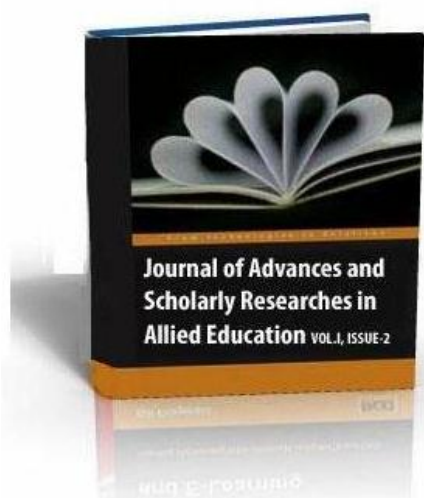


Treatment of Domestic Life in Anita Desai's Fiction: A Study of Cry, The Peacock



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Anita Desai, winner of the Sahitya Akademi award, was born in Mussoorie on 24th June 1937. At the age of seven, she began to write prose, mainly fiction, and published some small pieces in children's magazines. Unlike R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya, who confined themselves mostly to the portrayal of outward reality, Anita Desai goes to explore the inner reality. She prefers to delve "deeper and deeper in a character or a scene, rather than going round about it" (Jain,68). She lays emphasis on interior than on exterior characterization, on motives and circumstances and on the invisible than visible life.

No one grows in a vacuum. In this world one's life intersects the lives of others. Other people make for us most of our pleasures- companionship, security, love, sexual gratification and admiration. Family is man's immediate fragment of society. Even this small group which seems

very small, offers challenging possibilities of complexities. Because the modern man values his individual identity. The search of an independent identity has negatively influenced the quality of our familial ties. In domestic life Anita Desai's emphasis falls not on happy spectacle but the gloomy picture of life. She herself admitted in one of her interviews:

"I think all human relationships are inadequate....Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster"(Jain,64).

Desai in her portrayal of man-woman relationship mostly concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male-dominated society and her destruction at the alter of marriage. According to her most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. In Indian society, mostly marriages are arranged where no consideration is usually given to choice, outlook and taste of the persons involved. A marriage is a union of souls.

Some adjustment must be there from both sides. But very often, a marriage in Indian society becomes successful because of the woman's grace, love, wisdom, sense of understanding, tolerance and sacrifice. Desai focuses on the inadequacies between the couples who attempt it. She dwells upon tensions, problems and conflicts which an individual faces in life without any possibility of redressal through action.

Desai's characters are not ordinary, nor are their problems concerned with food, clothes and shelter. She usually starts by presenting a person who is cut out in a different grain from others. They resist demands of society and turn out to be rebels. Because they do not find a proper channel of communication, they become alienated and start brooding on their lives. Most of major characters have a near-neurotic quality about them. They are constantly disturbed by familial ties that they find uncomfortable and inescapable at the same time, and with which they can not reconcile their individual values. She writes:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have

Retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who can not follow it, whose heart cries out “the great no” who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (Dalmia,13).

The domestic life in Anita Desai’s novels is affected by many reasons. First reason behind this is temperamental incompatibility. It is a universal phenomenon which leads to separation, despair and loneliness. It is followed by the lack of communication. The theme of alienation also plays important role in shaping the domestic life. Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other. However, the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama in Cry, The Peacock.

In Cry, The Peacock (1963) Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional while Gautama is realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya is poetic and high strung while Gautama is detached, philosophical and remote. The matrimonial bonds that bind the two are very fragile and tenuous, “neither true nor lasting” but “broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again”(CTP,40). This novel can be read as a story of temperamental incompatibility leading to marital discord and disharmony.

Maya-Gautama relationship is a problematic one which reflects total lack of mutual understanding. But in spite of the efforts on their part their relationship becomes strained and tiring. In fact they become more and more aware of the fact that as persons they are poles apart from each other. Whereas Maya is all for instincts, Gautama is a man of intellect, a brainy type. The reasons for “every widening gap in communication between the husband and wife” (Pathak,21) are more than one. The kind of upbringing and atmosphere and the degree of exposure they had- such factors have made up their personalities. Their modes of life are so

formed and they are so convinced in themselves about it that there is not much scope for alteration or changes.

They belong to completely different backgrounds. Maya was a motherless child. She was brought up under the excessive care of her rich father. It is no wonder that Maya grows up into a hypersensitive, sensuous, touchy and romantic bent. She was totally unaware of the harsh realities of life. Probably, this was the reason why she married Gautama, who was twice her age and whom she thinks to be father surrogate. On the other hand, Gautama's childhood experiences, have been quite different. He was a big family, he being the eldest among his brothers and sisters. There was no question in his case of becoming the only center of attention of his parents. It is through his hard work that he succeeded in getting a good position and status in life. For Gautama his clients, cases and their details are so much important that they occupy him most of the time.

He even rejects the plea made by Maya to visit south so that she might see the performance of Kathakali dances, without caring for the intensity of her desire. It is enough to show that they are leading a life where one's tastes and preferences are of no concern to the other.

