

RESEARCH ARTICLE



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAYA IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK AND DIMPLE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

M.SRILAKSHMI

Associate Professor of English, Aditya Engineering College, Surampalem, Kakinada, A.P., India



ABSTRACT

Modern woman values individuality and insists to preserve it. The psychologically tense, socially dynamic milieu often becomes deleterious to the establishment and development of healthy interpersonal relationships. Deprived of a sense of identity most women feel emotionally incapacitated to face life. Unable to withstand the onslaughts of the external world, they drift towards loneliness, isolation, neurosis or death. Female marginality, psychic and spiritual despair, broken marital relationships, suppressed sexuality or the thwarted attempts of establishing individuality are some of the problems touched upon by women writers like Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee. This paper makes a comparative study of Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*. This study reveals that there is certain common pattern running through both the novels though they differ in the themes, narrative techniques e.t.c. The general pattern seems to be that of the protagonist as victim of the patriarchal order who fights against various forces in order to resolve the issues in her own ways. The search of the protagonists is mainly for love, understanding, recognition and identity. The existential struggle to establish one's own identity, to assert one's individuality and fight to exist as a separate identity elucidates that feminism has commonly echoed in both the novels by these feminist writers.

KEY WORDS: Woman, Identity, Neurosis, Murder, Silence, Communication, Fantasies, Symbolical

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INTRODUCTION

Indian women novelists project woman as the central figure by giving a distinct dimension to their image in the family and society. Their insight into the woman's reactions and responses, problems and perplexities and the complex working of their inner selves and their emotional involvement and disturbances enabled these novelists to succeed in presenting the predicament of women most effectively. The existential struggle to establish

one's identity, to assert one's individuality, fight to exist as a separate identity, cultural conflicts, the social and economic changes, the problem of the expatriates and immigrants and the personal relationships especially between man and wife are some of the common themes that appear in the novels of Indian women novelists.

We find the fullest expression of women problems through display of various themes in the novels of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee. Anita Desai's

protagonist Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* gives expression to the long smothered wail of hurt psyche. Maya's tale is a tale of blunted human relationships. With heightened imagination, sensitivity, loneliness and lack of healthy communication with her husband she becomes complex, confused, irrational and a neurotic individual. Bharati Mukherjee's Dimple in *Wife* lacks a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and is a victim of fantasies and other forms of social oppression.

The hiatus between reality and dream darkens the life of Mukherjee's Dimple in *Wife* besides Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*. Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and Mukherjee's *Wife* explore the inner space of neurotic individuals. Dimple, like Maya, is mentally disturbed and the core reason for this is an intense sense of loneliness. Dimple is the victim of a domineering husband and Maya of an older man who has no time for her. Both are lonely women. The similarity between the two protagonists in terms of the stages of disenchantment with their situation in life, frustration, the onset of neurosis, the gradual but perceptive building up of mental tension till the final totters them on brink of insanity. Like Maya in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Dimple fails to communicate with others and even with her own self. Dimple's maiden dream of freedom, love and luxury contradict with what she attains. Though cosmopolitan in her thinking, Dimple seems to have a warped thinking that borders on the grotesque. She fails to reconcile Amit with the husband of her fantasy. She obsessively measures her husband against her ideal man and her life against her dream. The shift to the land of freedom shocks her to realise that America with all its glamour allows Indian women little escape from the traditional routes chalked out for her. She cannot comprehend her experiences: "all impossible to talk about? Let alone describe in English or Bengali. There were no words she'd ever learned to describe her daily feeling. She would have to give up trying to write. She would give up trying to preserve old friendships .Because there was nothing to describe and nothing to preserve." (120) Love and death are the most important things to Dimple as in the case of Maya of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. While it is the

dance of peacocks that defines the tragic predicament of Maya which chimes in with many other images of dance, it is America that allures Dimple into believing that it stands for love and death. If it is memory of the prophecy and Gautama's inability to soothe the troubled psyche that define the tragic predicament of Maya, it is cultural transplantation and her addiction to the world of fantasy that cripple the mind of Dimple. While Gautama does not help to liberate Maya of her terrifying nightmares, Amit thwarts Dimple's attempts at acculturation. Dimple's husband's dominating behavior restricts her free movement in America and stifles her desire to assimilate into the following trends of the American society. This has great psychological impact on her because she had accompanied her husband to America with the great dream of liberation from a restricted middle-class life in India. Maya cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama. While Maya longs for love, contact, relationship and communion, Gautama longs for detachment. The marital life of Maya which is punctuated all along by "matrimonial silences" alienates her. She aspires for the life that would permit her to touch him, feel his flesh and hair; hold and then tighten her hold on him. Stemming from marital discord, her alienation ends with severe insanity. The jarring notes of discontent and frustration in marriage often emanate from temperamental incompatibilities. Maya the emotional, sensitive and impulsive wife is contrasted with the rational, matter of fact, practical husband Gautama. Maya's moods, obsessions, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed very effectively in the novel. Disenchanted with life for different reasons they become neurotic and the gradual descent to the role of murderers is carefully patterned. Maya's act of murder, like Dimple's killing of her husband, is an act of self-liberation.

When it comes to the final scene, both the protagonists show semblance in the act of murdering their husbands. Dimple in *Wife* is found watching television along with Amit. The episode is a discussion about suicide on the Johnny Carson show. At this stage Dimple gets transfixed to an

episode where a baby face in a bird cage is poked at till it turns into a 'mangled bleeding mass.'

This is then wrapped in newspaper, from which silk-scarves, rabbits and a wisping bra are extracted. This leaves no impression on Amit. But we can see the emphasis of Bharati Mukherjee on Dimple's consciousness and perception of reality as this situation serves as a prelude to Dimple's act of murdering her husband. She stabs him seven times which symbolically represents the Hindu marriage bond signified by seven ritual steps. With the final disinterested question about Toto, Maya sentences Gautama to death feeling that he has never lived and never would live. In both the cases the murders are not planned they are done in a fit of insane moments.

Sex becomes either a unifying force or an alienating agency in man-woman relationship. While unattained sexual satiation which leads to despair and agony is suggested through Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* by Desai, we find Mukherjee's Dimple engaged in sexual fantasies with glamorous heroes from sports and cinema. Her knowledge of the possibility of greater happiness with a different man ruins her attainable happiness with her husband Amit. Her sexual mechanism with Milt Glasser is part of her defense mechanism, a part of her concept of assimilation. On the other hand Maya fails to attain sexual fulfillment with her husband. This sexual frustration leads to her intellectual alienation from her husband. She takes refuge in "furious pillow-beating, kicking, everything but crying." (P.9) Sexual act which is a revitalizing force lacks in her life and makes her sterile. Gautama callously remains immune to the demands of her soul and body despite his practical wisdom and experience. Maya's honest appraisal of herself that her face lacks the charm to capture the entire attention of Gautama brings in more pain. She gets depressed eventually giving up the efforts to enchant him and force him to share her troubled mind. Maya's volatile temperament defeats the very purpose of her all-consuming love and her heart gets crushed with the depression. Both for Maya and Dimple sex acts as an alienating agency.

The communication and comprehension gap between Maya and Gautama is too deep and too broad to be bridged by good intentions or even by

intense love. So it claims its victims, each reaching the gory end through the other. In Dimple lack of communication stifles and chokes her voice and disintegrates her sensibility. It takes away the sanity of her mind which leads to the butchering of her husband. Unlike Maya, incompatibility with the spouses drives Dimple to extramarital relationship. Her extramarital affair with Milt Glasser is only a desperate attempt to merge with the new culture by outward drabs. Instead of fulfilling, it only deepens her estrangement from self, Amit and the surroundings. The traumatic turbulence of guilt over adultery that she is caught in and her long cherished dream to become an American turns her to a murderess.

The absence of mother creates a void in Maya. Maya does not even mention a photograph or any conversation with her father about her mother. It seems it might be a painful and disgusting episode in her father's life. Maya being motherless craves for motherly tenderness and refuge from her mother-in-law but it becomes impossible. Though Dimple has a mother she doesn't serve as a role model to her. She fails to trace the unusual fantasies of her daughter which in the later stages ruin her life. Also, in the hour of need she fails to provide emotional crutches to the daughter. The presence of mother in Dimple and the absence of mother in Maya make no difference in their attitudes. Maya's fascination for the babies in the pigeons nest suggests her longing for motherhood. Dimple skips her way to abortion considering pregnancy as a hindrance to her voyage to America. She day dreams of sinister abortions. While Maya longs for motherhood Dimple averts motherhood. Aloneness and inactivity destroys the spirit of an individual. This drags Dimple to the pits of neurosis where her only company becomes the T V screen. In the absence of any activity Maya gets obsessed with her past and broods over the coldness of Gautama.

Both Desai's Maya and Mukherjee's Dimple experience psychic disturbances due to severe demands on their personality. We come across despair, frustration, loneliness and fear in Dimple and the psychological states give way to hallucination, thoughts of death that culminate in madness and violence. But Maya's retreat to her

past does not save her from her problems. Both the past and present become equally unacceptable and dissatisfying and Maya resorts to the last refuge for a neurotic, suicide or homicide.

Mukherjee's *Wife* is a cluster of corroding images suggestive of the deteriorating mind of Dimple. She employs images of corrosion, decomposition, disease and death skillfully. Desai skilfully correlates the landscape of the novels to the psychic states of the sensitive individuals that people her canvass. The city of Delhi highlights the lack of affinity experienced by Maya. The parties, dances, drinks and gossips in the club disturb her inner mind considerably. The cry of the peacock forms the background music suggesting her sexual starvation. The deteriorating psychic conditions and different moods of Maya are portrayed by using highly functional images. Imminent death is reminded to her as the tension in her aberrant mind accelerates the disturbing images of slimy crawling creatures: "Albinoes, Bleached into albinoes by the desert sun, these lizards. But the rat, too, is an albino, from having lived always in the dark, from never having seen the sun at all" (127). Besides the memory of the prophecy associated incidents too augment her trouble. Her brother Arjuna's letter confirms that the astrologer, the horoscope and the tantrums are not figments of an insane nightmare and curious hallucination but facts. This makes her fear-stricken by which she associates even the ordinary events and remarks with the prediction of the albino astrologer. The culminating tension leads to severe headaches which are symptomatic of the desire to elude the issue. But reality can no longer be eluded and fears and thoughts crowd her mind. Maya fails to visualize any strategy to achieve tranquility. Nightmares intensify her suffering and gradually descend her into the abyss of darkness and aloneness where the only echoes are those of the albino and the peacock. Even the deteriorating psychic condition of Dimple is portrayed through hallucinations which give way to thoughts of suicide. She has nightmares of violence, of suicide and of death. She even has the sensation of being raped and killed in her flat. To her, death appears to present itself in myriad forms. Sleepers look to her more like corpses than as people under temporary suspension of consciousness. Her friend

Ina Mullick appears in her dream as dead which properly interpreted could mean that Dimple fervently wishes herself dead. It is her nightmarish visions and dreams that highlight her latent impulses which gradually deteriorate her to a state of neurosis.

It is lack of communication between the spouses that leads to failure in both the matrimonial relationships. The impossibility of verbal communication with the spouses causes Maya and Dimple to withdraw to a world of silence. The protagonists who occasionally indulge in introspection lack the courage and maturity to achieve an honest appraisal of themselves. Various attempts to escape their cages make them mentally bruised and spiritually battered. Their worlds become destructive with their near neurotic urges, lonely strivings and desperation. When the demands on the self become unbearable they either withdraw or choose homicide or suicide or murder as a solution to their problems. One thing commonly observed in these two protagonists is that the decision to kill their husbands is taken in a frenzied state of mind which is momentous. It is not planned.

There are differences between these writers in their novelistic techniques, approaches, themes and in their use of language. Nevertheless this study reveals that there is certain common pattern running through both the novels. The general pattern seems to be that of the protagonist as victim of the patriarchal order who fights against various forces in order to resolve the issues in her own ways. The search of their protagonists is mainly for love, understanding, recognition and identity. The existential struggle to establish one's own identity, to assert one's individuality and fight to exist as a separate identity elucidates that feminism has commonly echoed in both the novels by these feminist writers. They have shown that Maya and Dimple fail to establish good interpersonal relationships due to uncongenial domestic environments characterized by emotional deprivation, lack of understanding, parental neglect or pampering and lack of peer group or sibling support. Broken marital relations, sexual abuse, loneliness, despair, identity crisis, thwarting of individuality, dislocation and culture shock too

contribute to darken the lives of these women. The stories of such Maya and Dimple can be made successful in a world where nobody is inferior or superior, where men and women are equally valued, where they become complementary to each other, where silence is broken, where positive recognition and learning to assimilate without surrendering individuality is gained.

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