

In Pursuit of Self: A Feminist Reading of Anita Desai's Cry the Peacock And Voices In The City

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Abstract :

Anita Desai's novels convey a sense of universal feminist consciousness. She presents a critical understanding of the communal, cultural and gendered hindrances that her women characters had to go through in their pursuit of self. Alongside subjugation Anita Desai thoughtfully represents the determined quest of the woman characters to fashion a worthwhile reality for themselves. In the light of these arguments the present paper is an attempt to examine and probe the way Desai's women characters challenge the stereotypical roles and identity imposed on them by the patriarchal social order as they attempt to reconstruct a liberated self-identity for them. For this purpose her two novels Cry the Peacock and Voices in the City are thoroughly studied in this paper.

Keywords: *Feminist consciousness, women, oppression, stereotypes, patriarchy, quest self identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

As a woman's liberation movement feminist ideology is committed to destabilize the institutionalized structure of the patriarchal paradigm and unfetter women from the shackles of sexist images and from subjugation and silencing by the male dominated society. Concurrently Feminism also aims at the all-round emancipation of women. Underscoring on the "all-round liberation" Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* states that, "It (feminism) is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organized effort" (Lerner, 237). Almost in the same vein, Sushila Singh in her piece of writing "Recent Trend in Feminist Thought: A Tour de Horizon" observes that "As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep - seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of 'raising of the consciousness' of an entire culture" (22). This consciousness of being subjugated and marginalized by the patriarchal social order and of challenging the false identity which render women to a state of invisibility is the feminist consciousness.

The feminist consciousness led to the emergence of feminist literary works which not only question woman's subordination and oppression in society but also but also to prejudiced, stereotypical representation of women in mainstream literature. Indian literary tradition too witnessed the emergence of feminist writings - feminist in being expressions of the afflictions, desires and assertions of women's identity in a conventional patriarchal environment. Worth mentioning here is that, Indian culture is a manifestation of patriarchal ideology. And very naturally in the leading social discourses, women have been either voiceless or nonexistent entities, and women's representations in literature are also decidedly prejudiced or gender biased that corroborated the general oppression of women. Women writers in India also like their counterparts in other parts of the world therefore, felt the urge and necessity to contest and subvert the patriarchal representation of gender, the gendered social framework, and the cultural control of women's bodies. Accordingly, women-centric line of attack has become a governing trend in the writings of women.

Anita Desai's novels convey a sense of universal feminist consciousness. She presents a grave understanding of the communal, cultural and gendered hindrances that her women characters had to go through in their pursuit of self. By diving deep into the psyche of her women characters she lays bare the repression and ruthless treatment of women by the conventional Indian social order. Her novels focus on issues like incompatible relationships, depression and alienation, and woman's quest for independent identity and to construct a worthwhile reality for themselves. Gajendra Kumar has comment underscores this fact when he states, "The recurring themes of Anita Desai's novels are identified-woman's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, woman's quest for her identify, her

pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level” (18). Worth noting here is that Anita Desai does not present subjugation of women belonging to all section of society. Rather she is mainly with the idiosyncrasies of male despotism and the victimization of the learned, bourgeois, municipal women.

Anita Desai’s first novel, *Cry the Peacock* (1963) was a ground-breaking work in that it portrayed for the first time a thin-skinned, heterosexual woman, who kills her husband when she is deprived of love and sexuality, and thus subverts the acclaimed standard of Indian womanhood. Herein, Desai gives an uncommon example of a feminist perspective through the protagonist’s outlook and response to problems in her life.

Maya is highlighted as an enormously hypersensitive figure; Desai represents a turbulent and neurotic woman, who fails to cope with the patriarchal order and system represented by her husband Gautam. The conjugal conflict which is the root of Maya’s crisis results from the temperamental difference between her and her husband. Maya’s husband, a lawyer twice of her age is practical, unfeeling, rational and reserved and is unable to understand and appreciate female sensibility. Maya on the other hand is dreamy, hypersensitive and emotive and is a love-sick woman. She is distressed by her husband’s laxity and indifference towards her emotions and desires. Maya pines for his companionship and emotional attachment but fatefully her marital life turns out to be drab and miserable shattering all her expectations. She suffers from emotional and erotic starvation as conveyed in the following expression:

She longs to be with him, be close to him, make haste in undressing... but when I went to rouse him from the couch, with a touch, I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep and ponder was very far from any world of mine, however enticing. (Desai, *Cry* 93)

The ill-matched marriage, erotic starvation and apathy of her in-laws induced a lot of stress and loneliness and consequently, Gautama’s house becomes a psychosomatic hell to Maya. Moreover, her childlessness further intensifies her agony and sense of estrangement Caught up in such excruciating and crushing circumstances; Maya falls back on the old memories and fantasies. She is reminded of her childhood days spent splendidly in the company of her caring father and this makes the present even more atrocious and bleak. As her sense of agonizing solitude intensifies, it is seen that she becomes more and more rebellious against the repressive male dominion enforced by Gautama and loud in securing her own passionate love of life. Sometimes, she articulates her rage and resistance with a peculiar shrill and harsh voice madly trying to make him realise her attitude and approach. She reacts with resentment at his feelings of supremacy, his obvious disapproval: - “Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing, nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me---and of how I can love....” She even resorts to her childhood memories in order to assert her freedom and escape from the present turmoil: “No one, no one else, loves me as my father does” (Desai, *Cry* 112).

The mutual mistrust, the differences in their mind-sets, the unremitting outbursts of resentment, all coalesce to turn their lives into an utter crisis which becomes too weighty to put up with. Maya’s quest for a liberated herself from this crisis consumes her so much that she decides to take the most strange and terrible move of getting rid of her husband. This is inflamed further by the recollection of the prophecy of an astrologer that after four years of their marriage one of them would die. The hallucination borne of Maya’s obsession with the prediction, fear of death, alienation and discontentment arising out of the incompatible relationship transforms her into a neurotic, a mental patient. She begins to lose her sanity: “Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad” (Desai, *Cry* 108). Her intense love of life convinced her that it was “she (I) who meant to live” and her husband was to die as he is disconnected from and unresponsive to what makes life livable: “The man who had no contact with the world, or with me, what would it matter to him if he died ...? (Desai, *Cry* 175, 215). In a fit of frenzied fury and madness, one day she pushes her husband down the roof of their house and kills him. Nevertheless, the murder of her husband does not sort out her crisis; instead it drives her further into the deeper darker corner of mental illness, which results in her committing suicide later on.

Through Maya’s heartrending catastrophe, Anita Desai has embodied the deep desire of the woman to be recognised by her male companion, to get away from the stifling room that is assigned to her by the male hegemonic social order. Maya’s suicide can be said to be an extension of her discourse

of defiance to such hegemonic power. She rejects to be recognized as an insane woman only because she has flouted the prevailing patriarchal standard.

In Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* (1965) temperamental incompatibility between couples again leads to discord and misunderstanding in marital relationships. While the first part of the novel "Nirode" depicts the plight of Nirode, a typical Bengali youth aged twenty four, rootless and revolutionary, a psychic outlaw who in his heart of hearts harbours a skeptical complaint against the world. The second part of the novel, 'Monisha' deals with the distressed feminine consciousness primarily through the character of Monisha, one of the two sisters of Nirode. In the second part Monisha who is silenced by the patriarchal standards attains voice by creating a confessional discourse in the form of a personal diary wherein she represents herself as a rebellious female subject. In an environment of mistrust, jealousy and lack of space her diary serves as her only dependable and independent agency of communication.

Monisha's personal diary lays bare the emotional turmoil and crippling life within the confines of a conservative joint family. In fact, Monisha's suppression begins when out of spite towards her mother; her father marries her off to Jiban, "a boring non-entity, a blind moralist, a minute-minded and limited official" and who is in no way a perfect match for her (Desai, *Voices* 198). In so doing her father thinks of her not as an individual, but as a location of inscribing his masculine authority. After marriage, Monisha craves for love and warmth "that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations completely" but her expectations of happy nuptial bond is shattered when she finds in the name of conjugal bliss she is conferred male-control over her feminine self (Desai, *Voices* 135).

Monisha's Diary evidently describes the ordeal suffered by her when she finds herself utterly ignored in the midst of unfeeling in-laws. Her relatives fails to understand that being educated girl with a refined sensibility and academic bent of mind Monisha's interest lies in reading books and not in sarees. Disappointingly, in joint-family she has no time to put into academic activity as she has to remain preoccupied with domestic chores. In such suffocating environment Monisha expected affection and support from her husband who instead gives her directives to behave better with his extended family. She therefore, fails to emotionally connect with her husband who neglects her and finds comfort in his mother than his wife.

Monisha feels herself alienated and disintegrated as she finds herself trapped in an environment of mistrust, unpleasant task and utter monotony on all sides. In addition, Monisha's childlessness also augments her turmoil and loneliness as her insensitive relatives derisively talk about her barren ovary and tubes, right in her presence. She faces the worst humiliation when she is accused of theft by her in-laws for taking Jiban's money to pay Nirode's hospital bills. And when, to her utter shock, Jiban supports his family's she is totally devastated and the prospect of having any fulfilling relation with Jiban is completely ruptured. Put through such disgrace and abuse Monisha chooses complete detachment from her husband and in-laws. She cocoons herself within the four walls and concentrates on reading books and writing diary which helps her forget everything else and makes "feel more whole" (Desai, *Voices* 122).

Monisha lives in a society where "any deviation from the cult of traditional womanhood is judged to be a violation of this morality of mental health" (Krishnaswamy 250-251). And so, her efforts to break free and assert her individuality against the norm make her suffer from terrible identity crisis. Exhausted by her failure to reconcile this conflict of identities, Monisha glides deeper and deeper into the abyss of despondency and depression never to float up by any means. She loses all interests in life and becomes neurotic. She gets obsessed with death as she thought she had to make "a choice between death and mean existence..." (Desai, *Voices* 122). Monisha puts a stop to her grief and marital conflict by committing suicide. This is the destiny of daughters-in-law in joint family, "a system which traps and then destroys Monisha, a system which denies freedom and privacy and encourages invasion" (*Stairs*, Jain 74).

It needs to be pointed out here that death is not Monisha's deliberate and self-willed preference. Being an educated woman with cultured sensibilities and dignity she finds herself entrapped in a humiliating and an emotionally stifling atmosphere which she can escape by negating life only. As she fails to voice her desires and her identity in the male dominated culture she gives the power of speech to herself by death. Like Maya in *Cry the Peacock* her act of self immolation is an act of female defiance. As Jasbir Jain underscores, Monisha's suicide is an "attempt to rebel against this meaningless, death-like isolation" (32).

Gajendra Kumar observes that Anita Desai's novels explores issues like "...identified-woman's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, woman's quest for her identify, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level" (18). The two novels *Cry the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* portray female protagonists struggle to achieve a liberated identity as opposed to the ones imposed by the patriarchal society. And this defiant attitude of challenging the socially accepted order gives rise to feminist sensibility. Both Maya of *Cry the Peacock* and Monisha of *Voices in the City* do not submit themselves to the pressure of the male conventional patriarchal parameters. Their academic bent of mind, finer sensibilities and dignity does not allow them to do so. They struggle for a change and strive to demolish the stereotypes fabricated and fostered on them and reconstruct a well-balanced self, at both emotional and intellectual planes, even in the midst of social disapproval and mental affliction, estrangement and even neurosis. Both the women embrace death as an expression of resistance, as an escape from the meaningless death-like existence. The pursuit identity represented in the novels is not individual rather its represents collective problem as the joint-family system described in the novels is only a microcosm of the unpleasant patriarchal society that is bent upon to suppress those who wish to be different from the conventional set up. The two women's neurosis too indicates a shared neurosis which aims to destroy the very identity of woman in such a society of male dominance wherein women yearning for love and attachment are driven to self destruction. And the problem of identity represented in the novels conveys what Shantha Krishnaswamy observes "the remedy for the predicament of women like Monisha and Amla is not in individual therapy but rather in social reconstruction" (250).

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