

Cry the Peacock: Analytical Study on Neurosis

Dr. Ashish Gupta

Professor & Head

Department of English

Government Girls College, Betul (M.P.) India

Mail – gupta.sharpcool@gmail.com

Article Info

Page Number: 2815-2820

Publication Issue:

Vol. 71 No. 4 (2022)

Article History

Article Received: 25 March 2022

Revised: 30 April 2022

Accepted: 15 June 2022

Publication: 19 August 2022

Abstract

Anita Desai, in her writings, examines into the psyche of her characters. The protagonists in her novels show strange behavior as a result of the identity crisis cussed by the distressing shocking experiences they face. The novel which has been chosen for study in this research is, *Cry, The Peacock*. This study tries to identify the strange behavior of the protagonist Maya; and to examine the sociological and psychological reasons for such behavior. In this novel, the central character assails through a strait of darkness, thoroughly confused and puzzle about her future. In this paper, an attempt is made to analyze the protagonist of the novel; thus, linking up literature with psychology, gaining an insight into her neurotic behavior.

Keywords - identity crisis, shocking experience, neurosis, psychology

In Literature the use of psychological concepts is an old phenomenon as literature itself. Shakespeare's Hamlet, Lady Macbeth and Othello are classic examples of characters in English Literature showing neurotic behavior owing to the identity crisis they undergo. Coleridge also has given a psychological aspect to his Ancient Mariner's character. In the twentieth century literature, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Henry James and others have written novel with psychological flavor. In Indian English writing, Anita Desai, one of the pioneers among the women writers, is greatly influenced by writers like Woolf, Lawrence and Henry James; as she has admitted that she has drawn inspiration from them; which is reflected in her novels. In an interview to Srivastava's question of what kind of characters she prefers for her novels; Desai replies, "Individuals, always and invariably" (Interview 212). Her use of subjectivism and individualism in her works has given new scopes to Indian writing in English. In her writings Desai examines into the psyche of her characters. The protagonists in her novels show strange behavior as a result of the identity crisis cussed by the distressing shocking experiences they face. The novel which has been chosen for study in this research is *Cry, The Peacock*. This study tries to identify the strange behavior of the protagonist Maya, in Anita Desai's novel; and to examine the sociological and psychological reasons for such behavior. In this novel, the central character assails through a strait of darkness, thoroughly confused and puzzle about her future. Alienation or disorientation plays a major part in all of Desai's protagonists and her mastery lies in redefining the very concept of 'Alienation'. Desai's tendency to dive into the psychological compartment of human nature makes identical as a novelist.

The identity crisis in the lives of Anita Desai's protagonists in her earlier novels is, generally

of an individual nature; though, throughout the story, it has the overtones of existentialism. With the passage of time and the maturity of her narrative art, the nature of identity crisis becomes more complex. Her range of experience and her vision of life extend to the communities and nations either directly or indirectly. She succinctly epitomizes the predicament of the individual who is often subjected to the laws of heredity, nationality, race, cast, language, colour and environment. Anita Desai has a special stress on the existential problems of womankind in general and Indian women in particular. Although she does not belong to any feminist movement yet there is a touch of persuasive feminism in her writings. She marks a revolutionary departure without involving herself in any controversy and is contented to have women protagonist in her novels. Her themes and characters depict the existential reality and evoke the sensibility of her females. She is constantly concerned with the problems of communication between men and women. She has a talent of probing the psyche of her women characters.

Desai's literary career spreads over five decades. By the time Anita Desai stepped into the world of literary writing with her first penned fiction *Cry, The Peacock* in 1963; Indian women's writing in English had already made its presence in the English literary arena. Kamal Markandaya had published her first novel *Nectar in the Sieve* in 1954 and Nayantara Sahgal had published her first novel *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, also in 1954. Desai has followed the footsteps of these two pioneers in choosing a writing career. Markandaya's and Sahgal's writings are focused on social issues and feminist issues, but Desai concentrates on individuals in her novels and she tries to examine inward psychology of her imaginary beings even though she is conscious of the influence of society on individuals. In her article "*The Indian Writer's Problems*", Anita Desai says that her intention is not to represent social documents and that her novels are "purely subjective" and that her characters speak "the language of their thoughts, of their interior selves-which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language" (3). Desai's novels indicate her characters sensibility, "it is the exploration of sensibility, the inner workings of mind that assume significance. Anita Desai is interested in the psychic life of her characters and her novels reveal that her real concern is with the exploration of human psyche" (Dhawan 11).

