



CONFRONTATION BETWEEN REALISM AND IMAGINATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the most influential and notable Indian English novelists. She has offered innovative elements to her fiction: the discovery of human behavior. She is gifted with psychological insight and often peeps into the inner recesses of the psyche, rather than merely presenting the outer spectacle of the world; the creative field of imagination is her unfailing reserve. It explores the inner world of the main protagonist, Maya, and demonstrates her fear, insecurity and strange behavior. She depicts a world of alienation, loneliness and suffering. Maya is described as a hysterical character whose impending tragedy is suggestively foreshadowed, time and again. This paper is an effort to portray the confrontation between realism and imagination.

Key words: Realism, Imagination, fantasy, Introspection, Introversion, Psychological novels, Child Development, Psychological research, Psychological analysis of Maya.

Introduction

Anita Desai is a pioneer in writing psychological novels. She explores the psychic depth of her characters and analyses in detail their motives. Her characters are distinguished by the qualities of introspection, introversion and a refusal to surrender their individual selves. I am interested in characters that are not average but have retreated or have been driven into despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, and it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose hearts cry the great no, who fight the current and struggle against it; they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them (1983:21-23).

Maya's claustrophobia, loneliness and frustration are effectively brought out by the writer.

Maya is a hypersensitive young woman pursued and haunted by the idea of early death prophesied by an albino astrologer and her ineffectual lonely struggle against fate, that drives her to homicide, insanity and finally to suicide" (1991: 172). In her state of agony and depression, she is reminded of the albino astrologer's prediction that in the fourth year of her marriage, there will be a death, either her or her husband's. Fantasy becomes a part of the total structure of the novel and it is constantly projected along with and in contrast to the world of reality.

The excessive love Maya gets from her father makes her have a lop-sided view of life. When Gautama, a busy, prosperous lawyer, too much engrossed in his own vocational affairs, fails to meet her demands, she feels neglected and miserable. Seeing her morbidity, her husband warns her of her turning neurotic and blames her father for spoiling her. The terrifying words of the prediction, like the

drumbeats of the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, ring in her ears and unnerve her. She knows that she is haunted by "a black and evil shadow" - her fate and the time has come: And four years it was now. It was now to be either Gautama or Maya.

The loving attention of her father makes Maya oblivious of the deadly shadow; but as her husband Gautama fails to satisfy her intense longing for love and life, she is left to the solitude and silence of the house which prey upon her. She muses over her husband's lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight to his face: "Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me. . . ." Temperamentally there is no compatibility between Maya and Gautama. As symbolized by her name she stands for the world of sensations. Gautama's name on the other hand, symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is realistic and rational. He has philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagwad Gita. Such irreconcilably different temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony.

Had Gautama shown an understanding towards and been attentive to Maya, he would have saved her from the haunting fears of "shadows and drums and drums and shadows." The gap of communication between them leaves her lonely to brood over the morbid thoughts of the albino astrologer's prophecy. Her attempts to divert herself by visits to her friend Leila and Pom or Mrs. Lal's party or the restaurant and the cabaret, prove powerless to dispel the creeping terror.

The visit of Gautama's mother and sister Nila brings a brief respite to her and she enjoys her busy life in their company. But once they are gone, she finds the house empty and herself alone with her horrors and nightmares. She is caught in the net of inescapable. Being intensely in love with life she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death, "Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in a need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in Love and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. Then suddenly, during her interval of sanity, an idea

hopefully dawns in her mind that since the albino had predicted death to either of them, it may be Gautama and not she whose life is threatened. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks that as he is detached and indifferent to life, it will not matter for him if he misses life. When she asks him to accompany her to the roof of the house to enjoy cool air, he accompanies her, lost in his own thoughts. Passing out of the room, Maya catches sight of bronze Shiva dancing and prays to the Lord of Dance to protect them.

Her social status affects her psyche to the extent that she becomes an easy victim of many known and unknown inner traumas. There is no denying the fact that Maya receives a comfortable upbringing. She has no shortage of material comforts, but the high intensity of pain she faces at mental level takes her to tragic end. Maya suffers from certain obsessions and an astrologer's prediction of the death of one of the two- her own or her husband's- after four years of marriage. Her obsession with death, her father- fixation and her marital discords are the three strands around which the plot has been woven. Cry, the Peacock engages the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. Desai makes Maya her mouthpiece to express her views about woman.

As Cixous says, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." (78) So writing the story of Maya is significant not just because she is driven away from parental embraces but also from her own body. So one can find in Maya an assertion of her desire, a proclamation against societal odds and a lament on the loss of the self. Maya's predicament can be linked to the failure to find a refuge either in marriage or in family. The spilt in her personality results in her loss of belief in herself.

May's obsession with the father figure and separation from the mother along with her failure to identify herself with Gautama, has led her to isolation. She is trapped with the fear of albino's prophecy. She confines herself in a world of

superstitions and is unable to do away with the constraints imposed by the orthodox society, with its belief in horoscope and future-telling. She nurtures both-love and fear of the unknown.

Though her father defies these false beliefs, Maya is unable to overcome her fears. In the fourth year of her marriage, she is seen building this fear to such an extreme that it leads to an unexpected explosion. The gloomy state of affairs is unacceptable to Maya. Hence she eases her tension psychologically by thinking how peacock stamps its feet and strikes its beak against rock, and how it seizes the snake to break its body to relieve its own pain. This affects her consciousness badly and she craves for an urgent outlet of her emotions. Thus under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband is a revenge reaction arising out of her own basic frustrations- unhappy married life, unfulfilled longings and a reaction against her husband's cold unresponsiveness.

Through this murder and suicide, she experiences fulfillment and is relieved from the anxiety of past and present dilemmas. Anita Desai studies the inner life of her characters but she never allows them to forget their social and familial ties. Maya looks at her brother, father and husband to save her from this psychological predicament and cries, "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying." (84) The quest of Desai's protagonist is not only one woman's quest but the quest of a human being towards some understanding and acceptance of her predicament.

Though there are other more women in this novel apart from Maya but hers is the heart-rendering story. Nila, Gautama's sister and his mother, these two are the women who symbolically present positivity and strength. Nina has the ability to fight the odds which come into her life. Her view of life as presented by the novelist is "After ten years with that rabbit I married, I have learnt to do everything myself." (135) As far as Gautama's mother is there, she is more concerned with her social work than the crying need of lonely Maya who asks her to stay for some more time with her.

There are two more women in the novel whose presence is noteworthy, Pom and Leila, who are Maya's friends. Leila's marriage is a love marriage and she had eloped with her lover who is a consumptive. She has faced all the vicissitudes of life and put up a brave fight as the wife of a patient struggling for life. She accepts her lot as her destiny and does not grudge or complain. She reacts violently when Mrs. Lal and other women at the party do not come up to her expectations. Pom is another character who faces the problems which are quite common in the lives of women in India. She lives with her in-laws under many restrictions.

The complex webs of many do's and don'ts are there around her every time. Mrs. Desai, through Pom, elaborates how women have to live a suffocated life and take permissions from their inlaws for every work. Life for her is, "like two mice in one small room, not daring to creep out, for fear they'll pounce on you, ask you where you're going, when you'll be back, why you aren't wearing the jewellery they gave you." (55) Anita Desai, through Mrs. Lal's character, wants to show that a woman and her family is not considered complete and meaningful without the birth of a son. Mrs. Lal pretends to be well off with four daughters, but she longs for a male child.

Even though we may glorify and rationalize daughters, yet daughters are considered a liability because of the evil of dowry in our society. Moreover, only sons are considered as true successors of their parents. The novelist elaborates how women in a male dominated society are sexually exploited and treated as commodity to be enjoyed through the cabaret girls in this novel. Women in Desai, tend to make constant comparisons between their father's houses. In their search for a sense of fulfillment, women continue to rely on the house. When it becomes clear to that the house cannot fill their emotional spiritual vacuum, they choose to withdraw. Withdrawal becomes a symptom of Maya.

To study the predicament of Maya, it is important to see her life as structured between her father's house and her husband's. Both locations act as a reflection of her an attractive figure-nurtured by

the values of her class, she also becomes a threat to that very system. Through Maya's character, Anita Desai upholds a new vista of feminist writing. Maya stands apart from all the women characters in the novel. She is the most interesting and psychologically mystifying among all Desai's female characters. She represents a class of women who silently suffer at the hands of the men. Her actions and reactions may not always draw one's sympathy and can be dismissed as the useless thoughts of a luxurious mind.

Maya's suffering is also luxurious suffering but the demands of the social changes put forth by the novelist can't be ignored. The fashion of living away from the parental house, the mother living away from the children and the increasing busy life, are some of the fractions of changing patterns. The novelist has thus highlighted the female predicament in various aspects. She excels, particularly in elaborating the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by negligence and loneliness. Certainly the novel is about Maya but all the secondary characters like Nila, Pom, Leila, the mother etc. contribute to the poly timbered voice of the women and the issues related to them.

These demeaning words for herself and her father question Maya's identity, drawing a gulf between her ideal and real self. Her image of ideal self, gets shattered repeatedly which gives rise to an identity crisis. Maya's father has been highly responsible for her fragile psyche which does not allow her to build realistic self-esteem. There is an unconscious revelation of Maya about the suppressed knowledge of the gulf between what he did and what he should have. Her power of individual thought and action gets stifled in this manner.

Maya grows progressively insecure, losing contact with her real self. This divided self, ultimately suffers loss of identity which dampens her worth and esteem in her own eyes. To conclude, Anita Desai's writing "is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey, the true significance of things". She presents to readers her opinion about the complexity of human

relationships as a big contemporary issue and human condition. So, she analyses this problem by projecting and expressing changing human relationships in her novels.

Anita Desai takes up outstanding contemporary issues as the subject matter of her fiction while remaining rooted in tradition at the same time. She explores the anguish of individuals living in modern society. She strives to show this problem without any interference. On the other hand, she allows to her readers to pass judgment over her characters and their actions in an objective and impartial way. For Maya, the very Achilles heel of being genetically and socially programmed as being more susceptible to emotional frustration and depression is double edged. If Maya feels deeply and intensely she also suffers more the harsh sting of dislocation between ideology and reality.

The discrepancy between what she aspires or sets out to do in life and the harsh reality, plunges her into abysmal anguish. Therefore, she is a loner and inevitably a loser who grapples to win some understanding out of an intensely privatized world of personal emotions. Thus, Desai uses different fictional techniques to the demands of the story and for this she uses flashback technique, fantasy as a technique, stream of consciousness technique, use of contrasting characters and use of symbolism to evoke an atmosphere. We sympathize with the characters like Maya, Nanda Kaul, Monisha, Raka because they are in search of deeper, fuller meaning of life and through the power of her work, Anita Desai has made them reverberate the very impulse we feel within ourselves.

Desai's use of fantasy lies in the narrative technique of realism and romanticism, the relationship between fantasy and reality, the conscious and unconscious realization of fantasies and fantasy as technique used for the growth of characters within the novel, Desai like Virginia Woolf reveals the twentieth century preoccupation with flux and the centers of personal identity and have tried to emphasize a personal subjective sense of reality.

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