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THE POLY-TIMBRED VOICE: WOMEN IN *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

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ABSTRACT

*Cry, the Peacock*, primarily the story of Maya, the heroine, contains many women characters who represent different aspects of women. These secondary characters unravel the mystery of the feminine in several ways and each of them has her own individual personality and voice that this paper aims at analyzing and discussing. Since Maya's character has been the focus of many critical studies, hence besides her this paper would focus attention on those characters who are secondary nevertheless contribute significantly to the total effect of the novel, for all of them in one way or the other are related to the heroine. None of them is sensitive, refined, cultured, "neurotic," child-like, childish and Pagan like Maya but they serve as different types of women to be seen in real life.

**Keywords:** Predicament, voice, suffocated, alienation

Introduction

*Cry the peacock* published in 1963 is Anita Desai's first novel. It broke new grounds and is considered to be a trend setter in feminist writing. The women characters in the novel are quintessential seekers, hankering after what has since long been routine pursuits for their male counterparts. The novel deals with the major themes such as marital disharmony, loss of identity, escapism and a sense of meaninglessness in life. The women protagonists desire to live in the world where they have their own mental preferences and dislikes. D.S Maini has rightly said when he writes;

Cry the Peacock is typically a feminine novel, a novel of sensibility rather than of action. It has the quality of an orchid and of a flute about it. Its concern is almost wholly with the terrors of existence and it achieves its effects through a series of exploding and multiplying metaphors." (D.S Maini pg.39)

The central character in the novel is Maya who is hyper-sensitive, cultured and dives deep into her trapped feminine psyche from childhood to her untimely death as a youth. She is the victim of many social and psychological predicaments. The author uses the stream of consciousness technique to explain the cause and growth of Maya's despair. Maya is born in an upper – middle class Brahmin family. Having grown motherless, she is pampered by her father, Rai Sahib. He is a leading lawyer with a deep sense of order and discipline. Although sensitive and well educated, Maya is treated as a child rather than a mature person, willing to be heard and spoken to. She has been reared in a protective atmosphere along with her brother, Arjun. Both the children have enjoyed the rich indulgences of a father. Her father tries to fill the loss of her mother and creates a fairy and dreamy world for her. Arjun goes to America to carve his independent identity. Maya enjoys a wonderful close relationship with her father, 'a toy of princess' living in the world of elusive happiness. In such

circumstances when even her mother is dead and she feels lonely , she is forced to exclaim to herself “No one else loves me as my father “(Cry, the Peacock pg 7)

Maya lives with full attention and affection of her father and her pet, Toto since childhood . This is the reason why her father marries Maya to Gautama , his own middle aged lawyer friend. But both prove to be a poles apart. If Maya stands for poetry and romance of life , Gautama for prose and matter of fact life-style.

To quote Vinod Bhushan Gulati “ The present and past are juxtaposed to highlight the temperamental incompatibility.” between Maya and her husband Gautama”.The marriage of Maya with Gautama doesn't yield happiness. Like Freudian theory Maya suffers from father fixation .No one is aware of it than Gautama who tells her:

You have a very obvious father obsession , which is also the reason why you married me, a man of much older than yourself. It is a complex that unless you mature rapidly you will not be able to deal with it , to destroy. But then, it will probably destroy itself in the end , since passion of this sort is almost self consuming , having no objection within its range than it can safely consume.”

Maya's mental and emotional needs come into confrontation with her husband's practical outlook. The novel shows how sharply contrasted childhood experiences of couple can cause dissonance in their married life. Her inclination to her father worsens her relation with her husband. Gautama blames her father for her immaturity and calls her a “spoilt child”.

The protagonists gradually withdraw from the society including their families and husbands. They develop in communication and tend to ponder over existential problems and end up in alienation.

The novelist clearly shows how a motherless female child's psyche is damaged which further effects her relations with all around her. She seeks a guardian and protector in Gautama but finds that in him “understanding was scant, love was meagre”.(CP Pg 40)

Maya is trapped with the fear of Albino prophecy. She believes the albino astrologer's warning regarding her future. She lives a life of horror and fear at the prospect of the astrologer's prophecy being fulfilled. She recalls the experience of her childhood when she had met an astrologer who was an albino. Just as it is prophesised here, “I see it there, he smiled’ unmistakably..... Death, he finally admitted in one such moment, ‘to one of you ‘when you are married and you shall be married young’ Death – an early one – by unnatural causes”. (CP Pg 15).