In this paper, an attempt is made to analyze the protagonist of the novel; thus, linking up literature with psychology, gaining an insight into her neurotic behavior. Neurosis begins when the real self is forsaken. A threatening environment evoked in him a dread of others and self he becomes hostile and dependent but tries to repress both because he does not want to give vent to his wrath and among others, he feels helpless and defenseless in the hands of dangerous world. Healthy and neurotic attitude towards others can be demarcated by flexibility or rigidity. A neurotic is not flexible, he is driven by the compulsive nature of his inner necessities, and the difference between neurotic drives and healthy strings is one between spontaneity and compulsion between recognizing and denying limitations. Inner struggles and discordant social relations produce neurosis. Emotional stresses, conflicts and frustrations precipitate them. Desai portraits hyper sensitive Maya, discarded Nanda, peculiar Raka, sensitive but balanced Deven; all provide a vast potential for the study of Neurosis. The roots of neurosis of Desai's characters lie deep in their unusual family circumstances, uncaring and unloving parents,

divided between themselves, and the neglected children seeking their own refuge. As 'strange' and 'eccentric' is Desai's domain, none of her protagonists has a normal family history. They are all victims of broken homes and uncaring parents. Maya, Raka and Nanda are developed sensitive and introvert natures because of their family histories. Maya, Raka and Nanda suffer intensely under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands. Incompatibility of temperaments, inability to adjust.

Desai's characters are chiefly introverts who do not defy to come out of the realm of their mini world. Anita Desai has shown a tendency to create off-beat characters. Making struggle and search for identities. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Desai commenting on her characters says "but naturally as writer one is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than everyday average ones" (Jain 10). In *Cry, the Peacock*, fancy and fantasy are used for showing Maya's weakness to get rid of the limitations of her planetary in order to be one with the larger world. She embraces fantasy because she is incapable to connect to reality. Anita Desai has examined into the consciousness of the main character, Maya, to bring out these conflicts between reality and fancy. Maya and Gautama portray the conflict between objective reality and self-cared creed. One is that of intellectual aloofness, personified in the mythical figure of Gautama and the other one is the world of dogma personified in Maya. Their very names suggest their nature: 'Maya' suggests belief and 'Gautama' evokes the figure of Gautama, the Buddha, who perceived the world of belief and by renunciation brought an end to sorrow.

Maya's kinship with truth undergoes three stages. The first is that of her early days when she is brought up within a limited world. The second is her wedlock and conjugal life with Gautama where she takes some futile moves to decline in her past and equally fruitless ones to reach out to others. The third and final phases is, her total submission to the world of her worries and to neurosis. In the beginning of the novel this ambivalence in the psyche of Maya is reflected. She is unable to accept the death of her pet dog, Toto. On looking at Toto's deceased body Maya "screamed and rushed to the garden top to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house". (CP 5) The indifferent behavior of Gautama to deal with this occurrence makes her alone and drives her back into her infancy memories, as they are like a gentle and sad lullaby. Memories of her childhood are joyous and happy. That world was "like a toy, especially made for me, painted into my favorite colors, set moving to my favorite tunes" (CP 36). The reflections of the leisurely breakfast in the garden with her father come her mind. She recollects:

She enjoyed the sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens, jackal and tigers, and, being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well. (CP 43)

