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A Feminist Study of Maya's Predicament in Anita Desai's *Cry The Peacock*

Dr. Shantilal I. Ghegade

Assistant Professor & Head

Department of English

Savitribai College of Arts,

Pimpalgaon Pise, Tal.

Shrigonda District,

Ahmednagar (Affiliates to S. P.

Pune Uni. Pune), India

Abstract

The present paper is a study of Anita Desai's novel *Cry the Peacock* from feminist point of view. The purpose of this research paper is to show the views of Anita Desai on feminism and considers them in the light of the feminist principles. Fiction by Indian women novelists occupies a prominent place in Indian writing in English. They have made a substantial contribution to the bulk of Indian writing. Their novels are mainly concerned with gender discrimination and other problems related to women who are exposed to physical and mental sufferings and ill treatment in the male dominated Indian society. The writers analyze the female characters and their inner minds from the point of view of feminine sensibility and insight. The writers depict how women struggle not only against male domination but also against social, cultural and religious oppressions prevalent in contemporary society. They also illustrate how orthodox attitudes and traditional beliefs strengthen the patriarchal practices which have made women inferior creatures and mere objects of pleasure. The study brings out all these issues under study through Anita Desai's novel, *Cry the Peacock*.

Keywords- *Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Feminine Sensibility, Patriarchy*

According to David Boucher (1984) 'Feminism' implies "any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex". The desire for equality with men on the social and political fronts took the form of an organized movement in the west. It includes the struggle for women's equal rights. It means the aspirations towards the all-round liberation of women. Gerda Lerner (1986) says in her book on *The Creation of Patriarchy* that "It (feminism) is not always a movement, for it can be a stance, an attitude as well as a basis for organized effort." The feminist consciousness is

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a consciousness against the victimization by the dominant males of the society which leads to the subordinate status of women and their consequent oppression. Feminism is concerned with 'raising the consciousnesses' of an entire culture.

The study is followed by a detailed analysis of the female protagonist from the feminist point of view. An attempt has been made to underline the universal aspects about the women in the novel. It explains the action of the predicaments of women and the writer's views on feminism.

The novel begins with the death of the pet dog of Maya, the protagonist. She is disturbed by the death of her dog. She informs her husband Gautama about it. He gets rid of the corpse after his return. He tries to console Maya because he knows that she needed a pet. At the same time, he cannot dwell on the incident for long. He gets back to work and normal life and wants Maya to do the same. Gautama is a lawyer. Maya is an ordinary housewife. She has a brother called Arjun in America. She is pampered by her father as she was the only daughter. He arranges the marriage between Maya and Gautama. He knew Gautama and thought that he would make a good husband for Maya. Gautama is almost as old as Maya's father.

Maya and Gautama have very few things in common. Gautama belonged to a big family and was brought up in a traditional and conventional way. His father was a freedom fighter and his mother a social worker. Both the parents could not devote much time to their children. He also had a sister called Nila. She was also unhappy in her marriage and wanted a divorce. She expects her brother to help her but he refuses to take up her case.

Maya becomes lonely as Gautama becomes busy with his work. She is a romantic type. Gautama fails to satisfy her physical and mental needs. Being over sensitive and impractical, she goes into a state of depression. She becomes neurotic. An albino had predicted that four years after her marriage, she or her husband would die. First, she imagines that she would die. She collapses mentally by the time four years of their married life are completed. She gets angry with Gautama with whom she is unable to communicate. She blames him for her unhappiness. Obsessed with the albino's prophecy, she realizes that he could die. She pushes him down the balcony and murders him. Later, she also commits suicide and dies at a young age. There are not many events in this novel. The focus is on the thought process of Maya, in the stream-of-consciousness style.

The protagonist of *Cry the Peacock* is a woman of her own world. Desai's novel is intensified by the woman's inner world and frustration. Desai's concern with the emancipation of women is found in her novels. Maya was born in an old and orthodox family. She was a motherless child and her father gave her his complete attention. He fulfilled all her needs. Her brother had left home at an early age and had settled in America. Her father was a man of discipline and love for Maya. She had all the comforts and luxuries of an affluent life-style in her childhood. She lived a protected life before marriage. Her father was indulgent towards her. She lived like a princess in fairyland. This kind of life in