It is four years since Maya and Gautama are married and Maya feels certain that one of them has to die. Desai's heroines perceive the psychic truth which is distinctively different from the reality they confront. They develop fears, obsessions, neuroses, paranoia or schizophrenia. The albino becomes a nightmare and his prophecy haunts her repeatedly--

“It seemed real , I could recall each detail and yet --- God , Gautama , Father surely it is nothing but an hallucination surely not , I sobbed.” (CP pg 84)

Gautama tries to lay his finger on the exact problem that bothers her but Maya is too secretive to allow him to learn the cause. He is a normal gentleman interested in his profession of an advocate, perhaps too practical and materialistic to allot time for expressing his love. Maya does not tell him about the albino's prophecy for fear of hurting him. At the same time she is unable to bear the oppressive burden of secret. The novel is divided into three parts. The first and the third can be considered as the prologue and epilogue of the novel. In the prologue the author describes the agony and depression suffered by Maya on the death of her pet dog Toto. The atmosphere of gloom reminds her of the albino astrologer's prediction that in the fourth year of her marriage there will be a death, either here or her husband's.

The significant cause for the maladjustment of their married life is that Maya and Gautama converse without communicating. Gautama doesn't understand Maya's internal trouble. She is vocal about it;

You were bored ?... Didn't you feel anything more ?... You weren't stifled in that house ? You didn't weep when you saw that pregnant woman ?... ( CP pg 56)

The agony is felt only by Maya.. She craves to be understood .But Gautama is ignorant of Maya's mind. For Gautama Maya's psychic trouble is too strong to be handled. Gautama sensible suggestion is that the sight of pregnancy should not reduce one to tears. He pacifies Maya as a father figure;

You are a grown woman now Maya , no light –headed child. You mustn't allow yourself to grow so upset .. What if they live in a grubby house? What if she.is pregnant again. (CP 112)

In her childhood Maya lived a life of self – absorption, characterized by calm, contentment, harmony and pleasure. She appeared to be completely at ease with herself as well as the with the world surrounding her. Gautama repeatedly asks from her “ Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities? He accuses her: “..And here you are capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real.”(CP 68) To Gautama the death of Toto is an ordinary happening that requires a quick decision and disposal of the corpse. Gautama withdraws his senses just as tortoise withdraws its limbs to attain wisdom. Maya remarks about him---

He is fit to attain immortality who is serene and not affected by these sensations ,  
but is the same in pleasure and pain.” (CP pg121)

After her marriage with Gautama Maya finds her life empty without children. She aspires for love and life. Failure to have a child even after four years of married life, is perhaps a psychological trauma to a woman, and this tragedy has been repeated in Monisha's story in Desai's another novel, 'Voices in the City' Toto has been substituted as a children in her life. Therefore Gautama says , “ As for death Toto's dying ... a matter of missing the games you played with him, finding empty time heavy on your hands and ultimately a search for a replacement.(Meena Belliappa pg 35)

Gautama doesn't pay attention to Maya's pillow beating and long wailing and shows no reverence to death. 'This reminds us of Mulk Raj Anand's story where the parrot is the fate of his mistress Rukmani, and the suffering of humanity. His cries for liberation lead to an aggravation of suffering. When Gautama dismisses burial rites of Toto as meaningless sentimentalism, Maya attempts to remonstrate, “I mean, how can you dictate ? Oh, Gautama , pets might not mean anything to you and yet they mean world to me.” (CP pg 71). She longs for contact after the death of Toto, which shows her spiritual need which is unfulfilled most of the time. “The death of Toto expresses symbolically for her own psychic death – a fact, of which Gautama is always oblivious” (CP.pg 73)

Through the contrasted pictures of these two lovers and through their words , thoughts and deeds Anita Desai establishes that perfect live on this planet is difficult to achieve. The desire for loving and being loved in return in physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions is beyond attainment.

Maya is too sensitive to accept the stark reality on its face value. Consequently, she becomes furious whenever she realizes that she has to do nothing but to wait endlessly for a husband who is too engrossed in his work to have any time for her and who often withdraws into a mundane refrain of a cup of tea. Her ideas about him are always kept as secrets from him. She has her own battles to fight and scores which are not very clear are to be settled. Maya's anguish and her feminine sensibility often find expression to our utter dismay.

During day time Maya manages to forget the Damocles sword that she believes, hangs above her head and sets it aside as hallucination. But the nights are unbearable and she starts wandering whether she has lost her sanity. Rebuffed by her husband, Maya is torn between her love of life and her fear of death .The gradual disintegration of her personality is very powerfully dramatised. She is deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity. She craves ,

God now I was caught in the net of escapable, and where lay the possibility of release? This net was no hallucination, no ...“Am I gone insane ? Father ; Brother ; Husband; Who is my saviour? I am in 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 will never sleep again. There is no rest anymore—only death and waiting.”CP 98)

She listens to the piercing cries of the peacock ; “ Pia, pia, which means ; Lover , lover and Mio , Mio ; which means I die , I die “. In her relationship with Gautama , she strives for companionship like that of Radha – Krishna . Vrindavan lives in her heart that craves for Krishna like a lover.

The peacock is the most suggestive symbol in the novel. It stands for “ lust for life and for indomitable spirit of love , which can be achieved only at the altar of death. True love for means destroying ones’ self

In this connection R.S Sharma aptly observes --

It is the symbolism of the peacocks that Maya’s predicament and anguish is fully articulated. The iterative symbolism of the peacocks suggests Maya’s struggle for life in death and death in life.

When Maya comes to realize in the fourth year that her days are numbered , love for life springs in her. She feels that it is Gautama who stands between her and her father , symbolized by me. She relaxes and openly declares that because unlike her, Gautama has not been in love with life, it is he who has to die.

Maya’s approach to reality is not based on illusion. It is based on the philosophy of vital contact. Indeed she wants to drink the cup of life to the brim.

Maya’s decision to murder Gautama involves a difficult choice , but she does not camouflage her thoughts .She passes the death verdict on Gautama;

The man who had no contact with the world , or with me . What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact ? What would it matter to him? It was I , who screamed with the peacocks , screamed at the sight of rain clouds... (CP pg-175)

Though there are other more women in this novel apart from Maya but hers is the heart –rending story . Nila , Gautama’s sister and his mother , these two are the women who represents the optimistic outlook towards life. . Nina has the innate ability to fight with the ups and downs 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.” (162) She says tartly.” For she hated this matter of a divorce in the family, and children growing fatherless.”(CPpg 164)

As far as Gautama’s mother is there, she is more concerned with her social work. She refuses to listen the crying need of lonely Maya when she asks her to stay for some more time with her. Maya begs:” What, the house empty again, and I alone with my horrors and nightmares?”( CP 162)

There are two more women in the novel whose presence is observed , Pom and Leila , who are Maya’s friends. Leila’s marriage is a love marriage which is not solemnised by her parents. She eloped with her lover who is consumptive. She has faced all the vicissitudes of life .She puts 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. The decisions taken by us in a haste leave us in tenterhooks and we have to face the consequences of our actions. ,Leila does crave for escape routes in a nervous or romantic manner. She knows if life is a cup of poison (and she opted for it herself) , she must drink it. She reacts violently when Mrs Lal and others at the party do not come up to her expectations.

Pom is another noticeable character in the novel. She faces the problems which are quite common in the lives of women in India. She lives with her in –laws under many restrictions where there is no scope to raise her voice. The complex web of many do’s and dont’s around her hampers the smooth functioning of her married life. Through the character of Pom , Anita Desai elaborates how women have to live a suppressive and suffocated life and take permission from their in-laws for every meticulous work. Life for her is , “like two mice in one small room , not daring to creep out , for fear they will pounce on you , ask you where you are going , when you will be back , why aren’t you wearing the jewellery they gave you.” Pg 118

Through the character of Mrs Lal ,the novelist wants to show that a woman and her family is not considered complete and have a meaningful existence without the birth of a son . Mrs Lal pretends to be well off with four daughters , but deep in the heart she desires for a male child .Even though we may glorify and rationalize daughters, yet daughters are considered a liability because of the stigma of dowry in our society. Moreover ,

only sons are considered as true successors of their parents. It is through the cabaret girls that the novelist elaborates how women in a male dominated society are sexually exploited and treated as commodity for playful enjoyment. The cabaret girls have carnal voice.

### Conclusion

Anita Desai portrays women as not totally cut off from familial and social ties but women who remain within these orbits and protest against monotony, injustice and humiliation. Woman in her novels is not a mere goddess or a robot but a self-actualising and self-realizing individuals. Through Maya's character ,Anita Desai upholds a new vista of feminist writing. We find the entire range of the octave in the novel: the soft voice of Maya, the authoritative voice of her mother-in-law. The resigned tired voice of Nila, culturally rootless Pom, the exposing voice of the cabaret girls baring and exhibiting their fleshy wares etc. the loud vulgar voice of the c 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. But all these secondary characters contribute to the poly-timbered voice of the woman. From the soft tinkling of the anklet to howling wind, from graceful subdued note to vulgar aural hammering we have all the notes, flat and sharp , of the octave in the novel. Anita Desai has presented the polyphony of the woman and it is significant that there are many significant auditory images in the novel.

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