

Alienated Human Relations in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* and Voices in the City

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to show Anita Desai as the well-reputed self-conscious novelist of high caliber standing next to Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan in terms of treatment of theme and narrative technique and to explain at length her fictional forte for giving fullest expression to the intricacies and complexities of human relationships, existential problems with particular reference to the theme of alienation and isolation, and marital discord born out of incommunication in their life.

Key Words: Human Relationship, Marital Discord, Isolation, Alienation, Psychic state.

Anita Desai is a distinguished artist of high order and her concern for human lot has imported profound appeal to her novels. Of all the contemporary Indian English Novelists, she is indisputably the most popular and powerful novelist. She has made a commendable contribution to the Indian English fiction. She is a novelist of urban milieu and a fine mixture of Indian, European and American sensibilities. She writes instinctively as if writing is an urge for her. Writing is a process of her self-discovery to go deep into the complexities of existence. She is essentially a psychological novelist. She claims that her novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. She does not reflect on Social issues in her works, like Mulk Raj Anand. She sees Social realities from a psychological point of view and does not look at them as a social reformer or a moralist. Her focus of attention is on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at a crucial juncture of their lives. She creates a limited world by observing minutely what is going around her.

Cry, The Peacock pictures the story of Maya, a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of terrible accident that becomes a warm bondage which it becomes difficult, rather impossible for her to get rid of. The marriage of Maya with Gautama leads to a tragic tone of *Cry, the peacock*. Maya's pining visions and unfulfilled fancies reveal the innermost shrines of human heart, craving for 'what is not'. Herein lies the innocent heart of Maya with pathetic cry for the company of Gautama who fails to afford a key to her marital harmony.

The novel has three parts to it. 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 death motive is built skillfully into the structure of the story. Maya, obsessed with the idea of death from the beginning is achingly responsive to the poetic beauty of life. The novel is mostly in the first person narrative, told by Maya the heroine. She relates her own story and often gives details of her own happy days as a child. The author uses the stream of consciousness technique to explain the cause, the growth of her despair.

The second section of the novel reveals the stages by which Maya moves from sanity to insanity. But even here, there are occasional flashes of sanity. Anita Desai makes use of the technique of the stream of consciousness along with the first and the third person narratives. She provides full length pictures of the hero as well as heroine although the central theme reveals around Maya. The section comes to a close with the death of Gautama. The final section which acts as the epilogue provides a powerful picture of the effect of the calamity on the important characters and concludes suggesting some possible ending for the novel.

In chapter two there is beautiful description of Maya's childhood and youth experiences with her father, her marriage with Gautama and her inability to form a satisfactory relationship with him. After four years of their married life Maya and Gautama have not been able to gain better sense of understanding and mutual adjustment between them. There seems to be a sense of frustration reigning in her. Gautama is indifferent to his physical structure. He does not give any importance to it as a means of attraction for a woman, particularly his wife, Maya. She sighs for this type of Gautama's negligence to her. Gautama is, however deeply lost in thinking or official duties of some mostly old cases, about money or property or sometimes dreary like that. In fact Maya as a wife needs more than all these things. Her nostalgic experiences haunt her mind and she does not think of money as basic need of life.

Both Maya and Gautama have been projected to live in sharp contrast. Maya is the prisoner of the past, lives almost perpetually in the shadow world of memories, which engulf her; Gautama lives in present and accepts the reality and facts even though they are not very beautiful. On the contrary, Maya never tries to accept the fact, but she wants to live in her imaginary fairy world. She keeps on remembering her childhood days or the treatment her father gave to her. She is a father obsessed child; she feels that no one else loves her as her father did. She seeks another father in her husband. But he does not respond her accordingly. Sensitive Maya is terribly upset at the death of her dog that she loses her mental calm and Gautama neglects the emotional yearning of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. The mechanical behavior makes Maya brood over Gautama's insensibility. Desai beautifully depicts Maya's plight:

“.....and my heart stretched painfully, agonizingly, expanding and swelling with the vastness of a single moment of absolute happiness and my body followed its long sweet cure, arching with the soaring, annihilating torture of it. Ultimately a world dropped down the tall tunnel of memory- it has been use that evening-ultimate. Ah, this was it, the ultimate absolute joy. Here lay perfection, suspended bearing all that could bear so full was it. Were one more flower to unfurl that night, one small bird to cry, if one bright star were to be shattered and fall now- I could have born it, no I was filled to the point of destruction.” (Cry, the Peacock,p.25-26)

In the final estimation, the novel attempts to discover the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist Maya who lived a carefree life under the indulgent attention of her loving father, and desires to gain similar attention from her husband; but she totally fails in a marital Voyages. So, social pressure created by the family, marriage and the representation of home, attempts to annihilate the family members, especially children and women. We have seen that these points are deeply rooted in Indian tradition but that western countries are concerned too.

