Marital Disharmony and Psychological Conflicts in Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock.

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Abstract

It is said that women have always been considered marginal and ‘other’ with respect to men. They have not been considered respectful and equal in society; they face drastic situations and hurdles in their whole lives. The case with respect to Indian women is not different; they have rather suffered more than their counterparts in other parts of the world. Women are always suppressed and subjugated in the name of social dogmas and other stereotypical and absurd conventions such as sati custom, child marriage, and other conservative rituals. For ages women have been targeted because of their identity. They have been used as a commodity in the male dominated world. In this patriarchal society women have suffered a lot due to these absurd social and cultural traditions. Looking on the optimistic side of the coin it seems they have gotten much opportunities and equal rights in many societal aspects. There are many examples of brave and intelligent Indian women such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Razia Sultan, Noor Jahan etcetera. In addition, there are also many influential Indian women writers who have exposed the patriarchal society and its filthiness before the world. This paper discusses the problems,
suffering and other domestic conflicts that Indian women face, providing content to the women writers of India; this paper will focus on marital disharmony and psychological complications in the life of the heroine of Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock*.

*Keywords:* Feminism, Marital relationship, Suffering, Psychological complications, Indian Women.

Since the ancient times women faced many challenges in society for their survival. They were suppressed, subjugated, repressed and tested on many occasion to prove their truthfulness and loyalty to the world. Many rigid customs were designed to oppress women; female infants were buried alive because they were considered as object of bad omen in the society. In India, the practice of Sati pratha was common, where a woman was cremated alive on her husband’s burning pyre. Mulakkaram, a breast tax, was imposed on lower class women for the liberty to cover their breast by clothing before men. Such rigid practices, prevalent in the society, were instrumental in reducing women’s dignity and a way of persecuting them. But there are multiple examples which show that women also received equal position in many sphere of life. It is said that there are many references of educated women in different religious texts, like Upanishads, which speak about the talented women like Gargi and Lopamudra. Besides, there are several examples of Muslims women who ruled, and also founded numerous academic institutions such as schools, madrasas, and universities. The first educational institution in the world, The University of Qarawiyyan in Morocco, was established by a Muslim woman named Fatima bint Muhammad. Maham Anga, the Mughal ruler Akbar’s biological mother, founded two madrasas for the education of both girls and boys. Thus, these multiple instances exhibit
that society endorses women community in some sphere of life. Moreover, in the contemporary world there are many women writers who use education as a weapon to reveal the problems and sufferings of women in the patriarchal world. Similarly, in Indian literature many women writers wrote on the subjects of female and their sufferings, marital relationships, domestic atrocities, male hegemony and prevailing evil manmade customs. Among the important women writers who wrote on women issues specifically are Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahri, Arundhati Roy, Ismat Chughtai, Kiran Desai, Rita Chaudhari, Meena Alexander, Shobha De, Mahashweta devi, Anita Nair, Bharti Mukherjee, Mahadevi verma and others. Their writings include the subjects such as female freedom, suppression and domestic violence, unhappy marriage lives and other conflicts that exist in Indian society. Many women writers remained fervent advocates of women’s rights. They spoke against patriarchal regressive modes which repress matriarchal folks. One of the fellow women writers and critic Rashmi Bajaj comments on the recent development of women writings in contemporary Indian literature, she says:

We have here increased social consciousness, a strong awareness of identity as woman, championing of women’s cause, problems of alienation and identity crisis, daring portrayal of sex and emphasis on the study of personal relationships. (Bajaj 28)

Manju Kapoor, noted Indian novelist, got commonwealth Award for her acclaimed work *Difficult Daughters*, describes her stance of women position in the following lines:

A woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful
change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. (Kumar, 90)

