

Existentialist Predicament in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

This article examines in detail about the human psychology projected in Anita Desai fictional world by revealing how she has devoted her creative energy completely to the psychological states of human mind. She finds her way to the innermost region from where the original ideas of human mind come into operation. This paper shows how she interrelates man's action for revealing the hidden secrets and motives behind the reality of conscious mind. Thus, Anita Desai has opened a new world, so as to present a plethora relationship and psychology of human minds.

Keywords: existential, metaphysical, deteriorate, pragmatic, unimaginative, trauma, furious, absurd.

In contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction, Anita Desai is indisputably a serious novelist of a very high order. In her novels, she skillfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she tries her utmost to examine in detail the various formidable factors that are bound to make existence rather uncomfortable and unendurable. Her unquestionable existentialist concerns coupled with her commendable craft, have distinguished her from other novelists, both of the older and the younger generations. Earnestly committed to the novel as an act-form, she is said to have practiced her craft with remarkable sincerity, skill and seriousness so as to make a commendable contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction.

Quite deservedly compelling plenty of critical attention, Anita Desai has established herself to be a novelist of urban milieu, with all her attempts, as a novelist of moods, of

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persistent states of mind or psyche. Gifted with the power of calling for a host of critical studies from different angles, she sees the world in terms of experience as it emerges from the encounter of the experiencing self with the world outside. Her primary emphasis is on sights and sounds, on movements and patterns both physical and mental as they impinge on the consciousness of her protagonists. Her protagonists are usually sensitive woman who, haunted by a peculiar sense of doom, withdraw themselves into a sequester world of their own. Anita Desai seems to be struggling in her art towards the mastery of a violence which seems to threaten not only her protagonists but also her own self. Right from *Cry, the Peacock*, this violence which has persisted in her work as a kind of inevitability, forces one to conclude that it has some kind of metaphysical or psychological significance not yet explored and analysed.

Anita Desai was born in Missouri on June 24, 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother. Even during her childhood days, diverse influences did richly fertilize her poetic imagination making her write prose, mainly fiction and publish some small pieces in children's magazines. The family lived in Delhi where she had her education – first at Queen Mary's School, and then at Miranda House, Delhi University, where she took her Bachelor's Degree in English literature in 1957. After having worked for a year in Max Muller Bhawan, Calcutta, she got married to Asvin Desai and had four children. She has to her credit publication of such popular novels as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Clear Light of Day*, *Fasting Feasting* and *Village by the Sea*. In each of her novels, there is an attempt to produce a calculated effect and a total impression which is always easily memorable. One of the important elements in her art is that in her novels, she is found painting the ornate, engrossing portraits of the outer world with its rich peripheral details, projecting the turbulent chaos of the inner world of her protagonists, but quickly conveys the main motifs as their clues with an astounding verbal economy towards the end of the novels. This is true of *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*.

Anita Desai took the literary world by storm with her very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), holding the reader spellbound by reminding him of some other notable novelists like Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster. This novel apparently strikes the reader as a poetic piece in which Desai's luscious lyricism has been handled rather dexterously. But deep down the surface of lyricism, there is an undeniable, Swift current of Desai's existentialist concern rendering the novel uniquely powerful in all respects. Desai seems to be deeply obsessed by existentialist themes and this quality calls for a profound consideration. Desai feels that a writer must have certain traits of the head and heart which are essential for writing a novel. Besides having a

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creative genius, a novelist should be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he could give acute descriptions and “pick up the tiny details that others might not notice” (Jain 63).

The selection of characters has to be according to the subject matter of the novel. Since Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya were writing for life’s sake, they chose their characters from amongst the economic and social victims and the victimizers. Anita Desai is concerned with the portrayal of a psychological reality and as such prefers characters who are peculiar and eccentric rather than general and analyses the existential problems or issues in her novels. As Heinemann has put it, “The problems of existentialism are in a narrow sense, expressive of the present crises of man, in a broader sense, of the enduring human condition” (P 178). In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Desai means the same “enduring human condition” referred to by Heinemann as she observes, “There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself” (P 13). Meena Belliappa considered *Cry, the Peacock* a remarkable attempt to “fuse fantasy with perpetual experience” (P 25) While Ramesh K.Srivastava called it “an externalization of the interior of Maya’s Cocoon” (P xviii). R.S.Sharma went to the extent of considering the novel, *Cry, The Peacock* as the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English (P 127).

