

A Study of Anita Desai's Cry the Peacock from the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the best known contemporary writers who have given voice to woman's inner world, her sensibility, her sulking frustration and the storm raging inside her mind. She is a keen observer of the society. She has written novel after novel about the miserable condition of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands. Her first novel Cry, the Peacock is faithful description of psychosomatic growth of a female character, which cannot cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected.

Keywords: Feminism, marital discord, patriarchal system, liberation,

This study throws light on the feminist point of view of Anita Desai in her famous novel Cry the Peacock. The whole story revolves around Maya, a highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative woman. Maya is shown as a fast disintegrating woman under the pressures of marital discord. Married to an insensitive and unresponsive husband Gautama, she becomes an easy prey to the state of insanity and madness.

Desai defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reaction and responses of the heroine. The difference in temperament and nature of the two resulted in tension. Maya is poetic, high-strung, dreamy, emotional and sensitive while Gautama is rationally hard, cold, detached, insensitive and remote. They are two poles apart which lead to her loneliness. Due to break down of communication it results in their detachment.

Maya, a pampered child of Rai Sahib, is brought up in an atmosphere of luxury. Her marriage with Gautama is based on a matter of convenience. Gautama and Maya's father were friends. They have similar way of thinking, Gautama evermore used to come to Maya's father. He used to come to her house everyday and one day her father proposes that she should marry him. So we come to know that their marriage is based on the friendship between her father and Gautama.

Gautam was totally indifferent towards the sentiments and feelings of Maya. It is very clear from the episode of Maya's pet Toto. Gautama telephones the public works department to send the scavenging truck to dispose of the corpse of Toto. His reaction on Toto's death is far different from her. Gautama asks her to make tea for him: "It is all over; come and drink your tea and stop crying. You must not

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cry" (Desai, 1980). Maya, who is in great shock at the death of Toto, despairs the detached attitude of Gautama. But when she comes to pour tea for him, it gets "split into the sugar-pot, the tea-strainer toppled into a cup, the lemons slipped to the floor and there was chaos" (Ibid). Later, when the servant comes in to announce that a visitor has come to see him, Gautama orders her to send tea to "his study forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" (Ibid). What disturbs Maya is not actually the death of Toto but the casual attitude of Gautama.

There is a contrast between Maya, who is highly sensitive and imaginative, and Gautam, who is unimaginative, pragmatic and unsentimental. The difference in age and temperament of both results in rupture. It is difficult to agree with the critics who consider Maya to be a neurotic. She is perfectly normal and healthy woman. Her only sin is perhaps she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous. These are in fact the characteristics of normal female with reasonably good social status and upbringing. Maya in her view is driven to emotional instability, insanity and even murder under the pressures of marital discord disharmony. It is clear from the following statement regarding the marriage:

It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of sacred iron with which out of the prettiest superstition, we could not bear to part... (40)

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". In India women are still being trapped under traditional roles and their identity is generally connected to and defined by societal and cultural norms. She faces identity crisis and defined only in relation to a man. As Simon de Beauvoir puts it in the right way in her 'Second Sex', "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," (295)

Through her novel Desai tried to give voice to the voiceless. She challenges the image of Indian women stereotypes, especially of the middle class by presenting their original pathetic situation with a longing for fulfilment in the family and society. Most of her women are housewives, but they are unhappy one way or the other. Maya is portrayed as a very sensitive woman who has failed to come to terms with hegemony and patriarchal order. Though she survives in a male dominated world she refuses to identify with it and revolts against it. Though Maya is an affluent housewife with all necessities of a comfortable city life fulfilled, yet she is neither happy nor satisfied, nor is she the ideal housewife who compromises with her situation and suppresses her self-identity and feminine desire until her death. Her dissatisfaction, search for self-identity, boredom, dejection loneliness results in the tragic end.

Anita Desai has dealt with various aspects of feminist writing in her first novel. Although the end of the novel is gloomy, the novelist has successfully portrayed a feminine mind at work and has hinted towards the emergence of the 'New Indian Woman' who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the unconscious dawn of the patriarchal India.

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