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childhood could not prepare her for facing hardships in adult life. In Indian society, a bride who enters her husband's house is expected to be prepared for hardships, adjustments and compromises. She is expected to work hard, cook, clean and attend to the needs of her in-laws. The moment she crosses her husband's threshold, she has to forget her past life and sever all ties with her parents. Wise girls succeed in pleasing the in-laws and win their acceptance and love. The training of a girl child begins early because the ultimate aim is to prepare her to live and settle in the husband's house without complaining. Generally, it is the mother who trains the daughter and teaches her how to cook food and manage the household and keep everyone happy. Due to the over caring nature of her father and the absence of mother or any other woman in the house, Maya does not get the kind of training she should have received before marriage. The comfort and security that she enjoyed in her father's house make her unable to face the realities of life after marriage. This points out that it is difficult to play the role of an Indian daughter-in-law. It requires proper grooming and training. Only a woman can train a future bride. If a girl is motherless, there should be some other woman in the family to bring her up. The training for hardships and challenges should start early in life. Pampering of a girl in childhood can lead to maladjustments in adult life. Maya's husband Gautama, is affectionate and caring in his own way. It is Maya who fails to establish communication with him. Maya is unable to establish familial relationships with any member of her family. Maya was an educated girl who led a happy, secure and comfortable life in her father's house. She found it very difficult to change her views overnight. She could not adjust with the new life in her husband's house. She never thought of others. In an Indian set-up, the daughter-in-law has to sacrifice her joys for others. In both cases, the consequence is sorrow. Maya is a victim of the latter kind of sorrow.

Age is another important factor in matrimony. Finding a suitable groom for girls is a difficult task for parents. Quite often they are compelled to agree to give their daughters in marriage to grooms who are much older than the girls. Too much gap in age reduces chances of compatibility. Gautama was almost as old as Maya's father. Hence, she looked upon him as a father figure more than as a husband. She wanted him to be caring, attentive and protective towards her. He tried his best but he did not succeed.

A woman has her own private desires. She needs acceptance from and attachment with family members. When Maya failed to get it from her husband, she transferred her attention to her dog. She tried to find solace in his company. She could communicate better with the dog. This shows that somewhere in her mind, she was aware of her needs. She tried to maintain her balance in various ways. She knew that existing circumstances were harmful to her psyche. Unfortunately, the dog died.

The writer wants to emphasize that a woman can tolerate life even if the husband does not care for her, provided she has a child. Maya was childless. A mother can concentrate on nurturing a child. This is a rewarding and satisfying task. A mother is also loved by her

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children. The experience of being a mother is unique and necessary for a woman. It awakens a sense of responsibility in her. It makes her stronger and more courageous. A child would have made a vast difference in Maya's life. In the absence of a child, she tried to shower her love on a dog and a cat. A pet cannot be a complete substitute for a husband or a child. Maya's loneliness became so acute and intense that she became neurotic. She also developed a split personality. At moments, she would imagine herself in her father's house and suddenly she would become aware of reality. She was driven to the verge of madness.

A girl must feel comfortable in her husband's house and the effort is to be made from both sides. Many girls make an attempt to compromise with the members of the family but they do not get equal response from the in-laws. Every girl has her own identity. Maya had lost her identity after marriage. She had no position in the household. She could not make one for herself like Geeta in *Inside the Haveli*. Maya is treated more like an object or a toy. An Indian girl assumes the surname of the husband's family after marriage. Quite often her first name is also changed by the husband. Giving up a name that has been a part of the personality is like giving up one's identity. Little thought is given to girl's feelings although it is just an age-old custom. Marriage brings about tremendous change in the life of a girl in India. In modern times, girls are educated and try to assert themselves. However a girl must be given freedom to retain her name if she wishes to. This is the point. Sufficient freedom has to be given to a girl to establish her identity. She must be given an opportunity to settle and adjust in the new atmosphere. The in-laws should support and encourage her in the process. After the departure of her mother-in-law, Maya began to collapse. She suffered from headaches. She experienced fits of rebellion and terror. Gradually, she moved towards insanity. She started seeing visions. She imagined snakes, lizards and rats crawling over her body. Her house appeared to be a dark tomb for her.

Maya could not bear the memory of Leila so she picked up the memory of another friend Pom. Pom was exactly opposite of Leila. She liked to deck herself, stand before the mirror and go shopping. Maya was happy when she remembered Pom's love for newness, brightness, color and gaiety. Pom always chattered glibly and animatedly. After Pom's marriage, Maya accompanied her once to Birla Mandir. She couldn't believe that Pom wanted to go to a temple. Pom went there every Thursday. Her mother-in-law had instructed her to do so. She wanted Maya to be blessed with a son.

Maya couldn't make friends with anybody. She was shocked to see the sacrifice and suffering of Leila. Leila's marriage was based on love. Her husband had tuberculosis before marriage. Yet, Leila had married him. Anita Desai wants to emphasize the need for love between partners. It was love that gave Leila all the strength that she needed to face the vicissitudes of life. There was no joy in her life yet she could thrive on the strong bond of love. Her husband sometimes corrected the papers of her students to help her. She appreciated it with a smile. Maya knew that she would have to go through the papers again and assess them. Leila did it

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secretly and never deprived her husband of the satisfaction he got in helping her. Maya was astounded to see this kind of sacrifice and adjustment.

Maya's mother-in-law and sister-in-law were against her. Her mother-in-law was a hard working woman. She knew many people from diverse backgrounds. She wanted Maya but not her to love. She was not emotionally involved in her own children. She could not be involved in Maya. She needed Maya because her father sent a cheque for the crèche that she ran for poor children. She was a strong woman. Even Nila was strong and independent. She wanted a divorce and she wanted Gautama to fight her case. Gautama did not want to take up a family matter like a divorce case. This shows that his reputation was more important, his career was more important than his sister's happiness. There was no love between the members of Gautama's family.

The novel deals with the complexities of modern Indian culture. The writer shows that a woman has to struggle to maintain her identity and individuality. It is through Maya that Anita Desai expresses her views about women. Anita Desai focuses on the inner life of characters in the social and cultural contexts.

Maya feels alienated emotionally, spiritually. This alienation of women is another recurrent theme in the novels of Desai. This is one reason why women readers identify themselves with Maya or other woman protagonists in Desai's novels. Modern women find themselves in similar situations. They face the same problems of identity, loss of values, meaninglessness of life and loneliness. Desai, being a woman, can perceive these issues from a woman's point of view which lends authenticity and a strong base to her writings.

The quest in this novel is not confined to women. It extends to humanity in general. It is a quest of any individual in search of identity and acceptance. Maya is different from all other characters in the novel. She is rather mystifying. She represents a class of women suffering silently on account of men. Her suffering is deep. Her reactions can be attributed to a luxurious mind. She does not necessarily get the sympathy of readers. One does not respond to her character in the same way as one responds to Rukmini or Geeta. Geeta easily gains praise and appreciation. The demands of social change pointed out by the writer cannot be ignored. This change includes issues like nuclear family system, living away from the parental house, working women, women having no time for their children.

The writer has succeeded in highlighting the miserable position of highly educated women in affluent society, women who are sensitive, emotional and lonely. Maya stands out as a protagonist. Other women characters like Nila, Pom and Leila contribute to feminist issues. Anita Desai has portrayed the lives of women in her novels as passive, dependent and helpless. Lack of communication and incompatibility are also the themes in many of her novels. Desai goes deep into the sources of conjugal incompatibility and marital disharmony. Desai wants to highlight the loneliness and lack of communication. Such common afflictions of women in the modern world can lead to serious consequences.

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Anita Desai's prime concern is the projection of the existential predicament of woman as an individual. She expresses a desire for a way of life, which would respond to the innermost yearning of women for self-emancipation and self-dignity. The physical and psychological sensitivity of women passes by their male-counterparts. So the sensitive wife is like a finely tuned musical instrument. The tragedy of marital disharmony in each of Anita Desai's novels can be traced back to this disparity in sensibilities. Modern women often identify themselves with the women in Desai's novels because they realize that they are in similar situations. They face the same problems of identity, loss of values, and meaninglessness in life. Another aspect that women find identical is the memories of their childhood, which act as a soothing balm to women suffering in their married lives. The system of marriage in India requires a girl to quit her childhood home and depart from her relatives. It is not easy to bond with strangers but they are taken for granted. Sometimes, the bonding with in-laws never takes place.

Desai's first novel *Cry the Peacock* makes a deep impression on the reader's mind. It creates an awareness of innermost feelings of women which only a woman writer can understand. It underlines vital issues like physical and social needs of women besides economic needs, the importance of communication and compatibility for successful marriages and the factor of age which affects communication. Neglecting women and their needs can lead to serious consequences. The novel emphasizes the need to bring up girls in such a way that they can think independently, learn to adjust with all kinds of people and assert themselves as individuals.

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