Maya's cry was unheard by Gautama, It was really the cry of peacocks in the wild during the monsoons. Maya's cry is like that of peacock, was “pia, pia, lover, lover, mia,mia, I die, I die.” (Cry, the Peacock: p.95)

Finally the tragic end of the novel is due to different type of violence's and at last the deaths of the husband and the wife. Maya is torn between her love of life and fear of death. In order to subdue her turmoil, Maya kills Gautama in a vindictive rage. After killing her husband, she is burdened with guilt, and haunted by self-contempt, self- accusation and self- hate, she drags into complete darkness of world of the insane. She dies in her quest to find fuller life. Her frustration reaches its completion and inner fit of insane fury she pushes him down from terrace. Her madness becomes more explicit when she starts justifying her act in front of Gautama's mother and sister. The novel ends with the author reporting the tragic death of Maya as she jumps out of the balcony.

The novel deals with the problematical rather than the comfortable answer to the question of alienation and its effects. Maya's attempt to liberate herself from fear of death becomes writing down of the stars this week, horoscopes, blind superstitions, that many of us make a hell of our lives. In the ultimate analysis Maya's fear is for death and so her choice of flight and consequently, that leads to the death and destruction of life. In this way, Anita Desai creates a stained glass landscape with details of images, colours and odours...*Cry, The Peacock* is the product of a mellowed craftsman. Maya's extreme sensitivity never alienates the reader because it is rendered in terms of measurable human loneliness.

The husband-wife alienation which forms the thematic nucleus in Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock* is taken up again in *Voices in the City*, where in the focus is on human futility. The three sensitive individuals – Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla move about in their own worlds. Maya and Monisha appear to be outward contrast leading an unhappy life with insensitive, dull-witted parents-in law. Maya's life is an abundance of feeling where as Monisha freezes her emotions and trains herself to suppress her. Jiban, the husband of Monisha, is not mature and accommodating. He is a 'boring non-entity'. If Maya pushes her husband out of the roof in order to protect her world, Monisha sets fire to herself in order to reach the core of her being. But in both the novels are found search for reality, meaning in life and way of balance. As a young wife, both Monisha and Maya are unable to adjust themselves to the demands of marriage. As being in the joint family she feels, she has no privacy and she can't put up with that. She rebels within her against the servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. She is not like any other Bengali woman, not

“One of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali women with a bunch of keys at her waist and nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront”.(*Voices in the City*33)

She longs for privacy and solitude, she wants to be free like Nirode, but she finds it difficult to free herself from the duties. She yearns for the free air of Kalimpong, “the solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves” (P 116). She has no alternative but to stay in the joint family, nor has she the ability to attain detachment. Dr. Jasbir Jain observes:

“But the detachment she achieves, like the detachment of Nirode, is not born out of Nirode, is not born out of experience but out of fear and attachment”. (P 33)

Had she been religious, there would have been a chance for her to renounce the 'Samsara'. She is afraid of the inroads that love may make into her life:

“I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for 'from attachment arises longing..... If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, than, but there is no such love". (P 135)

The love which Monisha expects in her life is not available to her and destroyed only by loneliness and a desperate urge to make it meaningful. It plunges her into pleasures and pains, fears and regrets. She withdraws from the material concerns of family and retreats behind the barred windows. As Monisha feels isolated, she tries to commit suicide, as it is only an attempt to give meaning to her life through death. She realizes that the drama of life has gone by, neither birth nor death had touched her and that there is complete alienation “an empty white distance” between her and her fellow beings. In a flash of visionary intuition, she realizes that her action to end it all would be the most courageous, magnificent of all her acts in an uncompromising unconventional life” (Shanta 257). Her suicide is

preceded by self knowledge and it asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice. Another cause is the absence of love that results in the husband-wife alienation. Jiban as a husband becomes failure and he does not know how to comfort her. He is not kind and considerate towards his wife and reason for her collapse.

To conclude, *Cry, the Peacock* is about Maya's cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama; the peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's agonized cry for love and life of involvement and *Voices in the City* deals with a terrible frightening shrill against the masculine. In a nutshell, in the fictional world of Anita Desai, the female is not a passive creature. She not only rejects the unquestioning acceptance of the traditional role but also rebels against the entire system of social relationships. The protagonist suffers more and feels more deeply the harsh sting of dislocation between the ideal and the real. The discrepancy between what he or she aspires to do in life and the harsh reality plunges him or her into intense misery. The protagonists are loners and inevitably losers who try to lead meaningful lives. Anita Desai is concerned with the inner world of her characters. She tries to look for the deep desires, emotions and feelings felt by her characters and shows them as the influencing factor behind their action. Her portrayal of man-woman relationship is influenced and conditioned by complex social milieu. She basically portrays the plight of modern woman in the existing man dominated society where she makes an effort to voice herself. She basically portrays the disparity in temperament as affecting the man woman relationship. This paper puts forward the portrayal of women in man woman relationship. Mostly woman are culturally as well as emotionally dependent on man and any disruption in relationship proves to be a loss of self.

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