



EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT OF MAYA IN ANITA DESAI'S "CRY, THE PEACOCK"

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, an Indian novelist & short story writer, is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Desai's novels explore tensions among family members and the alienation of middle-class women.

KEYWORDS: Existential predicament, Neurotic, Struggle, Turns and twists, Alienation, Repression.

INTRODUCTION

The study of Isolation experienced by women in male dominated society is significant modern trend. In Indian society women are not allowed to play an active role in decision making. They are ignored and keep aside. In such situation Anita Desai tries to focus on the existential predicament of women in society. Anita Desai's 'Cry the Peacock' presents the image of a suffering women preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within the existential predicament of woman in a male dominated society.

MAYA IN 'CRY THE PEACOCK'

'Cry the Peacock' is a story of Maya, a young lonely girl had been portrayed by Anita Desai. She has been mentally affected due to the loneliness and loveless marriage life. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much of her opinion, married her off to his own lawyer friend, Gautama, who was middle aged man. It is a story of highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative girl, Maya, and her husband who is materialistic, practical and unresponsive. That leads Maya towards search for identify which is an important feature of existentialism. Maya is motherless child but her father showers all his love on her, so he has been brought as a princess.

'Cry the Peacock' is the story of a female whose own romantic world is lost with her husband's practical world that makes her to feel dejected, lonely and frustrated. The personal conflict of identify of women in the Indian society has been portrayed by Anita Desai. Maya the protagonist wants to create her own identity after marriage, but she lost her self at the end. Desai artistically depicts the identify of Maya in contemporary society dominated by man (Father, Husband) in which she longing for love is driven her mad or completed to commit suicide. At last Maya undergoes a gradual disintegration of her personality. She says – "Am I gone insane? Father, ! Brother! Husband ! who is my savior? I am in need of one"

Maya is romantic and hungry for love, where as Gautama is realistic and cold, she struggles for existence with a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. The protagonist Maya, struggles against the oppressive environment of patriarchal domination and undertakes for



voyage for the purpose of discovering herself. Desai's work 'Cry the Peacock' shows the aspect of identity and alienation. In it Maya grows up under the care of her father which develops in her a sense of loneliness. She aspires for love and life. In Maya's life 'Totto' has been substituted for children. She becomes alienated after the death of Totto.

Maya and Gautama are poles apart. There is complete lack of communication between two. This is clear from the attitude of her husband towards her after the death of Totto. For Gautama "it is all over and he simply needed "a up of tea."He fails to realize her misery and does not know how to comfort her. Insensitivity of her husband becomes clear from the following.

"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 that run under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me."

When Maya get married to Gautama and come in her husband's house the situation is totally different. She finds that her feelings are not cared; she is being neglected, isolated and alienated in her own house. This disturbs her terribly and so she feels herself utterly defenseless and alone. This novel gives an impression of indifference in the married life of Maya and Gautama. The death of dog makes the situation worse and indicates the isolated life of Maya. She is badly disturbed by indifference of her husband to the death of dog and it shows carelessness towards his wife. He considers the pet dog insignificant and replaceable.

He is unable to comprehend the value of emotional attachment. The pet's death shatters Maya beyond measures. She tells Gautama : "Oh Gautama pets might not mean anything to you and yet mean the world to me." – Totto was insignificant for Gautama where as everything for Maya. With Totto she shared her pains and pleasures and removed her loneliness. Gautama is detached, philosophical and rational. There is no place for Maya in his world. He neither understands her wishes nor allows her to enter in his world. His world is totally strange to Maya. Maya is a victim of emotional as well as physical depression.

As her name suggests, she creates an illusory world around her and crying to come to terms with her marginalized status. She assumes that for Gautama, her husband, life is not of much value and pushes him off the roof. But in the end Maya is not saved from becoming insane.

Cry the peacock shows in Maya the awareness of the rigidity of the patriarchal structure which shuts the women off from a major area of human experience and refuses to acknowledge a woman's experience as significant. It also shows a young woman and her confrontation with the society leading to the annihilation.

Thus the novel echoes in the cry of Maya the desire of a married woman to be loved with passion.

The Turns and Twists of Maya's Mind :-

The turns and twists of Maya's mind constitute the major portion of the narrative in the lengthy middle portion of the novel and are conveyed through the stream of consciousness technique that Anita Desai uses. Her use of language with its devices of description, reflected in dreams and nightmares is specially effective in revealing Maya's disturbed mental state and conveys graphically the complex states of her consciousness.

The struggle between attachment and detachment as survived philosophies of existence is played out in the battlefield of Maya's mind, taking the form of external questioning and internal uncertainty and causing her intense anguish. She reacts hysterically and exaggeratedly to most events of the outer world, which impinge painfully on her consciousness.

Maya as a Rebel Women :-

Maya is thus an extremely sensitive character, a portrayal of a woman who has failed to come to terms with domination and the patriarchal order. Though she lives in the male world surrounded by male dominance, she refuses to identify with it and revolts against it in her own way. As the story unfolds, she

seeks her mother in the natural landscapes and gardens, gets solace in it, but her inner feelings and deepest desires would not be rejected. Though Maya is an affluent housewife with all the necessities of a comfortable city life fulfilled, yet she is neither happy nor satisfied, nor is she the ideal, content housewife who compromises with her situation and thus suppressing her self identity and feminine desire in her heart till she dies.

Maya is a rebel woman who fails to identify herself with her husband Gautama's world and finds herself alienated from the affection she got from her father and besides her total economic dependence on her husband makes her feel rather insecure and powerless. There are other traits in Maya's character, which transcend the idea of Feminism. She is in search of new vistas for a woman's world, a space in which she is on par with man akin to the dance of the peacocks who destroy each other in spite of being madly in love. Maya thinks of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. Rebuffed by her husband, Maya is torn between her love of life and her fear of death. She is deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity.

(Bilquees Dar, 89)

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.

In this novel Desai deals with assertion of women's rights. So, Maya's identity as a woman is given priority over a man's. But after killing her husband she does not seek the freedom that she craved for. Her madness has a symbolic significance that a woman cannot go to the extent of killing her husband in order to be happy. At the same time, Desai has tried to answer an implicit question for the whole mankind that human beings cannot live without feelings, love and emotions.

Maya's increasing desperation makes her more assertive and vocal about her feelings. She feels that Gautama, by associating love with destructive detachment and rejecting it, has effectively rejected her love. This provokes her into open rebellion and rejection of his platitudes of detachment and attachment.

She refuses to let him talk, or to subdue her passionate beliefs with his rational logic, as he has always done. All her suppressed instincts and emotions find a violent release now through her flood of words, and ally with a rising sense of panic and the feeling of being betrayed to stress her realization of her irrelevance to his life. This confrontation becomes the turning point of her relationship with him, making his irrelevance to her own life apparent to her.

Thus Maya's overwhelming sense of fear becomes the catalyst for her growing need for assertion in forcing her to reexamine her relationship with her physical and emotional world.

Anita Desai sensitively projects the tilting balance of Maya's mind, dominated by its anxieties and fears, desperately seeking a way out of this dead-end of existence. Totally insecure with no one or nothing to save her from death is rebelling against what fate has ordained for her. She has to fall upon her own resources to circumvent death. Though conceived as a neurotic character, Maya is also associated with a heroic rebellion, with an intense attempt to unequivocally understand her own priorities and live a meaningful life. Madness becomes a meta-language for her rebellion and helplessness and provides her a means of consciously defying her fate. Her strong yearning to live provokes her into action, on to the path of murder and perhaps suicide and gains no positive end, but the novelist describes her mental 'growth' and ironically endorses her attempts to gain control over her unhappy existence.

Maya's happiness is illusory or short-lived but is gained through an arrogant acceptance of her self with its emotional needs. Her choice of rebellion is meaningful in itself and provides a heroic stature to Maya. Her story highlights the clash between her desire for communication as a wife, and her desire not to lose her identity as an individual.

Vijayalshmi Seshadri comments in her *Study of Woman Characters in Indian English Literature* that the journey to selfhood and freedom becomes a central quest in contemporary female writers and this motif of self exploration rids the female figure of all the existing stereotypes and turns her into a questing protagonist. She also sees 'Maya' as typifying the individual's quest for some sympathy in the face of

individual misery. Hence, Maya in *Cry the Peacock* becomes a representative of both the female and individual predicament.

In my opinion, the novel echoes in the cry of Maya, the desire of a married woman to be loved with passion. Through Maya's character Desai's main concern is to study human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. Maya's alienation is solely responsible for her tragedy. At last she found meaning by killing Gautama and by committing suicide. Anita Desai presents the theme of women's sensibility and how they suffer on account of emotional and physical repression and become victims of male dominated social and cultural order. '*Cry the Peacock*' is a unique example of the feminist point of view.

CONCLUSION –

'Cry the Peacock' depicts existentialism in its deep rooted morbidity through the neurotic and isolated self of Maya. Existentialistic idea came out of a deep sense of despair and depression in life. In 'Cry the Peacock' Maya's alienation is solely responsible for her tragedy. At last she found meaning by killing Gautama and by committing suicide. Maya is alienated who struggles with hopelessness. This novel illustrates an attitude towards female oppression, death and the meaning of human existence.

Anita Desai presents theme of women's sensibility and how they suffer on account of emotional and physical repression and become victim of male dominated social and cultural order. 'Cry the Peacock' is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.

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