Maya lived in a charming and luxurious world of fantasy. The fantastic world of toys was more real to her than the real world. Later on, she realizes that her infancy was one in that much was excluded, "Which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even." (CP 89) As she comes across reality she is horrified and disturbed. She has been brought up by her father like a princess preventing her from seeing the ugliness and sufferings of the world. It makes her so sensitive that she identifies herself with natural objects and animals but not with human beings. The

incident of bear and bear-trainer makes it quite clear. She gets much pleasure watching the bear dance, but is also worried that the trainer probably does not give enough food to the bear, and this worries her so much that on that night she dreams of hungry bears “grabbing and gesticulating,” and falls ill. It shows that Maya had a partial vision of the world, a world of human beings and realized only through senses. Her childhood has been cheerful, possibly more so in recollection than in fact. She had liberty to play with pets or smell flowers. She is almost very free but she fails to deal with them rationally. Maya plunges into her childhood days. She feels relaxed for a little moment, but when reality hangs large over her internal fears, she is annoyed by the feelings of uneasiness:

Its presence was very real and truly physical—shadows cast by trees, split across the leaves and grasses towards me, with horrifying swiftness ... I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and unlocking their moist lengths about me, of evil descending from an overhanging breach, of an insane death, unprepared for, heralded by deafening drum beats. (*CP* 12-13)

Maya has great love for nature and she finds peace and pleasure in the beauty of nature. It is as if she is running away from the horror of death, unable to face the facts of life and trying to find solace in the lap of Mother Nature. She has a beautiful garden, full of flowers. She can know each and every flower with its perfume. Maya hopes to have the same apprehension about nature from her husband, but he does not find anything like her in nature. Maya desires to have long a total understanding and love from her husband, and not finding the same she plunges her into the gloominess and sorrow. She is comforted by contact, relationship, communion as they solace her till the disturbed murmurs of her agitation get calm.

The growing gap between Maya and Gautama throws her into the very abyss of nightmares that is greatly increased by the constant reminder of the prophecy of the albino priest. Sometimes Maya tries to get out of her dreadful nightmares by going out and meeting her friends. But her meetings with her friends, Pom and Leila, prove to be unsatisfactory for her. She is worried by their problems, and it has great effect on her as she gets passionately involved with them. She needs good support and understanding from Gautama which she is denied, as the result of that she closes herself in her self-world. But this, too, is incapable of providing her an anchor she concludes the impermanence of her dreams and changing into nightmares. She is so haunted with the foretold calamity that even a tiny thing becomes threats of the forthcoming calamity, and she is dreaded by the chances of death. She has much love for life and the notion of death hangs vast on her mind. Maya lives in this mortal agony” in the contrast of life and death, fancy and reality, and she does not reconcile them. This contrast of Maya’s existence continues till the end of the novel. Her contact establishes a contrast between her world of belief and human world of action and business. On one hand Maya is not prepared to compromise and deny to take interest in the world of others. Because of the constant conflict between reality and belief, Maya loses her sanity fully and she kills Gautama by throwing him off the roof then she herself plunges hopelessly into the experience of past.

There is also a conflict between the two philosophical levels that is characterized by Maya and Gautama. Gautama expounds the teachings of The Bhargava Gita. He mentions few short

comings in her attitude towards life whereas she wants to live a life of disengagement. On the contrary Maya is utterly happy and satisfied with her world that is complete in itself for her. Yet, this aloofness from the outer world and her soaking up into the internal world does not content any liberty to her but only dominates her. The novel, thus puts questions on the nature of reality. In relation to this connection, Jasbir Jain asks a question:

who is involved and who is detached in the true sense? Gautama who needs to keep himself busy and engaged in actively, or, Maya, whose inner being creates a full life? Who is more wise of the two-Gautama who dreads passion; or Maya who is lost in emotion? (Jain 73)

This mental dissatisfaction conveys Maya's failure to cop up with the ethereal world and that leads her to sufferings, trauma and mental illness. After murdering her husband, she mentally returns to her safe and sweet childhood which seems to be the best part of her life. In this way Anita Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche both of a girl and of a woman in the character of Maya. In Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, we come across the two extremes. Maya is a sterile woman with a high degree of advanced sensibility and feeling. At the other side there is a woman Pom, woman with love for clothes, jewelry, color and looks. Maya's marriage with Gautama is not successful. Maya is sensitive whereas Gautama is rational. This is crystal clear from their dissimilar responses to the pet dog's death. Being a childless woman Maya had established a type of filial kinship with the dog. The dog was a child substitute for Maya. But Gautama, a down-to-earth person takes it very simply and makes the required arrangements for the burial of the pet dog, Toto. He, in his emblematic way try to comfort Maya and convinces her of bringing another dog. Gautama, being rational and above all a man, cannot understand the emotional depth in Maya; it is far beyond his approach. Though socially they are supposed to be near, sensitively they are extremes apart. To make the problem worse, he offers a cup of tea to her. This clearly displayed Gautama's indifference to Maya's feministic sensibility. Being a woman, Maya expects much from her the husband Gautama; but in vain. Therefore, in this novel Anita Desai throws light on what goes inside Maya, a sensitive and introverted woman.

