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**Claustrophobia in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* -
"From Defeat to Disaster"**

Deepti Chauhan, M.A., Ph.D.

Claustrophobia

Claustrophobia is from the Latin word *claustrum* which means "shut in place." In *Phobias: A Handbook of Theory*, it is defined as: "It is the fear of having no escape, and being enclosed in. It is typically classified as an anxiety disorder and often results in panic attacks."

Obviously, it is an irrational thought. The mind makes a connection that small spaces equal danger, the body follows mind's cue. Resultantly, a person floods with physical symptoms of anxiety – leads to the irrational fear about a certain situation. As it is triggered by a certain situation, it can also be termed as 'situational phobia'.

A person suffering from this condition responds in certain ways: sweating, accelerated heart beat, nausea, hyperventilation and most importantly - a fear of acute imminent physical harm. The cause for this is either rooted in bad childhood experience or, as Lisa Fretscher (2009) describes, it may be due to "warping of an evolutionary survival mechanism."

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 5 May 2010

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Claustrophobia - Neurosis in Anita Desai's Novels

Anita Desai's novels can be examined as the manifesto of female anxieties, woes, sufferings and panic. She remains more concerned with sensations, thoughts and emotions. Her characters are not types but they are individuals. According to N. Sharada Iyer, her characters are solitary beings - "who have retreated or driven into some extremity of despair, and so turned against or made to stand against the general current of life." (258)

Moreover, Gajendra Kumar defines: "Desai's themes, characterization and images deal with confinement and lack of freedom." (3) This leads the character towards cabin fever and ultimately towards obsession neurosis which we can depict from her maiden novel *Cry, The Peacock*.

Troubled Psyche in *Cry, The Peacock*

Readers are shocked by the neurotic behavior of Maya - the protagonist. Anita Desai plunges to the depth of the queer psyche of Maya and tries to "... discover, and to underline and convey the true significance of things." (240-241) - explains Devika (2004). These are the things or situations that can never be understood on the surface level. Anita Desai brings forth the hidden and dormant impulses of Maya's Mind that brings her closer towards the obsession of killing her husband.

Flashback Narrative Technique

The story in the novel is described through the flashback series of Maya's mind. By this way, writer becomes successful to bring forth the problematic labyrinth of her protagonist's mind. Maya is presented as an over seized pest feeding on a tender leaf. She is a highly sensuous person who believes in the unity of mind and body, self and society. She is a hypersensitive woman. Before her marriage, she is like a toy-princess for her father. She describes her father "...like a silver oak himself, with his fine silver white hair brushed smoothly across his bronzed scalp" (20-21). Her father loves and cares for her. When there becomes something wrong, he soothes her with love and care. She recalls:

"As always happened to me, it was after my most anguished moments that a piece of truth fell into my exhausted mind- the truth [...] my gentle father who would have said to me.... 'it will all be well soon, Maya.' " (59-60) She describes her childhood days in fascination: "The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours , set moving to my favourite tune" (36). But after her marriage, Maya's life is a complete change. On one hand, Maya is a 'creature of instinct' (16). On the other hand, for her husband reality '..... and idealism are one and the same thing' (20-21).

Pressure of Marriage – Growing Up to Meet the Challenge of Marriage

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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From the beginning of the novel, she remains under the pressure of her marriage with Gautama - a middle aged man with a super intellectual sensitivity. This rational approach leads Maya towards isolation. The queer psyche of Maya is peeled off by different circumstances. She is an oversensitive lady who yearns for: “the peace that comes from companion life alone, from brother flesh. Contact, relationship, communion ...” (18) - these are her main priorities in life.