Cry, The Peacock is Maya’s story, the story of her married life with Gautama and almost the entire story is “remembrance of things past” (Iyengar 465). In this novel, Mrs. Desai ably explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, verges on a curious insanity” (Prasad 3). In the first two chapters, Desai successfully tunnels into the chaotic world of Maya’s consciousness and her psychic states caused by her morbid preoccupation with death and transcribes them with a remarkable fidelity. Maya’s neurosis also denotes a collective neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of a woman in our contemporary society dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide. The very opening part of the novel depicts what leads Maya to her neurosis. Maya, a childless young wife married to a reputed lawyer, Guatama, who is twice her age and a friend of her father, is projected as mourning over the death of her dear dog, Toto. The death motif is built skillfully into the very structure of the story. Maya, though obsessed by death from the beginning, is achingly responsive to the poetic beauty of life. The resultant tension in her projects the misery of her existence very well. Part II of the novel takes once again the reader to the source of Maya’s neurosis and her compulsive fear describing Gautama’s obvious nonchalance to it. Maya’s intense longing for love and life and ultimately her encounter with the albino astrologer who predicts death either for her or her husband within four years after her marriage, her experience with her father and her search for a father surrogate, her inability to form a satisfactory

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relationship with her husband and the hollowness of marital life leading to marital disturbances receive due mention and consideration with a focus on Maya's deteriorating psyche leading Gautama to the roof and hurling him down to death.

The husband-wife alienation engendered by the temperamental incompatibility between the two is an important existentialist theme. It forms the very core of the novel *Cry, the Peacock*. Here Gautama and Maya stand in sharp contrast with each other as opposed archetypes and as such constantly remind us of their counterparts, Raman and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Gautama is a pragmatic unimaginative un sentimental man who believes in "detachment on every count" as the Gita preaches. Maya, on the contrary, is a highly sensitive creature gifted with poetic imagination and neurotic sensibility. The essential contrast between Gautama and Maya is highlighted even in the first chapter itself. The sight of dead Toto, her pet dog, is one Maya cannot stand. She thinks, "She saw the evil glint of a blue bottle, and grew hysterical" (CTPS). And the sinking sun in the evening appears to her to be sinking sun in the evening appears to her to be "swelling visibly like a purulent boil" (P 6). These intensely impressionistic, hysterical responses of Maya set off Gautama's casual and somewhat cruel remarks such as "The sweeper will do it" and "it is all overcome and drink your tea and stop crying you mustn't cry (P 6). When he is told that a visitor wants to see him, he indifferently leaves her to herself and then forgets all about dead Toto. The death of Toto which means, something traumatic to her means, in fact, nothing to him, suggesting the lack of any possible emotional communication between them. This gap of communication between husband and wife is well developed throughout the novel, Maya and Gautama always disagreeing, tiff with each other even over trifles. Even though their marriage has been an utter fiasco, they continue to be together, leading an explosive life of in communication. Maya herself reflects upon her unsuccessful marriage:

".... it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility. Forces 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 as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part" (P 5).

The clash between the irreconcilably different temperaments of Maya and Gautama is highly significant throughout the novel which teems with many episodes denoting the lack of communication between them. A trifling as Gautama's inability to distinguish the small of lemons from that of petunias surprises Maya, indicating that they do not share any common sensibility or understanding.

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“... The blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different: of much stronger, crisper character, they seemed out of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, into curving, scimitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent too, was more vivid – a sour, a stringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxiety, for now, when his companionship was a necessity, I required his closest understanding” (P 21).

Another episode, denoting the impossibility of any communication between Maya and Gautama, is one in which she expresses to him her desire to go south to see the kathakali dance. She says:

“I want – I want to see the kathakali dances. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages. They say they go on for days and days: And the dancers are all men and they wear such fantastic masks. And the drums ... The masks they wear – you must have seen them? And their costumes. And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight – and perhaps they have torches. Yes, I suppose they dance by torch – light... “ (P 48).

