ISSN No: 2249-894X

Monthly Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Review Of Research Journal

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X IMPACT FACTOR: 5.2331(UIF) VOLUME - 7 | ISSUE - 3 | DECEMBER - 2017



MARITAL DISCORD IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL, CRY, THE PEACOCK

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Guest lecturer of Gushkara Mahavidyalaya.

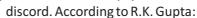
ABSTRACT: -

f all the contemporary Indian English novelists Anita Desai is, perhap, the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life, especially that of Indian women, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness in the face of onslaughts of an unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony. Her women are almost sick of life and listless playthings of their morbid psychic longings. Most of her female protagonists- Maya in Cry, the Peacock (1963) Monisha in Voices in the City (1965), Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer"? (1975), Nanda in Fire on the Mountain (1977) – are abnormally sensitive and unusually solitary to the point of being neurotic. What is important is the fact that Anita Desai, in most of her novels, attempts to bring out the neurotic condition of her female protagonists by a variety of factors – the most prominent being dissonance in marital relationships. This paper puts forward the portrayal of marital discord in Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock.

KEYWORDS: Anita Desai's Novel, the peacock.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of marital discord in Anita Desai's novels reveals her consummate artistry. Mrs. Desai sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern woman particularly in male-Chauvinistic society and her annihilation at the altar of marriage. The novelist however does not challenge the futility of marriage as an institution but discloses the inner psyche of the characters through their relations. In her novels, mostly women have been both culturally and emotionally dependent on men, and disruption of attachment or affiliation is seen not as a loss of relationship but a total loss of self, which is then seen as a neurosis. She has explored different aspects of feminine psyche which also includes marital



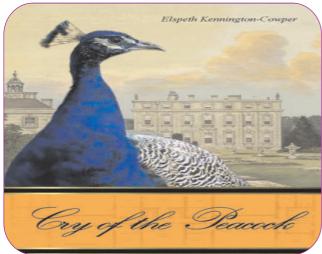
Anita Desai not only portrays the feminine psyche of a common

woman but also the subnormal bordering on abnormal woman. The

woman who are under so much of psychic pressure that they

cannot be known for insanity but then they are explicitly normal.

Desai's female protagonists are generally caught in a web of painful circumstances, their struggle and the outcome of which is usually the basis of the novels. The problem invariably in each case, is the difficulty of adjustment in conjugal relationships.



The novel Cry, the Peacock is Desai's first novel in which she has explored the theme of marital relationships and dissonance in it. The novel is concerned with the theme of marital discord between Gautama and Maya. In this novel the novelist has shown the real cause of disrupter in marriage of Maya and Gautama. The novel is about Maya's cry for love and relationship in her loveless wedding with Gautama. The peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's cry for love and understanding. The marital discord results from the temperamental disparity between Gautama and Maya. Even Maya's childlessness exaggerate her agony of loneliness which she feels in spite of being married. She becomes highly sensitive as a result of it.

Structurally, it is divided into three parts: The first part introduces us to Maya. Here, the narrator wins our sympathy for Maya and makes us believe that her husband is cold and indifferent her. Whereas Gautama appears to be shrewd, calculating and extremely matter of fact about the gravest matter, Maya seems to be innocent and extremely sensitive. An incident – the deaths of their dog Toto – which proves traumatic to her means nothing to her husband. There is such a vast difference in their attitude and nature that one cannot but expect a painful incompatibility between them. As Maya recalls the reaction of Gautama after the death of Toto: "'It's all over' he had said as calmly as the meditator beneath the sal tree. 'You need a cup of tea' he had said, showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. But then , he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins than ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it" (14).

In the second part, Maya elaborates the root cause of their incompatibility. We are told of her past life and her encounter with the albino astrologer who had once told her that either she or her husband would die within four years of her marriage. The anxiety caused by this prophecy had diminished with the passage of time but with the death of their dog, Toto, all these past memories wake up from their slumber and begin to haunt her again. The burden of the past, on the memories of her childhood, the constant fear of death, her desire to live, her regression, all these are closely associated with her recollection of the words of the astrologer.

The third part shows how Gautama's death, does not affect the daily routine. There is however, whispered conversation about sending Maya to a lunatic asylum. The story of Maya's life seems to be one of a three-fold pattern of events that can be summed up as: deprivation, alienation and elimination respectively. In the first place, Maya has been deprived of the love of mother, brother, and later her father. Her sanity is questioned at the end and there is clear likelihood of her being deprived of it once she is sent to an asylum. Secondly she is alienated from her husband and in the end she brings about his elimination from life and her own self from her family and society.

Anita Desai's, Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Where Shall We Go This Summer? Portray the troubled life of her female protagonists – Maya, Sita and Monisha. They seem to suffer since they have been married to the males, who fails to understand and agony of their fractured identities.

In Maya, of Cry, the Peacock, Desai probes the heart of a woman who is haunted almost suffers from the beginning of the novel by novel, by a gloomy prophecy of an Albino astrologer of a fetal disaster. According to the prophecy, she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage mysterious premonition about the tragic end of her husband would die in the fourth year of their marriage. When the novel opens, Maya's marriage with Gautama is running in its fourth year and the emotional woman Maya, is just beginning to reel under the pressure of the prophecy that threatens to shatter her married life. As Dr. Sanjay Kumar has said:

Maya's fear is aggravated as she fails to relate to Gautama her husband. Between the husband and wife there exists a terrible communication gap as both of them seen to live in different worlds.

Maya is an instinctive woman of passions and emotions. Gautama, on the other hand, is a philosophical intellectual. He is a kindly, cultured, rational, practical and busy with his own affair of business. He looks upon her love for good things as nothing more than sentimentalism and once makes a disparaging remark about her that she has a mind of third rate poetess. Maya longs for companionship which she never finds in her marriage: "Because when you are away from me, I want you. Because I insist on being with you and being allowed to touch

you and know you. You can't bear it, can you? No, you are afraid, you might perish" (113).On another occasion, in spite of her seductive postures, Gautama remains rigid and cold; Maya herself describes her predicament in these words: "I turned upon my side, close to him, conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded forms" (41-42). Thus driven by an instinctive nature, she expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but she is deprived of both — one by one by Gautama's cold intellectuality and the other by his age. She doesn't remain emotionally but physically dissatisfied too.

Maya has tried her best to love Gautama. Like the peacocks, longing for sexual communion, Maya craves for the company of Gautama, his touch and tickle. The cry of the peacock becomes the cry of Maya – her bruised soul. She asks her husband: "Do you not hear the peacock's call in the wild? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain?" "Pia, Pia", they cry. "Lover, Lover, Mio, Mio. I die, I die" — "Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will reap each other's breasts to strips and fall bleeding with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate". (95) But, Gautama remains listless to the cry. Maya, the 'pea-hen' fails to get response from Gautama, the peacock. For gratification of body's needs, Maya, within the permissible limits of the society, can look forward to her husband.

She longs the life that would permit her to "touch him, feel his flesh and hair, hold and tighten her hold on him". But the lack of understanding and viewing love, and void of passion and oomph, on the part of her husband Gautama has left Maya wanting and unfulfilled. Both Maya and Gautama are ranged against each other. When Maya wants to involve him in her world, she is rebuffed being considered as childish, boring and distasteful. She is not strong enough to rebel against physical and emotional deprivations and has to suffer her fate. An ever-widening gap in communication between the husband and the wife is felt throughout the novel. There is no real bond between them as Maya confesses: "Had there been a bond between us, we would have felt its pull — But, of course, there was none — there was no bond, no love — hardly any love".(108)

The novelist keeps Maya's mother out of her life, since Maya has been deprived of a mother's love, this painful void in her emotional life can be one of the factor responsible for her marital disharmony. In Maya's life, the only mother figure is her mother-in-law, and she too comes into her life, too late to be any help. She is sympathetic but helpless and her belated appearance shows that she is important but was not there earlier when she was most needed Maya's sense of insecurity is further intensified by the absence of her brother who could have been a dear childhood companion. But, from deriving a sense of security from her brother, she finds that she is living in a situation that is marked by conflict between the two people who are dearest to her father and her brother.

Maya misses Arjuna during his absence and her happiness cannot be measured when she receives his letter. It is clear, that in spite of the loving care of her father, Maya is still lonely an unseen spirit of sadness haunts the house. Despite all the luxurious, the home still lacks the vital family spirit. With marriage Maya has to leave her father. In this respect it can be said that, Maya is not a normal woman because she has never had a normal childhood. The only company she has in that of her father who pampers her to an extreme. It is worth mentioning here that her father's behaviour with his son was entirely different from Maya. With his son he was a harsh and strict but with his daughter he was over indulgent. Even Maya noticed the difference and felt uncomfortable. It is possible that Maya's father was aware of her weak mental state and therefore treated her like a delicate child. Not only did he pamper her but also fed her infant brain with fairy tales because the doctor had advised him not to make her anxious or sad. That was probably the time when Maya first began to reveal signs of her neurosis, and her father's awareness of it made him even more attached to her. It is only natural for parents to be ever protective about an ailing child and therefore, her fallen was specially, tender with her. This pampering spoils Maya and makes her crave for attention all the time: "people say he spoils me. They also say that I can get anything I want from him."

