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**ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK* FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINISM**



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ABSTRACT

The feminist movement was championed by those who revolted against the sexist image of woman in patriarchy and her consequent socio-economic exploitation based on female biological essentialism. The feminists aim at putting an end to male domination and for achieving this goal they have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, the feminists believe that women should struggle for their social and economic freedom. They should try to end female exploitation. Many Indian novelists focus on women's situation in the Indian society. Anita Desai is one of the leading voices who have given the inner description of the woman's inner world, her sensibility, her sulking frustration and the storm raging inside her mind. The central theme of her novels is the existential predicament of woman as an individual. *Cry, the Peacock*

gives expression to the long smothered sad cry of the wounded psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the chief protagonist herself. The novel presents the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Frustration, Male Dominated Society, Suffering, Feminine Sensibility

RESEARCH PAPER

Feminism is a socio-political movement for the freedom of women in a male dominated society. A feminist is one who propagates the cause of women. Toril Moi remarks, "The word 'feminist' or 'feminism' is political labels indicating support for the aims of women's movement which emerged in the late 1960" (Moi 204). In India feminism is not only as old as Sita but can also be seen in Sati, the first but can also be seen in Sati, the first wife of Lord Shiva'. She not only set aside her husband's wish and advice against participating in the Yajna organised by her father; but also avenged her husband and her own insult by jumping into the Yajna. A number of examples can be seen in Hindu mythology where women asserted their supremacy. Be it Sita without whom 'Ashwamedha' Yajna was incomplete or Draupdi whose pride and honour was one of the main reasons for the battle of Mahabharata or Mata Gujri Ji whose single verdict made Guru Gobind Singh Ji sacrifice his four sons. So how could the Indian writers ignore this genre. The feminist movement was championed by those who revolted against the sexiest image of woman in patriarchy and her consequent socio-economic exploitation based on female biological essentialism. A feminist believes that woman has a potential for action, a passion for liberation and a desire to assert herself. The feminists aim at putting an end to male domination and for achieving this goal they have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, the feminists believe that women should struggle for their social and economic freedom. They should try to end female exploitation. Many Indian novelists focus on women's situation in the Indian society. Actually women have always been in the need of such a platform which can show them a light to lead a respectable life in the society. Women studies as one of the prominent subjects of social science have patronized a number of writers including *Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Raj Narasimhan, Uma Vasudev and Shobha De*.

There are many reasons and the prominent reason that women have taken up their pen is that it has allowed them to create their own world. That is why women's writings are playing a very vital role in women's lives. Meena Shirwadkar comments, "The girls are at the centre of most of the novels by women writers in which some are first person narrations by the central woman characters, this has given scope to the feminist point of view to enter into the sphere of Indo-Anglican fiction" (Shirwadkar 48). Simply speaking feminism means the doctrine which advocates for women's complete equality with men in all spheres - political, social, legal, economical, cultural, academic etc.

Anita Desai is one of the leading voices who have given the inner description of the woman's inner world, her sensibility, her sulking frustration and the storm raging inside her mind. The central theme of her novels is the existential predicament of woman as an individual. She has written novel after novel about the miserable condition of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands. Her novels are known for the exploration of the inner recesses of the mind of a woman. If we examine her characters we will find that Desai's focus is on disintegration in the inner and the outer lines of her women characters

Anita Desai's whole concern is about the inner impressions of the individual. Her protagonists, chiefly Indian women, belong to various age groups and are in constant conflict with the society. She puts stress on the emancipation of women and the necessary steps to be taken for it. Like Lawrence, she also believes in the growing awareness among women of their rights and individualities R.K. Srivastva observes, "Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitiveness, a penetrating analysis and a skill to point with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female though dominated by the latter" (Srivastva 37). The major works of Anita Desai are *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall I go this Summer*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of the Day*, and *In Custody*.

In her first novel, *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai has given the portrait of a highly sensitive and cultured woman, Maya, and has gone deep into the feminine psyche from childhood through youth and to death. Besides Maya, there are other women characters in the novel who also reveal other facets of female psyche. Meena Belliappa considers this novel "a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience" (Belliappa 25). Darshan Singh Maini considers *Cry, the Peacock* "a typically feminine novel because it is a story of a woman told by a woman, but because..... it is the fruit of feminine sensibility....." (Maini 67).

Cry, the Peacock gives expression to the long smothered sad cry of the wounded psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the chief protagonist herself. The novel presents the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster. Her extreme sensibility is presented in terms of immeasurable loneliness. Maya cannot get over the trauma of a prediction that an albino priest forecasts death for Maya or her husband in the fourth year of their marriage. She is married to a man who is not only double her age but temperamentally quite different from her. Maya has been completely neglected by her husband

because Gautama has been influenced by the philosophy of non-attachment in the Bhagwad Gita and practises it absurdly in his relationship with his wife. Maya is deeply frustrated and hurt by the discovery that he is totally indifferent to her physical charms.

In order to understand Maya's psyche, we have to begin with her childhood. She is a motherless child born in a God fearing traditional Brahmin family which has such a cultural background. Maya has a strong love for animals. In the novel besides the peacock, there are many descriptions of animals. It is significant that the novel opens with the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog. It is the beginning of the mental imbalance. She is very sad at the death of her dog whereas Gautama considers it rather calmly. The communication gap between Maya and Gautama begins to wider and neither of the two is able to bridge it. A kind of agony begins to mount in Maya's bringing along mental fears which magnify everything out of proportion. As she has been brought up in a fairytale world, a wide gap is created between her illusions and the reality of life, between what she expects and what actually happens.

This contradiction forces the prediction of the albino astrologer to surface in her mind. The astrologer had predicted death of one of them in the fourth year of marriage. Torn by the phobia of an impending death, she loses her peace of mind and becomes psychotic. She draws the conclusion that since life and death is alike to Gautama, he should die. It is she who loves life and wishes to live. In a fit of insanity, she kills him to find life for herself. Maya has been made the representative of the 'feminine principle' by Anita Desai in her novel. On the other hand Gautama represents the 'masculine principle', he is always dealing with clear logic and a deep analysis.

Gautama remains unaffected and cool on the death of Toto. For him, a pet is a pet which can be easily replaced. But Maya has a strong attachment to the pet which is natural for a childless woman. She wants to satisfy her mothering instinct by showering her likeness on the dog. Maya and Gautama are irreconcilable. Their union is like to ruin each other's life and happiness. Now she is almost convinced that Gautama should certainly die and more secretive. Som P. Sharma and Kamal N. Avasthi remark, "Maya is seething in eros manifested in her multi-dimensional projections of companionship, motherhood, of Keatsian sensuousness of her identification with petunias. Gautama on the other hand is an Apollonian: he is into form, order, discipline career and logomachies" (Sharma and Avasthi 141). Maya expects emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both of them are denied by Gautama.

Maya commits suicide in the end of the novel. It is because she is in fear of being the one to die, as predicted by the astrologer. She stands apart from all the women characters drawn so far by Indo-Anglican novelists. She represents a class of women who silently suffer at the hands of men. The image of the peacock, the central symbol of the novel is the figural innovation of Maya herself. Her love of life is reflected in the splendid dance of the peacock whose, "dance of joy" is the "dance of death." She identifies her thirst for love with their passion as they hunted for their mating in a frenzied state of mind. She has many horrible dreams which reveal that her tender feminine sensibility has suffered a deterioration due to the stress of marriage. Bindu Lata Chaudhary proclaims, "The joy of life in her case is the joy of death as the story shows her thirst for life and this is gradually built up only to justify her killing of Gautama" (Chaudhary 61).

Cry, the Peacock has some more feminine characters that do not have any direct relevance with the plot but are quite important. So outside the family, there are two more women in the novel - Pom and Leila, who are Maya's friends. Leila's marriage is a love marriage and she has eloped with her lover who is suffering from tuberculosis. She is simple, having no interest in luxurious life. She works tirelessly in college and at home nursing her husband whom she loves, knowing that he is a patient. Pom is a typical woman with her own problems. She is fed up with her in-laws but on the other side, Maya is eager for the company of her mother-in-law. Mrs. Lal, another typical Indian Woman who has a desire to be the mother of a son and this desire has made her the mother of four daughters. Now she is worried for the dowry of her daughters. Lastly, there are cabaret girls who earn their living by showing their bodies. Anita Desai however, suggests that women should not settle down for a mean existence but strive for a more meaningful life. The introduction of characters like Gautama's mother and sister Nila are a step in this direction.

