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ANITA DESAI'S 'CRY THE PEACOCK' : A PSYCHONEUROTIC STUDY OF MAYA THROUGH THE LENS OF ELECTRA COMPLEX

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ABSTRACT

Indian literature in English as a genre has gradually emerged as institution in itself. The proprietors of this genre have explored myriad themes, thus giving it an expensive milieu. Beginning with the trio of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, some women writers also joined hands with their counterparts to raise a higher pedestal for Indian writing. A sea change came through the works of Anita Desai who has won her wide critical acclaim in India as well as abroad.

Anita Desai's fiction can be analyzed taking into consideration the Psychological motivations of her novels as psychic drama through flashback, diary-entries, self-analysis, ruminations, rumbling of dialogues and descriptions of places and people. The most remarkable thing about *Cry, the Peacock*, her maiden novel, is building up the tension and presentation of the hideous transformation of a sensitive, poetic young lady into an insane individual.

The present paper is an attempt to explore Maya's psyche and what leads Maya to her psychoneurosis. Maya is also a victim of Electra complex due to her father-fixation and after her marriage finds Gautam a poor substitute. Her earnest longing for Gautam's love on one hand and astrologer's prediction on the other, always drift his inner self apart. She has to pull throughout the novel between the world of her fantasy and the hard facts of life.

Key Words: Psychoneurosis, Electra complex, father-fixation, astrologer's prediction, psychic drama.

Introduction

Anita Desai's main foothold is the exploration of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin; into the constant struggles raging the soul of human beings at the conscious and the sub-conscious level. She tries to unfold the hidden motives, the vacillations of sensibility, the social and psychological convulsions, and the dim

dark regions of the subconscious and the unconscious where lie buried the suppressed desires, impulses and the dormant instincts of human psyche. Too much working on the unconscious level and a constant movement from the past to the present and from the present to the past in the minds of the protagonists make her novels symbolic and suggestive.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is clearly influenced by the writings of Virginia Woolf. So, it is the trend-setter in the field of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. It is the interior monologue of Maya, the pampered daughter of her father, who marries Gautama, her father's friend. Desai evokes the dominant attributes of contemporary Indian society through the protagonist who acquires symbolic connotations besides her role as the central figure. She undergoes experiences of various shades and complexities. Socio-economic factors colour her personality and mould her psyche. Unable to change her circumstances, she seeks relief in fantasy and in the rich promises of peacock dance. A number of instances from the novel reveal that the main reason for Maya's 'psychoneurosis' is her father-fixation culminating in 'Electra complex'.

Let us now have a look at the terms 'Electra complex' and 'Psychoneurosis'; and discuss how Maya became a victim of these two aspects which led her to her catastrophe:

Electra complex:

In his psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud opined that personality development during infancy and early childhood vastly influences the growth of adult personality. It was Carl Gustav Jung who was the first to use the mythological figure 'Electra' from a psychological standpoint and explained one of the most well-known theories about girls' psychosexual development i.e. Electra complex. In girls, the castration complex prepares the way for Electra complex instead of destroying it. In case of a female child, Oedipus complex is different from the male child and it is called Electra complex. In Freud's opinion, the female child after birth equally depends upon the mother for self preservation. Like the male child, she also loves her mother. But in the phallic stage when she becomes 3-4 years old, she observes her own genitals as well as the genitals of the opposite sex. When she finds discrimination, she thinks that she has already been castrated. As a consequence, she feels inferior to male members and blames her mother for this. This leads to castration complex and in case of males it is called castration anxiety. She starts hating her mother for

this besides for the lack of proper attention and partial behaviour towards her in comparison to her brothers and other male members of the family. She, thus, tries to compensate her love by loving her father instead of the mother. Thus, a sexual attachment towards her father develops. But as she grows up, the society does not like this father-daughter relationship and she also finds that it is impossible to fulfill the sexual wish with the father and the Electra complex disappears.

Psychoneurosis:

Psychoneuroses, otherwise known as neuroses refer to mild mental illness. William Cullen coined the word neuroses to explain disordered sensations of the nervous system. By and large, psychoneuroses is milder disturbance of the cognitive, emotional and motor processes, precipitated by emotional stresses, conflicts and frustrations which partially incapacitate the individual to meet the situations and demands of life effectively. A psychoneurotic is in touch with reality and environment and is conscious of his abnormal symptoms. He can carry on his normal vocations and occupation of life. Psychoneuroses usually arises out of morbid fears and anxieties or more rarely persistent ideas and motor acts, all of which the patient realizes to be abnormal and the meaning of which at a loss to understand. Psychoneurotic reactions are the commonest modes of faulty response to the stresses of life and especially to those inner tensions that come about from confused and unsatisfactory relationship to other people.