Maya's father fixation is so great that she marries Gautama because of his friendship with her father: "I met, half-way, my father's proposal that I marry this tall, stooped and knowledgeable friend of his, one might have said that our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else." (39) After marriage she expects her husband to play as

father with her. Maya does not grow up mentally which results in suffering. She has not attained emotional maturity which comes through facing facts and is content with the false nation that her husband can substitute her father and she can still behave like a child.

Gautama on the contrary, is aware of her father fixation. He tells Maya that she suffers from father fixation and until she matures rapidly, she will not be able to deal with life and will probably destroy herself in the end since passion of this sort is almost always self-consuming like any other husband Gautama expects Maya to behave like amateur person. But this increases Maya's sense of insecurity further, causing mental imbalance and acute psychic tension. This crippling impact, of her father fixation is obvious through out the novel. Maya compares Gautama to her father at every step and thus ruins her marital life completely. Perhaps, Gautama would have been better able to handle her if he had been told of her weak mental state by her father. Perhaps her father wished to keep this a secret not only from Gautama but from others as well, because such a revelation might have reduced his daughter's chances of marriage for who would willingly marry a psychic case. The death of their dog brings their respective, philosophies of life into sharp contrast. The dog's corpse brings no foolish sentiments in Gautama's mind. Instead he does all that was to be done, quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work. Maya reacts differently. She remains nervous and disturbed till long after the episode. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee:

The main pattern of this novel is a contrast between this woman's response to the world through her senses and her husband's response through his intellect.

Maya's desperate struggle to have an identity of her own is threatened by the presence of Gautama. She therefore, looks upon him as an antagonist and her psychic problem becomes an existential one. As, Sheetal Y. Thakore has said:

Maya hungered and hungered. And when this hunger was not satisfied, what was she do? Protest like her brother Arjuna? That she was incapable of because her father had taught her to accept life. And accept she could not because it told upon her nerves. She would lie awake at night stifled by the hunger. . . . She felt not only the Gautama but for all that life represented. She came to look upon her relationship with Gautama as a relationship with death.

Maya would like Gautama to meet her at the level of her inner life which to him is a closed book. He knows nothing of the astrologer and she deliberately avoids any reference to that phase of her childhood in which she had been troubled by the astrology's prediction. He is an ignorant about the fact that she has a brother and is successfully unable to know what is worrying her. From this arises a conflict of expectations leading to a failure in communication and to emotional incompatibility. The theme of marital therefore, does not acquire sociological connotations. In spite of this, there is little evidence to show that Gautama makes Maya feel like a nonentity or that he does not let her assert her identity, to subordinate her identity to his completely. He never dominates her, true, but occasionally they do have arguments because their basic way of thinking differs and not because Gautama is a male chauvinist. He is realistic, down to earth and not at all sentimental. He just wished to combat her indiscipline with his sense of the practical. He never humiliates her deliberately but on the other hand she, with her disturbed state of mind, concocts all sorts of situations where even an innocent action of the husband is regarded as a great insult. The trouble with Maya is that while she realizes she is 'different' from all, she fails to realize that each one is a different individual - who necessarily thinks, act and behaves in a different manner from others. Just as she can not think like Gautama, he, too, can not think exactly like her, Gautama is not a threat to her identity though she thinks him to be.

Maya's father is, no doubt, partly to blame for bringing up his daughter the way he did. He approved of whatever, she did or said, never differed from her, even when she was wrong. She therefore, comes to believe that everything should be done according to her wishes. At every step she compares Gautama with her father to the disadvantage of the former because she fails to realize that a father-daughter relationship is different from a

husband wife relationship. A father may not expect anything in return but with a husband it has to be a give and take relationship. Maya is not prepared to give anything to achieve a mutually happy relationship. She says that she loves Gautama, rarely shows her love in deeds. Gautama, on the contrary is gentle and .patient with her, except those times when she is too unreasonable. Even then he blames her father and not Maya herself:

He (father) is the one responsible for this-for making you believe that all that is important in this world is the possess, possess-riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers- all the luxurious of fairy tales you were brought up on life is a fairy take to you all. What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence are not love and romance, but living and working, all that constitutes life for an ordinary man. You want find it in your picture books. What wickedness to raise a child like that.

Maya's disappointment at Gautama's lack of sympathy and understanding is hardly justified. She never confides her troubles, but Gautama still tries to help her to face facts and to make adjustments. He fails in this endeavor because she does not change her perspective or even try to see things as he sees them. This also shows her lack of faith in him.

Maya's regressive tendency and her repeated death gradually assume the form of a murderous intent, when she finds that she loves life and so does Gautama. Life to him would mean death to her. She kills Gautama, but his death fails to leave any sense of tragedy or pathos in its wake. Even the novelist seems to play down Gautama's death which is mentioned euphemistically and evasively, reminding one of Virginia Woolf, in whose novels also death is under played from this view. The novelists attention is solely on Maya, what she feels, how she feels about what she does, and what she has gone through. For Maya it is only a push, for Gautama it is death. While others have been removed from her life in a subtle way, her murder of Gautama is her most daring act of assertion. The irony of the situation is that this assertion not only ends in removing Gautama from her life, but also her own removal from the house and Gautama's relatives. By her act, she has ensures her removal to a lunatic asylum and this removal from a sane society is another deprivation for her. Maya fails in her attempt to maintain an identity of her own and there is a steady deterioration in her mental state.

It would be wrong to conclude that Maya's only problem was the turmoil caused by her temperamental alienation from her husband. The prophecy of the albino astrologer is equally responsible for the estrangement. It haunts her mind and does not allow her to forget what she is doomed to go through. There is hardly any action in the whole novel but, through the meditation that goes on in Maya's mind, it is evident from repeated references that the astrologer has left an indelible impact on her mind. His gestures had reminded her of a lizard—"as a lizard flicks its tongue at petrified victims." Consequently, thoughts of lizards, rats and snakes constantly flash across her mind. We never hear her speak of the birds, the blooming flowers on the blue skies. Her thoughts about snakes can be interpreted as the astrologer, who with his forked tongue' fills her innocent mind with poison. A deeper look into Maya's psyche reveals that her life was basically unfulfilled. She ends up almost as if she was an outcast and unfit to be a member of the society in which she is living. Gautama is a faithful husband who loves and cares her in his own way yet Maya never satisfied and happy. As Usha Pathania has said:

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.

This novel Cry, the Peacock exposes an impression of marital incongruity and unhappy conjugal life. As Suresh Kohli has commented:

No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is.

There is little analysis of Maya's mind and more of the conflict between Maya and Gautama. The novel is uneventful and even in important event, like the death of Gautama is not treated with the usual importance. Just one paragraph is devoted to the tragedy. Dialogues are monotonous and the narrator oscillates between

description and edition. All that can be said is that the novelist has tried to give the verbal form of a situation which seems to be troubling her and to which she has found no solution. Her novel is a seemingly imperfect attempt to understand, explore and solve a problem that defies solution, if not understanding. Maya has a narrow life with limited interests hardly any inter-personal relationships. Even in her childhood, she was a lover. Though she is fond of possessing books by Tagore, Keats, Shelley, she hardly ever reads them. This tendency continues after marriage and Gautama points out to her, that she never reads the newspaper or a book neither does she involve herself in any extra-curricular activity. Consequently, her mental horizon remains narrow and she has a centripetal tendency as a personal relationship is concerned. She rarely gives anything especially to Gautama and always expects him to understand and love her.

For a woman, the traditional stereotype is one that cares and gives to others, even to the point of neglecting herself. The feminist inspiration has produced women characters that do not lose their identity, but assert the need for an independent identity. In feminist fiction we come across to women who are shown to be making efforts to mould their lives to be themselves, even to the point of disrupting their tradition - bound relationship in a conventional family. Shyam Asnani feels that:

In each of her novels one could sense the author's urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearnings of the Indian woman for self-emancipation and self dignity.

But in portraying Maya as a character born of feminist inspiration, Anita Desai is obviously not sure of herself because Maya fails both in creating an identity for herself and in leading a stable life.

The problem and the agony of Maya's life are accurately reflected in the significant fable of the peacock's mating ritual. The cry of peacock is the cry of the natural instinct of a woman who is unfulfilled. But such a fulfillment is denied to Maya. She realizes that she wants Gautama's physical presence, his love and a normal life. She is capable of empathy which enables her to experience what the peacock and peahen are experiencing but this makes her feel all the more intensely that though there is an emotional arousal, there is no physical fulfillment which is the cause of her agony and also the reason for her resentment against Gautama. A sense of lack of fulfillment leads Maya's to brooding and regression. Being an introvert, Maya does not like socializing, nor is she able to face reality and, therefore, sits at home brooding.

To conclude, the novelist, in the novel, presents temperamental incompatibility of husband-wife which leads to dissonance in marital relationship. The two widely different individuals, Maya and Gautama were united in marriage as such, they are unable to lead a harmonious and purposeful domestic life.

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