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Cry, the Peacock: A Critical Study from the perspective of Feminism



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Introduction and Concept of Feminism:

The word *Feminism* has its origin in the movements of and related to women's rights and issues concerning women in society. A central theme of feminist history is the subjugation of woman the society across the culture. The feminist also believe that it is one of the major causes of all psychological imbalances in the man woman relation in the human society. In this regard, Janet Richards remarks:

The essence of *Feminism* has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism. (Richard 3)

In the recent times, the feminism has turned out to be quite radical in its outlook. The present form of feminist came to existence after 1960s. It has started affecting all walks of life including social, cultural and political as well. Initially it was a social movement which later on turned in to a theoretical project. Its main objective is to arrive at a conceptual clarity regarding the power structures in the social order. Patriarchal structure of hierarchy in social practices and social institutions is considered to be instrumental in subjugation of women's position to women in family, society and institutions. The main argument of the feminists is more emotional and sentimental grounds rather than rational and scientific. It doesn't seem to bring about the emancipation of womankind. The strapping wave of feminism emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, 'Feminism' deals with an ideal transformation of the individual fields in 1980s. In 1990s this played vital role in shaping academic focus on the apprehension of the so-called otherness, differences and issues of marginality. Margaret Homans has expressed her concerns in this context of feminism. She brought forward fundamental questions regarding the progression of reading, writing and the teaching of literature. It works as an interdisciplinary apparatus of pivotal analysis of social and cultural investigation. It is inevitable that it leads to a political practice in the domain of power structures. Thus, feminism has come a long way from its origin. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that it was many remedies to make.

Feminism in *Cry, the Peacock*

If we want to understand and sympathizes the sensibility of feminism, it is important to observe that Indian feminist present altogether different picture sequence. There are some of the visible marks of the gender inequality such as long and painful suffering of women, the bitter struggle for the exception of the idea of equal pay for equal work, the continuing battles on behalf of woman's right to abortion and to practice of



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birth control. That has persisted and that woman had to fight for inspire of the commitments, they were made under circumstances. In India, feminist situation possess a dissimilar dispensation. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical and the several hierarchy have been maintained very strictly such as within the family concreting age, sex and ordinal position, congenial and fine relationship or within the community referring to the caste lineage, learning, occupation and relationship with ruling power.

By describing the reaction to the feminist movement in India, Suma Chitnis writes that man initiated most distinctive features of this movement. The women joined the fray towards the end of the century. Raja Ram Manohar Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Matahari, Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Karve, who champion the cause of women. They made different efforts to abolish the custom of child marriage the practice of sati, custom of distinguishing widows, the ban on remarriage of the upper caste Hindu widows and many other civil practices that affected women.

The feminist thought and feminist movement in the west have some influence on the woman's movement in the developing country like India. Yet, feminism exists today in India, it has gone beyond its western counter parts. Uma Narayan rightly puts it third world feminism. As Indian writing in English has been given international importance, it is bound to be compared with its Western English counterpart. In the world of novel writing, it has been epoch making and has opened new vistas of possibilities. It has earned recognition and many awards internationally.

Indian woman writers have made their mark the world literature and dared to differ from the prominent old patriarchal point of view of the west. Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand intimately the predicament of their female characters. She has represented the creative release of the feminine sensibility in her novels. (Rao 50) Anita Desai is indeed a novelist of considerable merits and has enriched the Indian novel in English in more than one way. In her novels, thematic concerns and technical innovations have been chiefly responsible in making her 'A disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglican fiction.' (D. S. 216)

She is not a novelist whose predominant interests are social or sociological. She is, obviously, not pleased with the achievements of Indian women novelists for the reason that 'they have been content to record and document' (Desai 43) and their interest in the psychological aspect of their characters has been, at its best, generally marginal. She has authored complex novels that can be termed as psychological novels. According to her, these novels are as purely subjective:



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It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision. (Desai 255)

The present chapter aims at exploring feminism in Anita Desai's pioneering novel, *Cry, the Peacock* and defining feminine sensibility in her present novel. In the recent times, there can be seen immense increase in the awareness among the societies about woman's situation. This trend can be seen reflected in the novels of the time as well. It is needless to say that this has led to unprecedented improvement in women's life and outlook in the society. Gyno-criticism has opened up new vistas of study and research. The veritable explosion of linguistic sexism during the past decade has been hailed as containing 'an ocean of interest'. (Thorne and Henley) The significance of women in the social order has to be seen, as Michel puts it, in the context of 'discontinuity' in history.

This loss of historical context and missing documentation can be found in representation of women and their condition in the novels by women novelists. Anita Desai is one such Indian woman novelist who has represented women in her novels in the most life-like manner. Anita Desai has made significant efforts to express the suppressed story of women consciousness in her novels. Her approach of narrating a feminine version of narrative is a trend setter as against the masculine narrative approach developed by the conventional male dominated narrative styles. She has genuinely attempted to probe into the matters that are important from a woman's point of view. Anita Desai is clearly of the opinion that there lies immense possibilities in the medium narrative writing and she indeed explores this medium to its fullest possibilities. It is this earnest attempt that has made her first and for most among the woman novelist in Indian writing in English.

Maya is an unforgettable protagonist created by Anita Desai in *Cry, the Peacock*. She is considered to be a princess of the toy by the author. She marries to a middle aged man named Gautama. Maya is an enthusiastic and warm hearted girl on the contrary Gautama is a cold hearted and emotionless guy with no concern for his life partner. However, he is an excellent lawyer with very high ambition. In his company Maya remained unattended and uncared emotionally, physically as well as spiritually. There can be seen absolute lack of compatibility between them due their age and generation difference. Maya's starvation was not primarily physical but rather psychological. Their mindsets were opposite to each other. Thus, she had to undergo issues of identity typical to women around the world and especially in country like India.



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Gautama stands for cold reality devoid of any romance and emotions. On the contrary, Maya was a sentimental and loving girl. She wanted nothing but to be loved in return. She was as sensitive as a tender as a touch-me-not flower. She would enclose herself with the garb of shyness with the mere reference of anger and displeasure. In the company of cold hearted Gautama, she started withering within. When Maya lost her pet dog, Toto her heart fills with immense grief. Nevertheless, Gautama remained least concerned with his wife's emotional status. All he cared about was a cup of tea for him. He did not care to solace his wife nor heed to her wish to provide proper burial to Toto. Being a childless woman, Maya had been emotionally attached to her pet dog as her child. When she was her dead Toto, she:

...screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes,
continued to cry and ran defeated, into the house. (CP 7)

Further, his cold and unresponsive attitude became very clear when he got engrossed in his work and he told Maya to go away. After the death of her pet dog, Toto dies, she had become very sad. She felt utter lonely alone in the world of frustration and disappointment. She had no person to console her in her loneliness. Her pet dog, Toto was not significant for Gautama but on the other side it was everything for Maya. She shared her pains and pleasure with it. Because of it, she did not feel herself loneliness. This reminds us of Mulk Raj Anand's story *The parrot in the cage*. In this story, the parrot is the fate of his mistress, Rukmanial, and the suffering humanity. He cries for liberation. It leads to an aggravation of suffering.

Gautama is also devoid of any philosophical or intellectual inconsiderate. He seemed to be obsessed with the concept of detachment preached in *The Bhagvad Gita*. He lacks the responsiveness towards Maya's requests. He also dejects all the suggestions that Maya made including the desire to go to the hill station and to enjoy classical dances. All these indicate the attitude and temperament that Gautama had which was contrary to that of Maya. She can be seen urging Gautama:

If only we could go away for the summer', I sighed, lethargically, breaking my promise never to say such things to Gautama who had never been able to "go away for the summer" till he married me, and then refused to do so...I cried, tearfully, and rose from my pillows to hold and draw him into my own orbit of thought and feelings. Yet not daring to make the bold, physical move. "You don't imagine I would go without you? Leaving you behind in the heat?"...



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(CP 38-39)

In the world of Gautama, there is no place for Maya. He does not understand her and wish her to enter in his world. Thus, Maya could not understand the strange world of Gautama:

On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre. (CP 89)

Maya is a childless woman. She does not have any vocation to pursue. She finds herself in loneliness. She always wants company of her husband. She resents when her husband treats her as a child. When Maya came to realization that she was not a helpless and dependent child, she was as much competent as man. Gautama ignored her as child, pains her much because she wants to free herself from the ages of old guardian child chain. This reminds of Roots and Shadows. In this we can see the agony and rage of Indu. When he is going at that time Indu expresses her resentment:

Going? Why did I feel at once like a deserted abandoned child? Why did it always have to be someone else for me? I felt foolishly ridiculously angry, like a pampered child suddenly left on its own, finding out that grown-ups have other and most engrossing interests after all. (Roots and Shadows 161)

Maya spent her childhood under the full attentions of her father. Her father used to take care of her. She longed for similar care and attention from her husband. But Gautama was too occupied in his work to offer her that attention and care. He was a very famous lawyer and had to engross himself into his vocation. He obviously failed to fulfil Maya's childish demands. Due to that she constantly felt dejected, neglected and miserable. She could see her marriage dried up and at the verge of dying. Gautama started getting irritated about Maya's morbidity and started blaming her father for pampering her beyond repair:

He (Maya's father) is the one responsible for this for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers - all the luxuries of the fairy tales, you were brought up on. Life is a fairy tale to you still. (CP 98)

Maya is not only preoccupied with father's fixation factor but also intensifies her tragedy by expecting Gautama to step into her father's shoe. After four years of their marital life, they hadn't got any children or vocation. This intensified her anxiety and restlessness. Moreover, the death of her pet dog, Toto proved to be a final blow in her already divested life. It worsened her mental condition. It also made her aware of the



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mysterious play of destiny. He is totally insensitive and indifferent to natural beauty, smells, colours and sounds like character of Mr Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*.

It is not fact that Gautama and Maya have never tried to understand each other, but they are prevented by a nameless barrier. The astrologer's prophecies ring in her ear that after her marriage either she or her husband will get unnatural death. The maddening sound of drumbeats that came from the mad demon of classical dance of Kathakali haunted her mind day and night. The drumbeats also symbolise the forthcoming sad demise in Maya's life. She is haunted by a black and evil shadow of her fate. She realised that her ultimate time had arrived.

Maya remembers this prophecy, told by Albino before long time. This is like same prophecy, it is done by witches upon Macbeth. But in this time, neither Gautama nor her own family can help her. Perhaps he can rescue her from it, but he is a prisoner in his own shell. She is as one doomed in her own eyes. Her father's loving attention makes her oblivious of the deadly shadow.

Now, Maya was left all alone in an abandoned house by her husband. There was no compatibility left between Maya and her husband Gautama. She has a romantic notion for love and life on the contrary Gautama was devoid of any romance in his life. He has "no use for flowers". (CP 24) Maya is "a creature of instinct" (CP 16). She is "a wayward and high strung child." (CP 48) She stood by her name i.e. "nothing but an illusion." (CP 172) On the other hand, Gautama's name symbolises asceticism, detachment from life. He is also practical and realistic. As the "Bhagwad Gita" (CP 120), he has philosophical detachment towards life. She meets with the situation, which is beyond her control. She consequently goes mad. So, R. S. Sharma has rightly pointed out that:

Most of her problems as a fiction writer begin with her insistence on too much style on too small a canvas. (Sharma 167)

In this, the vocabulary is more violent, diseased and evil. Structure of the sentence is more abrupt and broken. There are also many exclamatory and interrogatory phrases. In case of Gautama, the philosophic generalization merges with a personal anguish.

Anita Desai depicts the cry of an agonised woman, who is feeling lonely and unwanted. Maya suffers very seriously. She clings more and more to him. Despite the ever widening inner division, she must keep herself intact. She can achieve this. She emerges herself with him. But she unconsciously surrenders to him. It is wisdom to surrender to a stronger personality is inherent in a morbidly dependent character. She is helpless,



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suffering, humble and also lovable. Her expansive traits remain suppressed in her unconsciousness. Because she does not want to master her life, she felt strong in father's strength. Now there is Gautama. According to her, father and mother both are 'magic helpers' to protect her from a feeling of inadequacy.

Maya, morbidly dependent person cannot express her rage openly. So she hides her aggressive traits behind her self-effacing and self-minimising process. She feels herself as a helpless, a childless woman. She is also gripped by the misfortune of her pet dog, Toto's death. She beats pillow and cries piteously. Horney terms it as the "shrinking process". She sees herself as a helpless child. These initial expressions lead her to self-pity psychometric systems such as splitting headaches and fever. She becomes vindictive when the self alienates itself from the real centre. Self-hate takes hold.

"Self-hate" is the logical outcome of a conflict between Maya's pride system and her real self. It is a war between the healthy and neurotic forces, i.e. between constructive and destructive elements. (CP 56)

Using mirror imagery, Anita Desai presents Maya's conflict. When she gazes in the mirror, she sees her own body detached itself from her soul. She "floats away to rest upon the dim mirror where I gaze upon it from a cool distance." (CP 90) In the mirror, she studies her reflection.

The peacock dance has very important individual meaning for her. She knew that the peacocks kill each other in spite of being madly in love. Similarly she came to realise that her marriage with Gautama has also come to a deadly end. Their company seemed to destroy each other. She is torn between her love for life and her fear for death. It is very powerfully dramatized her personality's the gradual disintegration. She is deeply stricken with the sense of insecurity and loneliness.

Conclusion:

The critics have interpreted the novel from different perspectives. Ruth Praver Jhabwala also gives true picture of women:

Beat them, starve them, how you like them, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a head to defend themselves.... (Jhabwala 97)

According to Prof K. R. S. Iyenger,

Cry The Peacock scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference



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in this world. Her insanity-rather she is sane, historical or insane fills the whole book and gives it from as well as life. (Iyengar 16)

According to Meena Belliappa that it is:

...a remarkable attempt to face fantasy with perpetual experience. (Belliappa 25)

There are some critics like Kamal N. Awasthi and Som P. Sharma, who point out that despite her over protective childhood, it does not seem that she is spoilt woman. It is capacity of her to differentiate between her childhood friends, and the indulgence of a doting father and clamorous demands of her lawyer husband, Gautama. After four years, she even destabilised with her husband, who had failed to fecundate:

“no you are too young”- perhaps of the bareness Maya had developed a slightly greater capacity for philosophy that she was born with. She blames Gautama for his grossness, for his concern with the fundamental and basic prosaic life in terms of money: “...it’s always money or property-never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exciting things like that-not for love or life basic things-like Toto dying. (CP 24)

Thus, one can see through the character of Maya the issues feminism such as identity crisis of a woman, suppression of woman in the domestic life and issues of liberty and equality. Anita Desai depicted these issues beautifully in *Cry, the Peacock*. The women's liberation needs to be understood in the male cantered world. Its discourse needs to go across the established institutions and practices beyond civilization and culture. If one wants to understand the nature of women subjugation, one needs to understand the nature and mode of domination, repression and oppression by the society. These oppressions are not documented in the history but can be seen reflected in the works of art from time to time. Anita Desai is one such author who documented aforesaid subjugation and oppression with its subtle details in *Cry, the Peacock*.



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