As a young girl, she desires to love and to be loved in return. But, “Gautama’s coldness disappoints her” (3). Her longing for conjugal love remains unfulfilled because of her husband’s insensitive and frigid behaviour. She remains physically starved. She never gets the sexual satisfaction from her husband. One day, when they returned from party- Maya goes to Gautama in a happy mood, But she finds him sleeping. She comes back to the room silently and thinks :

“A pink carnation bound in a red rose, both lifeless now, buried with the deeds and dust of the evening ... like all the rest of the deeds of which I had thought of speaking to Gautama ..., and now seeing them as tainted with fatality. Fatality-fate, Fate- fatality. I fingered the flowers sadly, and felt much like them as my self-bruised and tired, not quite of today.”(81)

Frustrations in Marital Relations – Sexual Starvation

She wants to do the love trifling with her husband. Her husband does not take care of her wish. She becomes frustrated with not achieving them. Her anguished soul once burst out:

“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.....telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his paper she did not give another thought to me ,to either the soft, willing body or the lonely wanting mind that awaited near his bed.” (9)

This unrequited love derives her crazy. As a young girl, she craves for the wild satisfaction during their discourse. Her inner-being suffers a lot when she couldn’t achieve them. Her torn self is shown through her fit of turmoil. She thinks crazily remaining sexually starved: “Fall, fall, gloriously fall to the bed of racing rivers ... Horrid arms and legs tentacles thrashing, blood flowing, eyes glazing. Storm-storm at sea at land! Fury. The wanting run...run and hide if you can miserable fool (180-181). She tries to tell this to her husband but all goes in vein.

When Maya asks her husband about the matter of love - he starts discussing about Yogis and Gita and ridicules her desire of making love. He mocks at her without realizing her passion and demand for love. He tells her that she has the mistake attachment of love.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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Loneliness – Emerging Hysterical Self

This stolid and philosophical speech puts Maya in the shell of loneliness. She couldn't achieve soothing and emotional consoling, love, care and above all understanding from her husband. To add to this, she remains a childless woman. It increases her miseries. Condemned to live a life of emotional, mental and spiritual loneliness, Maya's whole life is converted into hysterical self.

Till the very end she wishes from her husband to be understood: "I was overcome with a desperate timidity begging him once more to answer to come and meet me halfway, in my own world... Had he done so, all might have been quite different. But he didn't." (198) Instead, never be able to understand her psychology, he always leads her unconsciously towards panic and anxiety disorders. To combat over his feeling, he rebukes her: "you are a grown woman now, Maya, no light-hearted child. You must now allow yourself to grow ..." (76-77)

Responses of Husband

This insensitive behaviour of Gautama brings her closer to the engaged lonely shell. Day by day, the humiliating neglect of her husband leads her towards 'nausea'. She feels engaged in her-in-laws house. He cannot see Maya's desperation from life. She broods: "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." (9) Gautama's cocooned shell of intellectuality leads Maya towards "... a repeated and droll harping on the isolation of the self." (253) (Swain 1999). She herself confesses the effect: "I ceased to hunt then, ceased to plan... for I found myself alone... after all." (57)

Gradually, her angst corrodes herself. In the way of life, her spirits gets crushed by the intangible affairs. She finds herself unable to snap these ties. She longs to activate her life little bit. She wants to go outside to see Kathakali Ballets in Bombay. She wishes to Gautama: 'I want- I want [...] to see Kathakali dances.' But her husband thinks it a stupidity. His behaviour is lackadaisical when he refuses this idea:

"If that is your only reason for wanting to go all that way South, I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi..." (42-43) wish get smothered again. This present condition of being stored in a place, as Shubha Tiwari explains: "hunts her to the brim of insanity" (244).

Beginnings of Hallucination

Unoccupied, lovelorn and instinctive, Maya starts hallucinate the things. She also starts believing them hysterically. She becomes accustomed to shadows as if they are the

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people in the world. she admits : “ once upon a time it had been a world peopled with friends as solid, as now shadows were to me...” (51).

When the novel starts, she had already reached to that stage of mania. She had also started thinking about the prophecy of albino astrologer that after four years of her marriage, either she or her husband would die. In this condition, she wants to get relief. She recalls her father who in the condition of any problem had always been strength to her. She mentions this to Gautama: “I wish I could see father again. It always helps.” But rather understanding, Gautama puzzles out : ‘Helps what? Whom?’ Hearing this Maya reflects: “Without realizing what he had done, Gautama had laid his fingers and mine upon the fatal vulnerability of what I had believed in like a fond fool.”(53-54).

N. Raj Gopal (1995) finds:

“Maya’s tragedy is mainly caused by her loneliness, lack of proper response from her husband, non-reciprocation of feelings between the husband and wife, her childlessness and hyper sensitivity” (20).

None to Communicate With – Going Insane

To add to this, there is no one to whom she can tell. She knows that she is becoming insane. She feels frustrated with her own thoughts: “yes I am going insane. I am going further and further from all wisdom, all come I shall soon be mad, if I am not already. Perhaps, it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope that encounters with the albino, his predictions, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity.”(53) Knowing this she tries to adjust herself through engulfing into the theory of fatalism given by her father. Her father says that she must accept things as they are. She tries this to impose upon her thoughts: “I should be sane again, and in the daylight I should know all this to be nothing but a fulgurant nightmare. Should I not?” (54).

But instead of recovering, the situation becomes worst: “wherever I laid myself, I could think only of the albino, the magician, his dull, opaque eyes ... it seemed real, I could recall each detail and yet-God, Gautama, father, surely it is nothing but a hallucination” (54).

Hysterically, a red-volcano subsided in her changed into situational fever of death. Thus “...shadows and shadows were... a richer and a more refined one... who now constantly look behind to see where purple ghost of albino followed on silk-swathed oil softened feet” (55). She tries to explain this to her husband. But he remains uninterested. Frustrated, Maya scolds him: “You were bored? Bored? Didn’t you feel anything more? Can’t you feel anything except boredom? You weren’t stifled in that house?”

Solitary Confinement

But Gautama wishes to combat the indiscipline: “If a man were to react...by bursting in to tears, Maya, no court of law would consider him sane...” It creates disturbance in her mind. She argues with her husband but he simply asks: ‘Were you that miserable?’(58-59). Without any understanding from her husband, she suffers from this metaphysical anguish, a tragic sense of loss that leads her towards solitary confinement, reluctance to face reality and last of all to the stage of ‘claustrophobia’. She turns into a mental wreck in the process. She remains lost in her-self for a long time. Gautama pointing to it once says:

“‘Still sitting there? You have not stirred out? Have not lifted a book, your sewing? Nothing at all? But this is madness, Maya.’

‘Madness!’ I screamed, leaping at him to strike him, to stab him... and began to cry hysterically.” She starts hallucinate the prophecy during walking sleeping hours. Day dreaming, night mares and constant fears of death bring her closer to situational phobia. She starts floating in the bizarre world of human imagination. She recollects about the prophecy: “It was now to be Gautama or I.” Unconsciously, she wishes her husband to be dead. She remains restless all of the time. She knows that she can never sleep in peace. She gets entrapped “...in the net of the inescapablethis net was no hallucination , noI could force myself believing that was only a night mare, no more but, in the night , under the stark gaze of the moon , in that wanting silence , my memories came to life ... I knew them to be real ...” (84). She eagerly wants to understand the prophecy of the astrologer and turns to “language.... ‘Of hierograph [which she had] once known. The moon supplies her the answer: “in the end, it was not the stars which told me, but the moon ... It was not the gentle moon of love-ballads and fairy revels ... but a demoniac creature ... phantom gone berserk trying to leap the threshold of my mind” (27). In the last she has to pay the price of her sanity. She has unrest in her mind. She wishes ‘let me sleep ... there is no rest more – only death and waiting” (84). She wants her husband to be dead instead of her sanity. Her hallucination about the death of her husband leads her towards the killing of her husband Gautam.

A Fit of Frenzy

In a fit of frenzy, she pushes her husband over the edge of roof:

“Gautam! I screamed in fury and, thrust out of my arms towards him, out at him ,into him and part him , saw him fall then ,pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom.” (208)

To conclude

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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In this way, as Dodia (2000) defines, this "... is a journey from defeat to disaster that Maya, the protagonist, is shown to undertake in *Cry, the Peacock*" (27). Claustrophobia is imposed on Maya because of her husband's insensitivity. One wonders why in the first place Gautam got married at all. Gautam is *the* claustrophobia imposed on Maya. It was received and further developed and accentuated by the matrimonial relations. One also wonders why Maya did not do her best to extricate herself from her this cold relationship. Was it the social convention that stopped her from taking this step, or was it that Maya, like most Indian women, hoped against hope that one day Gautam will change and show his love to her?

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