Anita Desai is one of the writers of Indian literature whose writings received international recognition and were widely accepted by the readers as well as critics. She holds a significant place in Indian literature. The above discussed themes and subjects which centralize women can be seen vividly ornamented in every page of Desai writings. She got Sahitya Academy Award, India's highest in literature, for her novel Fire on the Mountain in 1978. Besides, her three other novels were shortlisted intermittently for Man Booker Prize. Desai's writings mainly deal with the lives of Indian women and their sufferings, subjugation, complicated relationships and regressive norms designed to marginalize them. Desai also spoke on the women subject in her works, she remarks:

Especially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, particularly those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. (Desai)

She is also been appreciated by many writers and critics, and what makes her writings unique and popular in comparison to other novelist’s works has been explained by a critic here:

What makes her (Desai) remarkable is her attempt to shift the focus from the sociopolitical realities as is evident in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Ruth P.Jhabvala and Nayantra Sahgal to the exploration of the inner reality- the unexplored realm of the female psyche, the poignant evocation of human
predicament and the sensitive apprehension of the existentialist vision of anguish, abandonment and despair. (Sinha, 206)

Anita Desai novels mainly present women as protagonist and the plots revolve around their problems, inner trauma, their attitude towards societal dogmas and domestic issues. Besides, her women characters are generally poignant, pessimist and psychiatric patients, suppressed, depressed and alienated from the mainstream. Although the other qualities of her heroines are being independent, introspective and adventurous and prototypes of resistance against the patriarchal hegemonic attitudes. In an interview Desai comments on her choice of characters:

I am interested in characters who 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; they know what demands are and what it cost to meet them. (Desai, 21)

Desai heroines find themselves in male dominated households where they struggles to live a life which a common human beings desires in this world. They confront many problems in every sphere of life. Some characters give up and compromise with the situations, however, many of them show courage and defiance against the stereotypical rituals and customs. “Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also of the subnormal and abnormal woman” (Gopal 21). As far as the psychological trauma in her writings is concerned Anita Desai captures this problem in her heroines. Social alienation provides for that trauma broadly. “She penetrates
psychologically deep into the inner working of women and externalizes their passive reaction” (Sree 22).

*Cry the Peacock* is one of the Desai’s masterpiece works which present the recurrent problems, sufferings, and psychological trauma of an Indian woman, and loveless and unromantic relationship between husband and wife. This novel revolves around the central character Maya. She is entangled by her own inner conflicts, unsuccessful married life, sufferings, isolation and the self-created suffocative ambiance, where she finds herself anxious, overthinking, worthless and hypersensitive. All these things becomes the cause of her and her husband’s death in the end of the novel. Earlier in the opening of the novel we find her already a married women and grief-stricken over the death of her pet dog. She got married with a worldly man named Gautama, who works under Maya’s father's supervision, a Delhi based lawyer. Gautam was very close and also remains one of the students of Maya’s father. It is the fourth year of their marriage when the novel opens, depicting Maya as sensitive, loving and emotional kind of women and Gautama as a luxurious, philosophical and party loving man. We come to know Maya is in grief because of the pet dog’s death and Gautam, being a practical man, tries to solace her by his philosophical words. This opening scene presents Maya an emotional and sympathetic woman while Gautam as a rational and realistic man. For Maya the life of dog matters a lot and that’s why she feels sad and anguished over his loss while, Gautam, who knows the reality of life and death has taken this incident normally and sends the dog’s corpse for cremation; “It is all over’, he said, ‘Come and drink your tea, and stop crying, you mustn’t cry. ...I sent it way to be cremated’, he said. It is all over, come, won’t you pour out my tea?” (Desai06). Maya finds his reaction absurd and emotionless which makes her sad and angry.
towards Gautam. During this situation Maya demands warm consolation from his side, but Gautam’s practical behavior makes her feel dejected towards him.

You need a cup of tea, he had said, showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me...giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it.

...it is his hardness- no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that my loneliness in this house. (Desai, 08)

Here, in this chapter, we will shed light on the scenes which depict Maya’s psychological complications and her relation with Gautam. In Gautam’s company she doesn’t find solace and tranquility. She wanted love from her husband’s side but all her efforts remain futile and worthless. There are many instances in the novel which explicitly show the broken relationship between Gautam and Maya. Maya has a strong imprint of her luxurious and pleasant childhood upbringing in her father’s house. When she doesn’t see hope form anyone’s side, she becomes the daydreamer of her own past and finds solace in that imaginative childhood world. She says, “yes, now that I go over it in my mind, my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was pretty one (Desai 77).” But now in her present life she finds the things new, realistic, and emotionless. In her married
life she doesn’t find those happiest and loving wishes and gestures from Gautam as that of her father’s, which makes her unstable and neurotic. Besides the astrologer's prophecy of her husband death causes psychic imbalance and overthinking problems in her life. So these are the factors that played significant role to ruin her married life. S. Indira states:

Maya’s conflicts, though a major theme of the novel, are not of mere social and domestic discord within the framework of marriage. They are an extension of Maya’s personal conflict within the self strongly rooted in memory and fantasy of childhood experience, with the prophecy of an albino astrologer foretelling the death of one of the partners four years after her marriage. (Indira, 10)

Guatam and Maya’s married life remains futile because of their differenceof behavior and perception. Maya always want to be loved and care from Gautam but he is incapable to understand the love and emotional needs of Maya. He always tries to make Maya happy from the worldly things such party, philosophical thoughts, luxurious things etcetera but Maya always demands emotional care and cooperation in her psychic sufferings. And this misunderstanding and communication gap destroys their world. Maya comments on her futile marital relationship with Gautam:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again. (Desai 35)
T. Sudhakar comments; “The incompatibility of character stands revealed-Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels without touching, (Sali11).” Gautam loves her strongly but his way of reacted to things is very practical and ordinary. He has no artistic skills of a romantic lover to flatter her wife. He is busy and rational kind of human whose objective is to live a life without extra care for things and worldly hurdles. Gautam never wants to make Maya sad and also tries many times to solace her, whenever he finds her in desolate mood. Even Maya admit his kind love in the novel, she utters that:

When he touched my hair, soothing it down carefully as a nurse would, I was flooded with tenderness and gratitude. ...lying here in the dark? he said, and drew a finger down my cheek. Fall, fall, long fall into the soft, velvet well of the primordium, of original instinct, of first-formed love. His tenderness was the cathartic I desired, and now at last I began to cry again, pressing my face against him. (Desai, 10)

Nonetheless Maya is depicted as a patient of her own thinking. She always occupies herself with the numerous negative thoughts which makes her feel scared, gloomy and depressed. She also tries to run away with these thoughts but fails, and, lastly, she meet her doom because of the psychological disorder devised by her own self. The prophecy of the astrologer, death of pet dog and Gautam’s practical attitude towards her feelings causes her pain and trauma. Madhusudhan Prasad in his Anita Desai: The novelist present Maya a neurotic persona in her critical writing, she asserts that; “In Cry the Peacock, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonists, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity, (Prasad
22).” In the end of the story she isolates herself from everything and starts to live with her own delusional and imaginative world. The only companions of her’s are house painted walls, swift memories of the dead dog and the symbolic things like moon and the peacock cries which cause her anxieties and depression; “Am I gone insane? Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I’ll never sleep again. There is no rest any more- only death and waiting, (Desai84).” Such terrible atmosphere pushes her into an appalling situation where she finds no solution. Finally, she ends all her sufferings by committing suicide: “Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment- these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain,(Desai 88).” Anita Desai is one of the novelist who fervently spoke on the women issues in her writings. She exposes the artificial relationships, domestic problems and women pathetic condition in patriarchal society. Desai protagonists find themselves difficult to adjust in marriage relationship and remain distress, anxious and suffocated. When they do not find hope in such suffocative environment they become psychic patient of their own imaginative world while many of her heroines boldly faces many challenges to live independent life. Furthermore Anita Desai employs many techniques and literary devices such as stream of consciousness, flashback and others which makes her writings profound and illuminating. Her novel in some extent gave hope and confidence to countless women readers.
Works-cited:


