

Self-Alienation in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's is one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She has been identified with a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English which is stylistic different and less conservative. Her novels reveal the alienation man-woman relationship, self-exploration, violence and death. *Cry, The Peacock* presents the tale of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is explained in terms of unfathomable loneliness.

Keywords— Anita Desai's Alienation, Self-exploration.

Introduction:

She is a dominant figure in the 20th Century Indo-Anglian fiction. She was born in Mussorie in 1937. Her predominant concern is not with society or social forces but the individual psyche & its interaction with social values. Her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* published in 1963, *Clear light of day* (1980) is her autobiographical novel. She received a Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 for her fifth novel '*Fire on the Mountain*'. In custody, *Village by the sea*(1982), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(1975) and *Bye-Bye, Black Bird*(1971).

Self-Alienation in *Cry, the Peacock*

Alienation is a term which has been used in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writing for a long time. Originally alienation refers to, some sort of mental illness.'The twentieth century has been rightly called "the age of alienation". Alienation is basically a western concept and this idea is employed in her novels. To her alienation is more related to the emotional and attitudes of her characters. Alienation as Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests

"not only physical isolation but also psychic imperviousness". To him alienation is "insufation". But in Desai, alienation seldom manifests in imperviousness. Alienation has been the thematic motif that organically connects Desai's fiction. This makes her an exceptionally unique novelist.

In dealing with the problem of the alienation self, she has adopted a realistic mode of writing. The feeling of alienation in most of her characters is psychotic and psycho-neurotic. *Cry the Peacock* is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Maya's mood, obsession, a mood, dilemma and abnormality is conveyed very effectively in it. The theme of alienation has been dealt with by American novelists like Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Among the Indian novelists in English, the theme has been touched upon by Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya and has been dealt with extensively by Arun Joshi and Anita Desai. In Desai's novels, most protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families from parents and

ever from their own selves because they are not average people not individuals made to stand against the general current who fight that current and struggle against it.’

The husband –wife alienation is highlighted in very beginning of the novel. This is done by unfurling the relationship of Maya and Gautama. *Cry, the Peacock* is a harrowing tale of a Maya, an introvert favourite daughter of a detached, sober lawyer. Their married life is marked with silence and Gautama’s coldness. Her loneliness pains Maya the most.

Maya is the pampered daughter of a rich father, RaiSaheb. Her growth has been monitored by this over indulgent, ‘despotic’ father. He is a perfectionist and Maya has learned to submit to him. Her bane lies in her habit of searching for her father in Gautama. Gautama is irritated with her father –obsession. Maya is obsessed with a worry of pleasing her father. She is afraid of his withdrawal of love as she recollects the treatment meted out to Arjuna, her brother. Arjuna could not force himself to adhere to his father’s principles and he has left home. (The reader becomes aware of Arjuna, only towards the end of the novel, when Maya receives a letter from him, from USA). Therefore, Maya does not want to displease father and she relies more upon him. This kind of relying extends over in married life. She inclines heavily upon Gautama. UshaBande remarks-“the love of Maya’s father is devitalizing; separating her consciousness from physical reality around and within her, which finally destabilizes her real self’. The smothering love endowed by her father has driven her far from reality. The prophecy of an albino as astrologer creates a fear psychosis in Maya’s mind. The astrologers’s prophecy proves to be true in the case of Maya’s brother, Arjuna. In the first part of novel, the deaths of her pet dog-Too servers as the symbol of an abandoned

self-doomed to loneliness: All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the verandah for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms.

“It was not pet death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps, as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair(13)”.

So she moved the little string bed on which it lay under the lime trees, where there was a cool aqueous shade, saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house.

Maya feels alienation due to the death of Toto. It was intolerable to her. The death of the dog indicates the eternal truth of human life. The idea of death terrifies Maya and she is obsessed with it. She is disturbed by the indifference of her husband Gautama to the death of her dog and it shows his carelessness towards his wife. Maya is a childless lady and Toto was like a child to her. Both of them have different views about death. Gautama thinks death to be a normal event while Maya is disturbed by it. The second part of the novel reveals Maya’s psychic depth and narrates the tragic death of Maya’s husband Gautama. Maya and Gautama have different approaches towards life. She is very sensitive and cannot ignore her feelings. Maya wants her fulfillment as a woman and as a wife. But her father-like husband does not soothe her burning heart. She opts for an ideal love. Maya’s loneliness, obsession, seclusion, unfulfilled womanhood, emotional stimuli, debilitating husband and over-ridden death phobia make her neurotic behavior. Her insanity increases. Her growing insanity and neurotic behavior is approaching a disaster. She

whoops and produces a sound “like an antic owl”. Before the mirror, she giggles “at the absurd image”. She finally invites her husband to follow her for fresh air out of the room. Gautama follows her upstairs on to the roof and she hears the sound of “an owl” for an ill-omen. She, in a fit of maddening fury, thrusts him down the roof. He falls down to the very bottom and dies. In the third part of the novel she also dies. Thus this alienation and solitude in the husband-wife relationship brings about their death. The novel *Cry, the Peacock* describes the reasons and consequences of alienation in the relationship between Gautama and Maya. Maya’s neurotic behavior is due to her intense alienation. Both husband and wife have different attitudes towards life. This alienates them from each other. Maya’s isolation haunts her no more as she kills her husband in a fit of maddening fury. It is alienation which brings a disastrous end to their life. Maya is losing her mental balance as she sits quietly for a long time without doing anything. Maya exemplifies women who suffer silently to the extent of breaking down. Maya experiences a sense of imprisonment which has been invited by the demonic prophesy. She is aware that she is on the verge of insanity. Her physical health has also deteriorated.

Gradually Maya withdraws into her childhood. Maya suffers intensely on these lines. Frank Johnson states that in conditions of ‘exceptional self-alienation’ included in the ‘diagnosis of schizoid personality’, shows the following symptoms and suffering:

- 1) Excessive ‘anxiety’ & ‘disquietude’ even in ordinary interactions.
- 2) Preoccupation with ‘ideas’ and ‘fantasy’.
- 3) Uncertainty in actions.
- 4) Retreating and withdrawing

- 5) Being away from social contact.

Maya who has failed to grow out of her childhood, lives in a world of fantasy and fairytale that is far removed from reality. Maya shows antagonistic behavior towards Gautama: and assumes self-destructive tendencies. There is a total loss of control.

Conclusion

She is part of a new literary tradition of Indian Writing in English. The Novel *Cry, The Peacock* describes the consequences of self-alienation in the relationship between Gautama & Maya. Maya is haunted by the astrologer’s prophecy. Finally She herself pushes her husband from the roof of the house and she herself commits suicide. Hence, the astrologer’s prophecy becomes the cause of the tragedy of Maya’s life.

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