each other.

Finally, Anita Desai stands to be the one of the most powerful contemporary Indian Novelists in English. She is concerned with the inner world of her characters. She tries to look for the deep desires, emotions and feelings felt by her characters and shows them as the influencing factor behind their action. Her portrayal of man-woman relationship is influenced and conditioned by complex social milieu. She basically portrays the plight of modern woman in the existing man dominated society where she makes an effort to voice herself. She basically portrays the disparity in temperament as affecting the man woman relationship. Mostly woman are culturally as well as emotionally dependent on man and any disruption in relationship proves to be a loss of self. It is through one's relationship that one evaluates his/her worth. Her women characters undergo many sufferings inside and try to overcome from it and attain empowerment in their life.

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