Anita Desai wants to emphasise that man is a social animal and he makes society. So communication must continue if we want to live life meaningfully. It goes a long way in establishment and maintenance of a harmonious relationship. Maya is highly sensitive creature who is gifted with poetic imagination and neurotic sensibility. The sight of dead Toto is one Maya cannot stand but Gautama takes it casual and makes somewhat cruel remarks such as "It is all over, come and drink your tea, and stop crying. You must not cry" (CTP,6).

Maya's physical needs being left unfulfilled and consequently leading to frustration and alienation. Although living as man and wife, they are strangers to each other. They follow their

own ways. Moreover, cruel fate has denied Maya the universal occupation of a woman which gives meaning and direction to female existence that is birth and rearing of children. Maya is childless even after four years of marriage. Under such peculiar circumstances all possible outlet for the release of her mental tensions are blocked.

Had Gautama shown an understanding towards her and had been attentive to Maya, he would have saved her from haunting fears of “shadows and dreams, dreams and shadows.”

Generally speaking, domestic life means living of two or more persons together and having understanding of each other. But in modern families, as husbands are quite busy outside, they seldom pay adequate attention to their women at home. Wives become mere possessions, no human being with their own passion and ambitions. In Cry, The Peacock we can see that Gautama has, like other possessions also a wife at home, dependent on his attention and care like a pet dog. Gautama is totally blind to the beauty and the seductive appeal of Maya. Even Gautama’s family members treat her with indulgence as she is just a child for them, not to be taken seriously. Their option about Maya is that her mental horizon is limited to baby’s meals, shopping and marriage.

Anita Desai wants to portray the lack of love in the domestic relationships of modern society. There is no love between Maya and Gautama, nor is there any meaningful, affectionate relationship between Maya and her mother-in-law. Maya wants to be loved by Gautama but he seems to have arrived at detachment like the Buddha, and is unperturbed by her sorrow.

Brother- sister relationship is another kind of domestic relationship which Anita Desai portrays with loving fondness. She loves to bring out the sweetness and poetry of this relationship especially in its childhood days. Glimpses of it can be seen in Cry, The Peacock also. We are told about Maya’s and Arjuna’s childhood days and even though both belong to different worlds, their relationship is an affectionate and loving one.

The absence of any hope and love from interpersonal relations naturally lead sensitive and emotional characters of Anita Desai towards psychic disintegration. At the very beginning of the novel Cry, the Peacock Maya has been depicted as a person who is easily vulnerable to sorrow and has an excitable temperament. She even seems to be doubting her senses. Maya evinces the symptoms of obsessive compulsive neurosis which “involves thoughts and actions the individual recognises as irrational but which still persists”. Maya’s neurosis lies in her persistent obsession with the albino and his forecast, despite knowledge that all this could be a nightmare. She is obsessively frightened also of Kathakali dancers though she knows well that they are ordinary human beings like her own-self. The difference in their appearances has been brought out only by the masks they wear. With the progress in the state of depersonalisation, Maya starts feeling her bodily organs to separate from herself, and once reaches the point of feeling herself to be a bodiless soul. Maya’s utter loss of hold on her senses and reality makes her a prey to hallucinations and delusions. She has been depicted as being on the brink of insanity, yet at times like many mentally sick people she behaves like a fully normal person and is even seen evaluating her past and present with striking objectivity and directing towards the incidents.

The main thrust of the novel remains on existentialistic Maya’s need of love, understanding and communion. She wishes to regain the freedom she has lost at alter of marriage, but her longing remains unfulfilled. This disappointment and despair in marriage give rise to the feelings of nostalgia, boredom, frustration and gloom with the result that she becomes alienated. Finally this leads to her death.

Had Gautama shown an understanding towards her and been attentive to her, he would have saved her from the haunting fears. Maya’s attempts to divert herself by visits to her friend Leila and Pom or Mr. Lal’s party but she utterly fails to get rid of the albino astrologer’s prophecy. Even she enjoys the company of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law when they visit to her house. But once they are gone, she finds the “house empty” and herself alone with her

“horrors and nightmares” (CTP, 162). It shows that Gautama as well as other members of his family are not aware of her mental condition, they are busy in their own worlds. They have no time to support her and to share her feelings and emotions. If they had paid some attention towards her, then the things would have been different.

Anita Desai delineates domestic life in Cry, The Peacock with a deep psychological insight. She brings out the damaging influence of over-protective father and the stifling environment of single parent family on the psyche of tender children. The novel repudiates the domestic life of luxury and physical comforts which fails to make individual fit to face the hard-realities of life. It also critically exposes the life of practical wisdom devoid of human warmth. Anita Desai seems to suggesting an ideal mean somewhere between the extreme worlds of Maya and Gautama. It is only that an individual can exist in a harmonious relationship. She also points to the possibilities of adjustment and of compromise in domestic life. The only thing is that each individual has to come out of his shell and recognise and respect the needs of other. It is only then that a harmony can be achieved in domestic life.

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