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Psychodynamics of Female Protagonist in Anita Desai's

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'Cry, the Peacock'

Portrayal of the inner space of a character has always been a critical challenge for a writer. This inner space, which houses the unconscious psychodynamics like repression, identification, fantasy or compassion etc., provides motives behind the outward behaviour. The complexity of inner psychodynamics has attracted a number of writers to create characters which can help in understanding the basic nature and behaviour of human beings in a certain socio-cultural milieu.

Anita Desai is one of such prominent writers who have added a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. She is a novelist with a difference. Her main concern is her characters. Dr. Sudhakar T. Sali remarks, "Anita Desai is more interested in the psychic life of her characters than their outer conditions. Her novels reveal her real concern for the exploration of human psyche and its dark recess." (1)

Dr. R. K. Gupta also writes, "Anita Desai lays stress on the art of characterization. She insists on analysing her characters, and the anecdotes are important only in so far as they reflect the obsessions and suppressions of her characters,Mrs. Desai makes each work of hers a haunting quest of the psychic self". (2)

To put into Anita Desai's own words from an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia:

I am interested in characters, who are not average but have retreated or been driven into despair and so turned against the general current.

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It is very easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out the great 'No', who fight the current and struggle against it, may know what demands are and what it costs to meet them. (21-23)

Anita Desai has, specifically, attempted to portray the psychological stress, sufferings and anxieties that haunt some persons in a certain socio-cultural surroundings. The psychological crisis of her protagonists makes the themes of her novels. "Many of her characters find the real world too harsh, difficult, unpleasant and too complex. They withdraw from reality into their inner world and search there for ways and means of living through this horrible world. Her characters refuse to see themselves as a part of an impersonal mass of mankind at large. They believe that their individual potentialities are of their own". (Sali, 2)

Looking at her interest in delving deeper and deeper into the inner lives of her characters, K. R. S. Iyenger remarks, "In her novels the inner climate of sensibility that lours, clears or rambles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action" (464). Characters in the novels of Mrs. Desai are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and alienated from their surroundings as a consequence of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. The protagonist, Maya, in Anita Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock', truly justifies the above words.

The story of 'Cry, The Peacock' deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonist which is perfectly illustrated amidst various monologues and flashbacks. The protagonist, Maya, attracts the engrossing interest of the readers as she unfolds the growth, development and climax of her neurosis.

Maya is a portrayal of a woman, with an anguished soul, who fails to grow out of her childhood world and is unable to come to terms with the hegemony of patriarchal order. Though she lives inside it, she does not identify with it. She is an incomplete adult as she is a woman who having grown motherless, was pampered by the father. Shielded from reality, from the gross ugliness of the outside world, the only reality that she encountered in her father's house, fails her to initiate into adult life. She believes that:

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The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes. (Cry, The Peacock, 36)

Remembering her childhood she says:

".....my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy prince in a toy world. But it was a pretty one. (Cry, The Peacock, 89)"

Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much marries her off to his own lawyer friend, Gautama, who is a middle aged man. Maya also being obsessed with her attachment to her father agrees happily to marry Gautama. Her father fixation and the search of fatherly image in Gautama together with the sensual demands turn the marriage to be a failure. Maya turns into a neurotic character whose emotional needs are seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband. Her longing for a sensual relationship with her husband turns into her frustration due to the detachment of Gautama.

She has a fear that it is impossible for to capture Gautama in entirety. It is interesting to note that whenever she feels threatened by her fears she takes refuge in the beautiful world of nature. Maya's extreme sensitivity is a sharp contrast to Gautama's pragmatism.

"Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly so shallowly. And I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for his slow harmless guileless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it. (Cry, The Peacock, 196-197)"

Maya's conflicts arise out of the un- gratifying matrimonial bonds which are characterised by a lack of contact, relatedness and communion. She believes in involvement whereas Gautama is the preacher of detachment on every count. Although living together, they are strangers to each other. Her loneliness leads to her out of proportion attachment to her pet dog Toto.

The reason for Maya's neurosis is her persistent obsession of the prediction by the albino astrologer of the death of either of her husband or her, within four years of their marriage. Toto's death casts a shadow of over the whole novel. The protagonist is, however, aware of the process of

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evolution in nature and in a similar way hopes to flee the fear of prophecy. But her obsessive impulse instead of freeing her cleaves her to it. The image of the albino haunts her repeatedly. So much so that even the cry of the mating peacocks becomes a cry of death and despair to her.

"In the shadows I saw peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing steadfastly, unwinkingly upon the final truth – Death. I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt their thirst as they gazed at the rain-clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them, I trembled and panted and placed the burning rocks. Agony, agony the mortal agony of their cry for lover, and for death. (Cry, The Peacock, 95)"

Her loneliness, haunted by the continuous shadow of death turns her neurosis into hysteria. She is alone afraid of the silent dark rooms and even the moon appears to her a ghost constantly watching her. She is unable to overcome her loneliness. Her sleepless nights are filled with "frenzied cries of the peacocks" and the night sky turns into a flurry of peacock's tails, each star a staring eye. Her loneliness and Gautam's neglect leads her to think:

"The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed in mute horror. (Cry, The Peacock, 175)"

It is in her hysteria she plans to kill Gautama and justifies her plans with the following words analysing her life with Gautama:

".....but it was Gautama who found many more things to teach that heart, new, strange and painful things. He taught it pain, for there were countless heights 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. (Cry, The Peacock, 201)"

Her divided self, lack of self-analysis, the fast withering spirit and the receding contact with the outer world leave the core of her integrity impaired. Maya finds herself spiritually ruined. And out of frustration she condemns Gautama to death and burdened with death haunted by self-

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contempt, self-accusation, self-hate and drags herself into complete darkness of the world of insane.

To conclude in the words of Ranu Uniyal, “She has lived like a toy princes and moves from one house to another without being able to understand the plasticity that binds her. Maya confines herself to this house both as a child and an adult. The process of self-definition is however incomplete in her for she fails to mediate the inner and outer sense of space. The house does not offer her psychic, inner landscape a sense of belonging. It refuses to accept an emotional shift which has occurred in marriage”. (168)

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