Discussion:

Maya is a young and sensitive married girl whose father is an affluent advocate in Lucknow. Maya has developed a father-fixation i.e. an obsessive love for her father. After the early death of her mother, his brother went to America to earn an independent living. So, she becomes a pampered child of her father who showered all her love upon her. She exalts triumphantly: "No one, no one else, loves me as my father does" (CP. 46). In a stream of consciousness, 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 princess in a toy world.

But it was a pretty one" (CP.89). In such an atmosphere, Maya starts living in her own fanciful world far from the maddening crowd. She alienates herself and feels proud when she says, "...as a child, I enjoyed princess like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian-nights..." (CP.89) and it results in her psychoneurotic behaviour. She develops a different attitude of the outside world and thinks the world can adjust according to her tunes. She can go to extreme heights of appreciation while praising her father, "He is like a silver oak himself, with his fine, silver white hair brushed smoothly across his bronzed scalp" (CP.37). It clearly shows that Maya has developed a father-fixation (Electra complex) which converts her into a psychoneurotic person. As her mother had already been dead, she does not go to the extent of killing her mother as her rival as the mythological Electra did. But after her marriage, Gautam, her husband, becomes a victim of her lopsided behaviour caused by her Psychoneurosis. Having been a fairy to her father, she leads a carefree and demands the same by Gautam, her father's friend and her husband, but finds in him a poor substitute of her father. She ruminates:

"his thoughts, his life, his attitude, his learning and his career assume a similar pattern formal as a Mogul garden, gracious and exact, where breeding, culture, leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art, where no single weed is allowed to flower, no single flower to die and remain on the stalk, no single stalk to grow out of its pruned shape. As the streams in a Mogul garden flow musically through channels of carved marble and sandstone, so his thoughts, his life flow, broken into Small, exquisite patterns by the carving, played upon by altering nuances of light and shade, but never overstepping their limitations, never breaking their bounds, always moving onwards with the same graceful cadence." (CP. 45)

Maya's father got her married to Gautam, his friend. When she meets Gautam, her illusions are shattered. Gautam is not a loving husband but a

father substitute who requires little interaction with her. He proves a medium to reach her father in her unconscious mind. She never establishes effective rapport with Gautam as he is unsentimental and twice of her age. Naturally, there is little in common and they simply maintain matrimonial bonds. Excessive adoration of Maya for her father makes Gautam aware of her growing dissatisfaction of their conjugal relationship:

"If you know your Freud it would all be very straight forward and then appear as merely inevitable to you taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious father obsession- which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that you mature rapidly; you will not be able to deal with, to destroy." (CP. 146)

Maya sometimes screams, "My father might have come. Look, look for him Gautam..." (CP.56). Gautam also admits, "There was fear in his face as he stared down at me, holding me fiercely. God what has happened to Maya?" (CP. 141). There is strangeness in her behaviour: "I heard a thin voice, shrill, as kites do when they battle and barely recognised it as my own" (CP.142).

So, unlike the episodes of matricide in the case of mythological Electra, Maya outpours her anger on Gautam making him responsible for not treating her like her father. Her father fixation develops into certain whims and leads her to her doom. It is nothing but her Electra complex which makes her a puppet in the hands of fate and she never rises herself from her father- fixation.

Let us now judge Maya on the touchstone of the characteristics of a psychoneurotic person developed by Coleman and neo Freudians:

Desire for excessive love and affection:

Maya's intense desire to love and to be loved constructs the plot and sub-plot. Maya seems to cherish a continuous longing for something i.e. love which is impossible for her to attain. There is something lacking in her she sees far from her goal. This emotional stability she wants to capture, but

her efforts fail and her hopes to patch up the distance vanish.

Since Maya is obsessed with prophecy of disaster, she longs for the company of her husband soon after the death of Toto:

"She sat there sobbing and waiting for her husband to come home. Now and then she went out into the Veranda and looked to see if he were coming up the drive which lay shriveling, melting and then shriveling again, like molten lead in a grove cut into earth." (CP.5)

Maya continues to suffer from the feeling of suffocation and disassociation of her internal self even after the sugar-coated pills of relief given to her by Gautam. Whenever she discloses her mind to Gautam, he does not appreciate her, he does not understand her, on the contrary he rejects the things out-right. He calls her neurotic, a spoiled baby and her life a fairy tale. She remarks: "Poor Gautam, Not to be alive to notice the odour of lives, not to hear the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, not to have time to count the stars as they came out one by one—too Gautam, my poor, poor husband." (CP. 237)

Ego centricity and disturbed interpersonal relationships:

Maya is a woman— ego-centric, hysterical, demanding, and obsessed with the fear of an impending catastrophe. She is always speaking something. Her speech builds up her character and presents her conflicts from her own point of view. The major action takes place in her mind that one of them will die in the fourth year of their marriage. This prophecy by the astrologer comes back to torment her during that ominous fourth year. For as many months, she has fears of her own death. As time passes, she comes to reflect intensely the life's meaning and further she develops extreme awareness of sights, sounds and smells around her. She desperately tries to imprint life's experiences on her memory. She thinks her days are numbered. Now she wants to live for more years. She wants to enjoy the fullest and demands more and more.

Tension and irritability:

Her tension and irritability is symbolized by the Peacock's dance which acquires a personal significance for Maya's life. It shows to her future course of life as she views her marriage with Gautam as a deadly struggle. The poetry of life, its passion, its love and its hatred—life and death are identified with the peacock and its dance. The peacock's dance is associated with the rainy season. It is seen that when dark clouds come over the sky, the peacocks start spreading their colourful feathers ready to dance and mate. However this dance of the Peacock merges with the colour of the Albino astrologer and the dance becomes somewhat the dance of the death:

"...the hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one Living they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life. 'Lover, Lover', you will hear them cry in the forests, when the rain-clouds come. 'Lover, I die'..." (CP. 109-10)

Inadequacy and low stress tolerance:

When the fear becomes obsessive, Maya is less and less able to control herself. She is at this stage finally to break down. Her abnormality is expressive of her hysterical condition while she repeats certain phrases: 'the cabaret was ghastly, ghastly; the Sikh was no ally of mine, but of that magician of the world, the albino, his shadow.' She hears the peacock: "Gautam do you hear them?" (CP.113)"Hear what?" (CP.113) The mirror frightens her: "I could not look into that face that reflected my own fear for the first time" (CP.141) and she becomes more and more distracted. Sometimes she warns, "Do not take me seriously what I write now, for I can not quite recall whether these conversations ever actually took place, or merely occurred to me when I sat there, alone, insane with dread...I was ill, ill" (CP .206).

We come to know the idea of death and it connects us with the death of Toto. Then comes the cry of pain—a desperate cry.

Tendency to dominate others:

Maya is ever imaginative and dominating. The imagination creates the desired and apprehends the threatening. The gulf between her and her husband separates them. Rebuffed by Gautam and mauled by the society, she is torn between her love of life and fear of death. Anita Desai dramatises the gradual disintegration of Maya's personality in a powerful way. She has nightmares and fears. She is going to be insane: "Yes I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not there already" (CP .124).

Dissatisfaction and unhappiness:

Maya is a prisoner of the past. She is always under the shade of her past memories—her memories engulfing her one after another like wave upon wave. The painful past is always throbbing in her inner consciousness. It has taken the shape of a permanent fixation. The prophetic note with her—for one of the spouses will die four years after marriage aches her, the Toto after death has widened the pitch and she is left with dissolution and extinction.

Being a dissatisfied person, she has nothing important to say or reveal herself. We also know that it is easy to speak the truth to oneself, but it is more risky to expose it to others. Therefore, it appears much safer to keep her thoughts to herself, but there is limit to this. One cannot contain it forever. It also happens in case of Maya when Gautam dies, she erupts like a volcano:

"I saw the moon's vast, pure surface, touched only faintly with petals of shadow, as though brushed by a Luna moth's wings, so that it appeared a great multi-foliolate rose waxen white, virginal chaste and absolute white, casting a light that was holy in its purity, a soft suffusing glow of its chastity." (CP .179)

Anxiety and fearfulness:

Maya is always obsessed with the idea of death. She is all the time haunted by the vision of albino astrologer that marriage is going to end in its

fourth year with the death of either wife or husband. She repeats it now and then:

"...and now I recalled that old-slick, sibilant tongue whispering poetry to me in the bat-tortured dark. Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wild? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? Pia, Pia, they Cry, Lover, lover, Mio, mio—I die, I die." (CP. 117)

Her death-fear is directly connected with her neurosis and it is, further heightened by her childhood memory of an unpleasant prophecy pronounced by the albino astrologer:

"My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look, look at the horoscope. Stars do not lie. And so it is best to warn you, prepare you...Death to one of you. When you are married and you shall be married young...Death--an early one—by unnatural causes."(CP. 33)

She feels that she would never sleep in peace. Therefore, she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death. She has no rest any more—only death and waiting. Maya herself admits: "Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment, these were the four walls of my private hell one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain" (CP .117).