But Gautama dismisses her desire in a matter-of-fact way, without caring for the intensity of her desire. He remarks: “I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi, as it is bound to sometime – perhaps in winter. It will be less expensive” (P 49). The alienation between Maya and Gautama is noted basically in his philosophical detachment and imperiousness to the “beautiful yet tremulous” beauty of the natural world. Although he talks of the “basics in life”, he remains absolutely untouched by the basics conducive to a successful man-woman relationship. Walking along with Maya, Gautama quotes a beautiful Urdu couplet; but he remains altogether impervious to the tender feeling inherent in it:

“Even if each star in the sky were a heart, what of it?
Give me one heart that this capable of sorrow” (P 25).

But Maya at once feels the inherent tenderness in the couplet. She finds the couplet “weighted with a rare compassion, a tender understanding”. Rapturously, she experiences her epiphany. Desai beautifully depicts the moment of Maya’s epiphany:

“... And my heart stretched, stretched painfully, agonizingly, expanding and swelling with the vastness of a single moment of absolute happiness, and my body followed its long, sweet curve, arching with the searing, annihilating torture of it ... I was filled,

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filled, to the point of destruction. God, God, I gasped – enough, enough no more. Let it remain son. Let it remain” (P 29).

Standing near Gautama in the moonlight, Maya thinks she is far away from him:

“.... Nothing was hidden. All was revealed, and it was not what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river across a mountain and would always remain so” (P 131).

This temperamental incompatibility and the resultant emotional alienation creates in Maya acute mental tension which keeps on mounting page after page in the novel. In the hour of crisis, Maya not only reverts to childhood memories to escape the present but also resort to behaving like a child crying and bursting into a fit of furious pillow-beating – which “sweetly exhausting” releases her pent-up emotions. Maya herself observes:

“The world is like a toy specially made for me,
painted in my favourite colours, set moving
to my favourite tunes” (P 41).

Gautama also calls her “Neurotic”, “A spoiled baby” to whom “Life is a fairy tale”. At the end of the novel, she is absolutely insulated in childhood memories. She plays with dolls, and we hear.

“the patter of a child’s laughter cascading
up and down the scales of some new delight –
a brilliant Peacock feather perhaps” (P 251)

Maya’s obsessive love of the beautiful, the colourful, the sensuous and the picturesque in life, standing in sharp contrast with Gautama’s philosophical detachment in life, serves an immensely significant purpose in the novel. The whole novel is replete with numerous highly poetic descriptions of the outer world which serve as important objective correlatives of Maya’s moods and changing psychic states, creating an unusual textual density. Maya’s world is full. Her appetite for “the real, the close, the living” is insatiable. But Gautama, a thick skinned creature, is unable to appreciate the pulsating richness of life. She knows him inside out. She remarks:

“..... Poor Gautama. Not to be able to notice
the odour of times, not to hear the melancholy
voices singing somewhere behind the plantains,

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not to have time to count the stars as they
came out one by one – poor Gautama, my poor husband”
(P 237)

A little later, she also feels that Gautama had never lived, and never would” (P 240). She also remarks:

“murders are committed only for the sake of
money, or property – or anything solid and
dirty. Not for love, or life or basic things” (P 22)

It is those basic things – her love of life and her love of freedom – that prompt her to kill her husband. Her quest for these basic things is basically existentialist in nature. Feeling stifled by the loss of her freedom, Maya feels lonely but not free. She wants to regain the freedom she has lost at the altar of marriage. Her existentialist quest for freedom gets a fillip, as she receives a letter from her brother, Arjun, who has revolted against her father and the social tradition that attempted to thwart the growth of his individuality. She tries to recapture her lost freedom which is possible only by ridding herself completely of Gautama. Quite unable to establish rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her arid existence, Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature writhing helplessly in an indifferent world. The loneliness corroding her heart and deteriorating her psyche, is undeniably existentialist and it makes her aware “of the loneliness of time and impossible vastness of space” (P 29).

What is to be understood is that as she failed to achieve a satisfactory relationship with her father, she also fails in her relationship with her husband. Her morbid preoccupation with death continues throughout the novel till she hurls. Gautama down to death and ultimately commits suicide. Maya’s death –wish is connected directly to her neurosis. Thus in *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai has skillfully explored an “enduring existentialist predicament with her profound understanding of human psychology. To conclude, it may be said that Anita Desai’s novels like *Cry, the Peacock* are bound by what may be called existentialist framework both in theme and technique.

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