Anita Desai has taken into account the corrosion of the feminine sensibility in marital relationships due to social pressures. In earlier times women accepted marriage as sacred and tried to keep it going even if they had to suffer much. The modern woman has lost that faith and is seen to indulge in ceaseless questioning of roles. Maya in this novel is a very sensitive and intelligent girl but she fails to express her response and establish a rapport with Gautama.

Anita Desai has given a new direction to novel writing in modern India. To some, it is her psychoanalytic method; to others it is the use of poetic prose, and yet to a few other people it is the artistic way of projecting life. A close scrutiny of her works shows another dimension that

she added to her fiction-the importance given to neglected women in Indian Society. Anita Desai, by the powerful search light of her observation focuses on the dark side of her character's personality and searches out womanliness in them, to prove that they are beings not devoid of feelings but in search of love and life. Maya might not have been introvert and a killer or Monisha, a self destroyer, had they got sympathetic attention of their husbands. Feminine sensibility of Anita Desai has promoted her to explore that tender area of Characters, which has been neglected for years in India. Their projection marks a new age.

Each and every woman character of her novels helps in a better understanding of material life. The female protagonists of Anita Desai further burdened with the awareness of their femininity. They wish to show alongwith the other ontological issues, the psycho-biological significance of their being women. One of the common neurotic symptoms in them is a state of continuous fear which is called anxiety. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the attack of panic that grips Maya is not caused merely by the death of Toto. Her anxiety is the sign of a fear. Freud gives prime importance to sexual frustration for causing great anxiety. According to him, repression is the Mechanism of great anxiety. In Anita Desai's fictional world frustration caused neurotic disturbances.

Maya is compelled to live in an imaginary world. On the contrary, she is handed over in marriage to a person who is a practical man in the real sense. Because of her husband's age Maya tries to find out a man in him who is capable of giving her the same affection and protection that her father did. But she fails to find love after marriage. This failure tortures her inner self constantly. She becomes the centre of all types of mental conflicts. On one hand, she is haunted by the prediction of the astrologer and on the other hand her childlessness, her husband's behaviour and the detachment of her family always deepen her anguish. Putting aside this anguish, a sense of alienation enters her heart.

The novel has intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions of a woman. Sometimes a regular conflict takes the form of anger, hatred and hostility in a person towards those who make him or her uncomfortable. Sometimes he is overpowered by destructive tendencies. He turns to aggression, which manifests itself in murder or suicide. Maya has crossed all the conditions of sanity and has now become a victim of psychosis. One night when Gnat comes back home and tries to talk to Maya, she feels disturbed because Gautama is standing in the way, in between her and the worshipped moon. In the chaotic state of mind, Maya pushes Gautama down the terrace to his death. Gautama death could not balance her imbalanced mind. Maya's intense frustration

compels her to kill herself and she commits suicide. Conclusively, the present study on *Cry, the Peacock* is based primarily on feminism and beyond question, one can say that *Cry, the Peacock* is imbued and coloured with the spirit of Feminism. The whole tragedy of pathos of the pampered rich woman is described in this novel in order to show how bright but brittle foundation of upbringing in such a pampering aristocratic atmosphere crumbles at the first encounter with reality. In order to see social realities in the male dominated family, Anita Desai creates a small world and then she goes deep to those places in the heart and mind of the character where reality has a different form and character. *Cry, the Peacock* clearly and evidently suggests that the modern life with all its achievements and progress is doomed to disorderliness and destruction unless it considers and nourishes the tender feelings of the women who form the nucleus in any society. Herein lays her most significant achievement that adds a new dimension to Anita Desai's literary work and this gives her commendable and remarkable place in the realm of Indo-Anglican fiction.

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