Marriage Conflict Characterized in Anita Desai’s “Cry The Peacock”

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is very common and basic in every society. It is the recognized social establishment, not totally for setting up and maintaining the household, but also for creating and holding up the ties of relationship. Marriage conflict is set as a disparity through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concern and it is also seen as a difference of opinion between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or finishes. The disharmonized personality’s search for fulfillment is a common place theme in modern fiction. Anita Desai is considered as the unacknowledged authority of exposing the predicament of modern women in India. She appears more concerned with the inner plight of her alienated protagonist in the existing human society. In the patriarchal culture, the personal conflict of identity of the Indian woman gains a dimension in the hands of Anita Desai. In her novels, she has depicted the man-woman relationship and the untold sufferings of women out of the marital disharmony. Desai’s debut novel Cry, the Peacock is considered as one of the first steps in the management of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. The marital disharmony between Maya and Gautama and its consequences is discussed in Anita Desai’s debut novel Cry, the Peacock.

Among the post-independent Indo-English authors, Anita Desai holds a prominent position because of the immense popularity she commands as a novelist of the human predicament of anxiety, frustration and loneliness in the insensitive and inconsiderate contemporary world. Her novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the women’s
inner world, frustration and the storm raging inside her mind intensify her predicament. Desai’s concern with the emancipation of women is found page after page in her novels. Her central idea is the existential plight of an individual which she projects through incompatible couples, the very sensible wife and ill-matched husband. She discovers a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology.

Desai’s first novel Cry, the Peacock, published in 1963 can be seen as a trendsetting novel as it dispenses with the mental rather than the physical facets of its characters. The novel shows the theme of inconsistency and lack of understanding in marital life. It portrays the psychic tumult of a young and sensitive married girl Maya, who is obsessed by a childhood prophecy of a fatal calamity. The novel centres on the disaffection in the relationship between Gautama and Maya that leads to the longing for a soul mate of the female protagonist. The intention of the novel is to study the matrimonial crisis “The hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the creation of individuality and the grounding of her characters” (Raji Narsimhan, 23). The very concept that women need something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in this novel. The claim indicates the parallel between a peacock’s cry in the wilderness looking for a companion with Maya’s desperate agonized cries for making real genuine human touch that remains thwarted.

The novel starts with the death of Tito, Maya’s pet dog. Tito could be viewed as a surrogate child to childless Maya. Anita Desai puts it: “Childless women do get a fanatic attachment to their pets, they allege. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child; no less worthy of fear, and agonized remembrance” (9). Gautama fails to understand this attachment and promises to get some other dog. It is this non-sharing of grief on Gautama’s part that makes Maya lonely and estranged. Maya comments on this:

Showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to console me. Only then, he knew nothing that touched me... His coldness, his coldness and incessant talks of a cup of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking, reveal myself. It is that- my loneliness in this household. (9)
Being motherless she becomes more sensitive and as a result develops much attachment for her favourite dog, Tito. Her husband hardly realizes the emotional attachment that existed in her affection for the pet. Tito’s death reminds her of her loneliness which had been repressed by her. “It was not pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps, as thus far not even experienced, and occupied me with despair” (13). She becomes more alienated after that. Gautama’s insensitivity is highlighted when he calls her a chattering monkey when she attempts to give up her opinion regarding her pet’s death.

A motherless child, Maya had been the heart and soul of her father’s affection, dependent on her father for the fulfilment of her emotional demands- for love, discernment, and pity. Her father showered his love for her to the fullest. He never permitted her to sample the fruits of adversity. To keep her from the warmth of the summertime, her father would bring her to Darjeeling or any other hill station of her choice. She had a comfortable upbringing. Those are the unforgettable golden days of her entire lifetime. She recalls her life in her father’s house:

As a small fry, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the illusions of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology. When I meet a battle-door and shuttlecock, using the small oranges as shuttlecocks that shoot, birdlike, through the air and are broken, egg-like, on the pasturage, he only laughs to see me leap and fly. (41)

On the contrary, in her husband’s house the situation is completely unlike. She faces there a totally different code of conduct. She discovers that her opinions are not cared for and that she is being ignored, set apart, and alienated in her own house. This disturbs her terribly and so she is utterly defenceless and alone. Her new family treats with disdain the basic emotions of passion, attachment, compassion, empathy and care. Maya comments:

In Gautama’s family one did not talk of love, far less of affection. I spoke-they spoke-of discussion in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the tests that followed, of trade pacts made with rural areas. (46-47)
Gautama, the husband of Maya, is an advocate, depending wholly on argument and logic in all matters of life to the complete exclusion of faith and emotions. Gautama fails to satisfy Maya’s intense longing for love and life. She is left to the solitude and silence of the house which preys upon her. She muses over her husband’s lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tell him straight to his face: “Oh, you know nothing about me and of how I can love. How do I want to share my love? How important is it to me? Only you, you’ve never loved. And you don’t love me….” (96). temperamentally there is no compatibility between Maya and Gautama. Maya has romantic love for the beautiful, the colours and the sensuous. She desires to love life to the extreme. She enjoys life in all its phases. She is an Epicurean to the core. As symbolised by her name she stands for the universe of sense impressions. Gautama’s name on the other hand, symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is a very rational and realistic person. He takes in a philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagwad Gita. He quotes Gita: “He who, controlling the sense of the intellect, follows without attachment the path of activity with his organs of action, he is esteemed” (116). Such irreconcilably different temperaments and disparity between them are the prime causes of Maya’s alienation. This disruption of communication makes her alienated.

Gautama fails to satisfy Maya’s physical needs too. On one occasion, in spite of her seductive postures, Gautama remains rigid and stale. On another occasion, Maya laments: “longing to be with him, be close to him… make haste in undressing…. But when I went… he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep, and was very far from any word of mine, however enticing” (93). So she remains physically dissatisfied.

Maya’s preoccupation with death had been actually planted long ago in her childhood by the albino astrologer’s prophecy foretelling of the decease of either of the couple after wedding. She, being intensely in love with life, turns hysterical over the cringing fear of death: “Am I going mad. Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my rescuer? I am in desperate need of one. I am perishing, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no I’ll never sleep once more. There is no rest anymore. But death and waiting” (98).
Maya suffers from headaches and experiences rages of rebellion and terror. As she moves towards insanity, she picks up the visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her, slipping their club-like tongues in and out. Her dark house appears to her like her thumb and she meditates in it over the revulsion of all that is to do. Tortured by a sense of neglect from her husband and obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster spelt by an albino priest, Maya finds the world an uninhabitable place. With every day her sense of restlessness keeps on increasing and culminates in a sort of schizophrenia. Her unfulfilled longing for a congenial atmosphere and relationship leads her to utter devastation. Finally, out of insanity, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Maya’s tragedy is fully formulated in the symbolism of peacocks. Maya echoes the trembling passion of the peacocks, the mortal agony of their cry for love and death. The mental incompatibility and disharmony is the base cause of Maya’s alienation, which is made clear by her reactions to the things around her and her attitude towards death. Gautama thinks that she is immature and has never been brought face to face with the quotidian realities of life. According to R. S. Sharma, “the novel makes a gripping psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony and compounded by age-old superstition”(24).Thus Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock clearly exposes the psychological troubles that are induced by the disintegrated marital relationship of a disharmonised woman.
REFERENCES
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