The clash between Gautama and Maya is quite internal than external. The issue with Maya is her aloneness caused by her husband's non-reciprocation. It is heightened by her being childless and more sensitive as well. To be very clear, Maya is extremely delicate. To her contrast Pom is a woman who believe is "lust for newness, for brightness, color and gaiety." She has a beautiful world where there are no shades of family, tradition and delusion. However Maya dislikes the cabaret girls, the writer has given much effort in unfolding them. This is why, Maya is not Anita Desai and Anita Desai is not Maya. For Anita Desai, Maya is as crucial as the cabaret girls. Leila is another woman character who is also a contrast to Pom. A teacher in a girl's school, she has married a tubercular man against her parents' wishes. So, she has turned passive and ascetic. She is unhappy having no longing for jewelry or bangles. Maya is so much attached with her father, but Leila's parents had broken all types of kinships with her after her elopement. Maya trusts in the priest's prophecy, but Leila, ungrudgingly has admitted what was all written in her destiny.

In her very attempt to discover the feminine psyche, Anita Desai enters the deeper and further

deeper insight. The result is, we find some of her woman characters, if not insane, are not completely normal. Maya does not move and find her sedentary still for a long time Gautama speaks- "Haven't you lifted up a book, your sewing? Noting at all? But this is madness, Maya. Madness? I screamed, leaping at him, to strike him, to stab him and began to cry hysterically." (CP 178) And then we are intimated that Maya is not sure if the event really took place but what is definite is her mental disorder. Her neurotic state of mind is painted through unpleasant animal imagery like that of a lizard, a nauseating creature. This image has been recurrent in the fiction. Pushing off Gautama from the roof top Maya goes back to her father's house in Lucknow. Once again, she becomes a girl lost in her world of picture books and toys. Whatever the cause may be, Maya is entirely unfit for the actual world. Thus, after killing her husband, she draws back to her safe and babied childhood which gives her a benign haven. Depicting the mother character Anita Desai has done justice to her creative art by not hiding anything that any other writer. Motherhood is a very delicate thought among women. So, being childless, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*.

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is considered a role model in the field of psychological novel in Indian writings in English. This novel works with a constricting facet of Indian culture and setting. In this novel Desai attempts to show a picture of the diseased psyche of a woman, almost on the verge of insanity. She has explored the psyche of a highly sensitive, cultured and high-strong woman Maya. Emotional dependence on the other sex, absorption in love, inhibition of expansive autonomous development, self-sacrificing nature, primeval and oceanic feminine power, impersonal and unrelatable majesty of femininity, respect towards the bond of marriage, demand for growth, having the powers to change and destroy, light-bearing quality, withdrawing to a quiet place and remaining still, the capacity to protect herself and her family from destruction, skill in sorting creatively and the fear of the loss of identity are some of the fundamental characteristics of the feminine psyche. It is, in the light of the theories discussed above, that I proceeded to make an exploration into feminine psyche in the early works of Desai. Desai stands out among her contemporary Indian women writers in English with the marked change in her style, theme and approach in her writings. Her novels are subjective in character and she was the stream of consciousness as her narrative style. As a women writer Desai engraves her mark in the English literary world.

References –

1. Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. Orient Paperbacks, 1980.
2. (The novel is mentioned in abbreviation form as CP)
3. Dhawan, R.K. "The Fiction of Anita Desai." *The Fiction of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.
4. Jain, Jasbir. "Anita Desai: Interview." *Rajasthan University Studies in English*, 1979.
5. Jain, Jasbir. "Work of Some length." *Stairs to Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai*, Jaipur: Printwell Publication, 1987.