Inferiority complex:

Since Maya has no children, this accentuates her loneliness and inferiority complex. At many places we see her changing psychic states of mind and moods. She lacks something to communicate:

"But there was a moon. A great moon of hot, beaten copper, of molten brass, living and throbbing like a bloody human organ, a great, full bosomed woman, who had mounted the sky in passion, driven the silly stars away from her, while she pulsed and throbbed, pulsed and glowed across the breathless sky, I spun around, clutching the Baby, to stare at my relations, whose names I knew, whose moods I sensed. whose hands I touched, and found there

was not one amongst them to whom I could cry, 'Look, look, there is a moon in the sky.'" (CP .51)

Persistent non integrative behavior:

Maya's disturbed behaviour is perverted and child-like. It is because in her childhood she had been carefree-perhaps more so in memory than in reality. She was free to play with pets and small flowers. Years later she is almost free. On two occasions, she sums something serious. At times Maya behaves like an adult. Once she says: "it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting" (CP 35).

She connects her present with the past and tries to go into a sheltered life. Efforts by Gautam to heal up her internal wounds fail as her consciousness gives it a dramatic turn. Her continuous longing for something fails to establish complete communication with reality in life. The cry of the peacock and at the same time the cry of Maya frustrates her within. Similar to the monsoon Peacock dancing madly and crying for its lover and finally killing itself in a frenzy of love, Maya's heart cracks up with the presumption of same hopelessness. She admits:

"When I heard one cry in the stillness of night, its hoarse, heart-torn voice pierced my white flesh and plunged into its knife to hilt in my palpitating heart... Now that I understood their call I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine." (CP. 97)

Still Maya controls herself and watches her other self which dominates at the end. The dance within her becomes more and more feverish. She is no longer sane. She is torn by doubts and dread and the atmosphere around her indicates sub-human existence.

At the end ,Maya appears waiting for an asylum. Her childlike behaviour has overcome her adulthood. Through her own description of the situation leading to her husband's death, we have her breakdown.

Irrationality:

Maya wants to revert back to her childhood memories to escape her present. In this crisis, she usually resorts to crying and bursting into a lot of pillow beating. In her such efforts, her consciousness seizes sensations of colour, smell or sound. As Meena Belliappa observes:

"She has a haunting perception of whiteness (white flower, white Toto) against a background of overwhelming darkness, a sense of foreboding expressing itself in eerie sensations—moistness of coiling shaky and deafening roar of drumbeats thrust the memory on its trail of a lost object." (Belliappa .9)

Lack of Insight and rigidity:

Maya is lacking in insight when she feels that her freedom is not possible unless she removes her impression of Gautam in her inner consciousness. To fulfill the demand of fate, she finds out the only way that her husband has to die and she has to live. Maya is not conscious of this alternative firstly, by and by she notices differences between Gautam's and her own attitudes. Once Gautam is found lacking in perception when a dust storm overtakes the house they live "...only underlined unawareness, a half-deadness to the living world, which helped and strengthened me by justifying my unspoken decision" (CP .168).

Disproportionate reaction to frustration:

The mental agonies and the tensions in her mind show frustrations of her existence and narrows down the poetic beauty of her life. Not knowing how to react, she continues to lead an explosive life and comments on her unsuccessful married life:

"...it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon nobility forced upon as from outside, and—therefore, neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly, the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon, with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not sear to part." (CP.45)

In a fit of frustration, she decides that Gautam will be sacrificed. Her neurosis goes on mounting like waves till she has no hold on her. In this fit of insanity she argues with her brother Arjuna that her own death was not necessary and it might be Gautama's as "the man had no contact with the world or, with me." (CP .175)

Unusually critical attitude towards others:

Maya, most of the time, criticizes her loneliness and the spell of darkness separate both Maya and Gautam. Even the sky does not seem to give her an inescapable fact of life; she seeks meaning in a dark universe. The Urdu couplet quoted by Gautam does not heal up-her wounds. This does not redeem her loneliness; it simply underlines the irony of her position still longing for something. Her experience of love appears to be short-lived—and her hopes vanish.

Dissociation of personality from conscious psychic life:

Maya's strong reaction to all ordinary events shows her high perception of the things around her. Except for these things, her life is normal. Maya is free to sit in her bedroom and live a life of loneliness. Her lack of manual labour and social activities leads her to take up an inward journey . She herself admits when Nila and her mother visits her. Maya, without outwardly concerns and social contacts, lives a self centered life. Her loneliness and inward things develop her personality into a woman of illusions. The readers know the reasons for her behaviour, but her husband sees only the outward manifestations of her thoughts and he is not in a position to piece together the complete picture of her disturbance taking place day to day.

On all occasions, when she tries to have rapport she fails and she is bound to withdraw herself. Sometimes this world appears to her familiar and compromising and sometimes it is menacing and fearful. She translates outside world into her personal experiences. The Cabaret, the dancing bear, the caged monkeys—all serve as reminder to her death.

Psychological and somatic symptoms:

Maya's moods, alienation, indifference, obsession and abnormality, convey through various sets of symbols and images, once again develops insecurity of growing insane:

"This is not natural, I told myself, this cannot be natural. There is something weird about me now, where ever go; whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself ? or the world around me?" (CP. 167)

There are four significant events which force Maya for her illusions. These events intensifies her inner self—the death of her pet dog, Toto, Lal's visit to her home, a visit from her in laws, a shopping trip and a letter from Arjuna, her brother. These are ordinary events for others. For example, the death of a pet dog would be simply mourned but she says that a relationship with a dog "is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child" (CP. 9). Only the letter of a long-lost brother might change a normal man.

Maya is reminded of the impending death when the visions tell her the youngest child of the Lals entering the dining room:

"...an indescribable air of futility had entered the room with the child. It seemed to me that we alone existed upon an island in a city of dead, and that we, too, were gripped by a fatal disease and would soon, slowly, perish, since even the youngest, freshest, generation was touched by it and had no hope of survival... ." (CP. 80)

The repeated cries of the Peacock and the cries of the neurotic Maya are symbols to denote the inner-self of the protagonist. R. S. Sharma says that "the Cry of the Peacock is a symbol of Maya's life in death and death in life." (Sharma. 25) Her isolation becomes total when he tries to murder her husband in a fit of insanity.

Repressed hostility:

Maya remains a lonely creature. Her loneliness, her aching heart and gradual

deterioration of psyche make her an existentialist character as she herself admits:

“For there never was a doubt in my mind, now that I remember, as to the definite truth that I did have a place in it. Not only I, but my small dog whose said journey I followed with my mind, even as my eye traced pattern after majestic pattern amidst the proud consultation.” (CP. 29-30)

The dance within her becomes more and more feverish. The albino, the Kathakali dancer, the peacock, the bronze Shiva and the other images come to her mind one by one until she is finally insane. The dark dancer represents death and Maya knows there is no time left. She or her life partner is fated to die. Regular contacts outside the world intensify her fear psychosis and her sense of loneliness. Leila married to a man slowly dying of tuberculosis, the Vulgar Lal, the funny Sikh—all add to her miseries. Each encounter tells a new intimation of mortality. The same pattern of events continues to repeat itself. A trivial occurrence or incident makes her more subjective and neurotic. The small boy in the party with Lal makes her feel all of them are waiting to perish soon.

Conclusion:

Thus, it is concluded that *Cry, the Peacock* is concerned with the terrors of existence and it achieves a multidimensional effect through a series of events in the life of its protagonist, living in a perpetual twilight of the mind. Her neurosis growth, development and crisis are painted in all the three parts of the novel. The reasons for her insanity lie in her own nature. The other people around her do not see her saner side. Her own name has obvious significance. She is a form of illusion (Maya). Though she is a creature of song, dance and flower, she goes beyond her control and as a result becomes mad. For Maya, the desert is full of hidden dangers and presenting those dangers. The novelist dramatises the psychic drama of Maya; sometimes her disintegrating sanity and sometimes her cracking up under the pressure of fears. In this way, the novelist has given an opportunity to the readers to enter into the inner

recess of a particular woman during her short critical period. Though Desai has her sympathies with Maya, she maintains a distance so that the reader may see Maya's personality in its complexity and beauty. Her hopelessness is not an individual but it spreads and becomes universal. Her neurosis is somewhat collective and poses a definite danger to the identity of woman as a whole.

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Brief Bio-Note

Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj is an Assistant Professor in the Post-Graduate Department of English, SCD Govt. College, Ludhiana. She has presented a number of scholarly papers in various National & International Seminars and Conferences. Her papers have been published, in print and online mode, in many National and International Journals of great repute. She has guided two M.Phil. Scholars. Her thrust areas are Diasporic Literature, Gender Studies, Indian Writing in English, American Literature, World Literature in Translation and Post-Colonial Literature. She is a member of the Editorial Board of three International journals: The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal, The Criterion: An International Journal in English & The Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal.