

A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK

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ABSTRACT

The entire Post Independence fiction does not radically depart from the idealistic social strains but consciously focuses at the residuals of issues which shift from society to psyche. And it is the psyche that comes under smart focus. The first group of the novelists includes Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya. These novelists reveal the social, economic and political realities of India, especially the gross realities "of caste and class conflicts, exploitation and the proverbial Indian poverty". The second group of writers includes Kamla Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai voice forth the human predicament-vis-à-vis the negative social forces that subvert man's progress. Of all the novelists of the Post-Independence period, Anita Desai occupies a unique position as a writer. She mainly illustrates the internal drama of human life in her fiction, and concentrates on its basic facts. Of all the contemporary Indian women novelists, Anita Desai is the best known. Although we know not much about her life and views on literature yet we consider him one of the landmarks in the Indi-Anglian fiction. She says herself, "I confess I am afraid of speaking about the art of writing, the mechanics of my craft, I have an intuitive and deep fear that by speaking of something subterranean and subconscious, I will destroy it- it is something so very frail." Anita Desai appeared on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, when her first novel, *Cry, the peacock* was published. The novel received wide acclaim from the readers and critics. Her second novel *Voices in the City* came in 1965 and it enhanced her popularity amongst the readers.

KEYWORDS: Hypersensitivity, Consciousness, Sexual Obsession, Fear Psychosis, Existentialism, Psychic Turmoil, Matrimonial Silence, Psychology

INTRODUCTION

The Indian writing in English, with the background of more than a century, has passed through various stages giving priorities to different perspectives at different times. Till lately, the landscape of Indian fiction remained laden with the themes of freedom struggle and it's after effects. But with the coming up of new writers like Anita Desai, a new direction and a new vista has been opened up. Many new writers are coming up with different visions and forms in the field of Indian writing in English.

What distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual and his inner world of sensibility- the chaos inside the mind. Ruth Praver Jhabvala chooses the social background for her comedies, tragi-comedies and farces. In Kamala Markandaya's novels, the stress is as much as on principle characters as on diverse contemporary problems- economic, political, cultural and social. Nayantara Sahgal is writing about political or socio-political issues. On the other hand, Anita Desai's main concern is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind, bringing into relief the hidden aspects of the human psyche. The centre of attraction in her novels is the existential predicament of an individual which is projected through the couples who does not comprise- a

hypersensitive wives and inconsiderable husbands.

A Psychological Study

Desai spotlights an extremely complex nature of life. The real life has an infinite variety; it may take as many forms as there are individuals. Her notion of reality of life seems to have been greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf who says that

Life is not a series of big lamps symmetrically arranged; Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelops surrounding us from beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 177)

Desai prefers the inner reality to be outer, insight to sight.

We can say that Anita Desai is the first novelist among the Indian women writers who introduced the word psychology in the Indian novel written in English. Perhaps, she is the one whose main foothold is the exploration of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles raging the soul of human beings at the conscious and the subconscious level and describing the atmosphere of the mind. The fictional world of Anita Desai is strictly private. She is more concerned with the inner reality than the outside world around. She is the painter of the moods and wills, of desires and dreams and of inner experiences. Desai finds no discrepancy between Truth and Art. According to her,

Reality is merely the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean-art is the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below the surface. That is why; it is more near truth than reality itself. Art does not merely reflect reality- it enlarges it.

The search for Truth, for Desai, consists in the life of the mind and the soul- the inner life- and not in the life of the body- the outer life. With her constant efforts, she has successfully brought this art into the main stream of European and American fiction. She is the follower of the tradition of the stream of consciousness and is very much influenced by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The hard reality of modern life has forced us to live our life at the levels of personal, physical, social and at the level of inner self. It is the level of inner self which Anita Desai strives successfully to bring to focus the constant conflict of the soul inside the mind of man. The mental landscape of her protagonists is completely peeled off, layer after layer, and thus she involves her readers to see for themselves the hidden reality and become one with her characters. The reader can not only visualize with his mind's eye, the real happenings inside the head and heart of these protagonists but can also identify himself with them, because Desai deals with the universal problems of life, death, human suffering, hopes, frustration, success, failure and the struggle of human soul and weaves them in the intricate pattern of her fiction very artistically.

That is why, Anita Desai is one of the major voices in modern Indian English Fiction and her works added a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers. She has contributed a lot to the Indian English Fiction and her style has taken multiple forms. Her dimensions can be considered as follows:

- In Anita Desai's novels, there is a shift from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the individual. Unlike Jhabvala, Markandaya, Anita Desai's novels highlight individual characters, that is, their inner worlds and sensibilities.

- Desai's heroines represent not ordinary, mainstream women but are mostly from affluent families and do not have to worry about daily subsistence. They are more concerned with their emotional needs.
- The journey from selfhood to freedom is an important contribution made by Anita Desai. The motif of self exploration was new, especially for the women of the sixties.
- As Anita Desai's main emphasis is on the inner world rather than on the outer world, she uses the technique of stream of consciousness to explain the problems of the characters. Their emotional world is reflected in syntax and imagery.
- The image of a new emergent woman, who is intelligent, rebellious, in search of fulfillment is shown in her novels. Each novel by Mrs. Desai is a marvel of technical skills.

Anita Desai appeared on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, when her novel, **Cry, the Peacock** was published. She has written a lot more novels but our main concern is to evaluate this particular novel with an angle of psychology and try to understand the impact of psychology on the characters. **Cry, the Peacock** is a psychological novel which involves the study of a hypersensitive, childless, young married woman Maya, who is obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, kills her elderly husband in a fit of anger, goes mad and finally commits suicide. The novel very skillfully reveals Maya's search for an individual identity. Being motherless, she engages herself in the battle between her individual self and her social role in search of human love. She is a daughter of a rich advocate in Lucknow and being alone in the family, she gets the most of her father's love and affection. Her brother has already escaped from the boundaries of house. That's why, she gets the excessive love of her father. This excessive attention and affection of her father make her feel that the world is a toy which is made especially for her. When she gets married, she desires the same love and attention from her husband Gautama, a father surrogate. She dreams of human love and her dreams link her conscious and unconscious levels of the mind. Her dreams fill her mind with imagination, fantasy and nostalgia. Maya wants her fulfillment as a woman and as a wife. Maya always hopes for fulfillment and when she fails to have it, she feels loneliness, isolation and desertion. She tries to fulfill her incomplete desires through her husband but Gautama fails to satisfy her. He fails to distinguish between the fact and fancy. Therefore, a trauma visits Maya's unconscious mind, leading to an obsession in her psyche.

Another important psychological effect upon her is the prophecy of an astrologer about her future which was made in her childhood. The prophecy is that one of the husband and wife would die after four years of their marriage. The prophecy becomes troublesome to her unconscious mind. We can say that Maya's unconscious mind never reconciles with her conscious mind. Her conscious level of mind signifies the associative approach to human behavior whereas her unconscious mind forces her to realize her identity as a woman and as a wife. When her husband was unable to soothe her burning heart, at that point, anxiety enters her mind. In psychological findings, if the level of anxiety enters the unconscious level of human psyche, it makes a person to keep apart what actually belongs to him together. Thus, this constant anxiety in Maya makes her to develop a separation of idea and emotion. She develops a negative approach towards life and finds its entire essence as useless and meaningless. Therefore Maya says:

All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar. Thoughts come, incident occur, then they are scattered and disappear. Past, Present, Future, Truth and Untruth and I am tired of it. My body can no longer bear it; my mind has already given way. See, I am grown thin, worn. (Desai 179)

This loneliness makes her a psychosis patient. The disenchantment goes so deep in her unconsciousness that she loses the equilibrium of her mind. She dreams and her dreams become suggestive to her fear psychosis and a simple dream becomes a nightmare for her. She makes an unconscious journey through her dreams to an unknown world. In psychology, human mind when faced with the worries and the anxieties of life traces for its existence certain unseen and unfelt objects from the deeper recesses of pre conscious level of human psyche.

The sexual obsessions of Maya have been symbolized through animal's world. Maya marries a father like man who is without sentiments and emotions. He fails to come to the level of Maya's sensitive nature. Gautama understands deeply the causes of Maya's obsessive nature. At this stage, Id meets the Ego level in Maya's mind. The Freudian concept of sexual obsession is analyzed when Gautama points out the father fixation in Maya's mind:

If you know your freud it would all be very straight forward and then appear as merely inevitable to you-taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious father obsession- which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that you mature rapidly; you will not be able to deal with, to destroy. (Desai 146)

The sense of father-obsession and the distinction in their respective sensitiveness make their nervous system tense. Maya's hypersensitivity becomes an important cause in her failure to realize her identity as a wife. The sexual repression makes her nervous system breakdown. When she fails to realize herself, she yields to her past memories for relieving her tense mind. Maya desires to materialize the vision of the flesh and tries to recreate her own world but Gautama fails to fulfill the dream of her existence in the society. Thus, the concept of existentialism is related by Anita Desai while describing about the psychology of her character. Maya is afraid of being lost in the society and her fear shows a fantasy that breeds in her a lust for life. On the other hand, if Gautama observes father obsession in Maya, she too realizes the unsentimental behavior of Gautama and lack of manliness in him. The father-fixation, unfulfilled womanhood, weak husband and death phobia make her neurotic. The novelist uses different images like **window** and **mirror** again and again to show the inner psychic turmoil of Maya's mind. Anita Desai's **Cry, the Peacock** is a great effort towards dealing the psychological problems of an alienated self. Maya's mood, obsessions, dilemmas and abnormality is conveyed effectively through the understanding of Maya's psychology.

On one hand, Anita Desai's **Cry, the Peacock** deals with psychology and on the other hand, human relationships play an important role in creating such circumstances where the character is in dilemma and human psyche has to face a tumult. Human relationships are like thin, weak threads which bind one human being with another. Many novelists has dealt with humanism in general but Anita Desai has very skillfully related it to the human psychology. As, it is universally accepted that human happiness is attained only by harmonizing the hardships of life, Anita Desai has tried to describe the concept of strangeness in human relations which leads to the alienation of self. She explored the dilemmas which a person has to suffer in one's life. **Cry, the Peacock** rotates around the relationships of a husband and wife in particular. It tells us about the consequences which one has to face when there is a lack of communication in a relation. That's what happens

with Maya and Gautama in the novel when the relation between them starts unfolding layer by layer. Both husband and wife have a big age gap and are total contrast with one another in their temperaments and attitudes. Their married life is punctuated all along by matrimonial silence. Maya's unhappiness in the novel is not related to her circumstances in reality but is related to her own consciousness. She has led a protected life and been brought up in her own imaginary world but when she comes face to face with reality, she is unable to cope with the situation. She thinks that Gautama has taught her nothing except pain and she says:

There were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much. (Desai 173)

The novel presents a total contrast between Maya's sensitivity and Gautama's complete detachment. Maya has been alienated through and through and slowly she moves towards insanity. The fear of death threatens her so much that she is forced to think about the death of one either Gautama or herself. But her psyche is so dominant on the human relations that ultimately she decides for Gautama who will not miss life because he is already detached to it. Her obsession for life drives her crazy. The relationship of man and woman has been shown in many Indo-Anglican novels but human relationships entering into the private region of psychology can be seen only in the novels of Anita Desai. The two characters, Maya and Gautama, has been studied and described so deeply that a reader gets a complete picture of the impact of psychology on their relationship. Both the characters are total contrast of one another. On the one hand, Maya is sensitive and believes in imaginary or dream world, whereas, on the other hand, Gautama is insensitive and realistic. Maya's depression and uneasiness forces her to believe that Gautama has no love for her and her subconscious mind pushes her to kill her husband without any guilt. In the novel, we feel the communication gap between husband and wife throughout the novel. That is why, it is said:

Although their marriage has been an utter fiasco, they continue to be together, leading an explosive life of in communication. (Prasad 5)

Maya is none other than one of us with the only difference that in actual life we are aware of the trap which makes us the victim. But Maya is not at all conscious of this trap and becomes prey of it. Therefore, *Cry, the Peacock* is the greatest attempt of Anita Desai to reach to the depths of psychological problems of the alienated persons. Through her novel, she tries to describe the complexities and working of human relationships in the modern scenario. A man-woman relationship can be seen from various angles of human emotion; that is, Father-daughter, brother-sister, girlfriend-boyfriend, lovers and husband-wife. But in modern era, these relations have come under the darkness of suspicion, distrust, in communication and on the top of all silence. The elasticity of relationship is disappearing day by day. Now a day, relations are just a formality with which we have to live. If we see at the upper level, everyone is someone's father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife etc. but at the lower level, they are all deserted and alienated from their loved ones.

CONCLUSIONS

Anita Desai, as a novelist, has least concern for revealing the social and economic problems in her novels. She has devoted her creative energy completely to the psychological states of human mind. She finds her way to the inner most region of human psyche and explains about that region from where the original ideas of human mind come into operation. Anita Desai works on revealing the different mental states and human psyche of the various characters. She tries to analyze

a man in action to reveal the hidden motives behind the superficial reality of conscious mind. She unfolds the dim dark regions of the subconscious and the unconscious mind where the suppressed desires lie buried. She has opened before us a new world which gives us an excellent study relationships and the psychology of the human beings. The world presented before us by Anita Desai is a conflicting one; it is a world where the central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at and the desire to love and live clashes. Instinct and emotion and passion seem to be strangers in the world of daily routine and scurry away into the dark corners to flourish in conditions of solitude, which is presented in its varying shades and meanings. In all her novels there is a striving, on the part of the protagonists towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than the one which is available to them.

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