Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock*: A Manifesto of Female Predicament

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Abstract: The present paper aims to study the problems faced by the woman in Indian society which, undoubtedly, is marching ahead at the path of development but still assigns traditional roles to the woman. Woman can not come out of these customary roles because of conservative outlook of the male dominated society. She is imprisoned in the four walls of the house where there is no one else to share her grief. Even if she is provided with the material comforts, she tries hard to let others listen to her agony which goes unheard in most of the cases. Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* studies such predicaments which lead the woman to astray.

Human Identity is usually connected to and defined by societal and cultural norms. When it comes to woman, she is defined only in relation to a man as she is deprived of an identity of her own. It’s easy to liberate woman in a primitive social structure even if she is uneducated but it’s very hard to think of her freedom in a society which is moving ahead at the path of progress and civilization. But hearty thanks to the Women studies which are emerging fast and paying attention to the female predicament in a male dominated set up. Woman has always been considered as an accessory to man. No independent existence has been allotted to her. Weak, passive, foolish, fat-headed are a few of countless adjectives ascribed to her. Her biological features are connected with her destiny. She is laden with a traditional role and confined within the four walls of the house. Simon de Beauvoir puts it in a right way in her *The Second Sex,*” One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” (295)

Anita Desai’s novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the woman’s inner world, frustration and storm raging inside her mind intensify her predicament. Desai’s concern with the emancipation of woman is found page after page in her novels. The present paper aims to study the predicament faced by women characters in *Cry, the Peacock*. This novel is primarily the story of Maya, the heroine but it also contains many other female characters that represent different aspects of woman.

*Cry, the Peacock*, published in 1963, is Desai’s first novel. It broke new grounds and is considered to be a trend-setter in feminist writing. Here Anita Desai portrays a hyper-sensitive, and cultured Maya and dives deep into her trapped feminine psyche from childhood to her untimely death as a youth. She is the victim of many social and psychological predicaments. Her social status affects her psyche to the extent that she becomes an easy victim of many known and unknown inner traumas. There is no denying the fact that Maya receives a comfortable upbringing. She has no shortage of material comforts, but the high intensity of pain she faces at mental level takes her to tragic end.
Maya suffers from certain obsessions and an astrologer’s prediction of the death of one of the two- her own or her husband’s- after four years of marriage. Her obsession with death, her father- fixation and her marital discords are the three strands around which the plot has been woven.

Cry, the Peacock engages the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. Desai makes Maya her mouthpiece to express her views about woman. As Cixous says,” Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.” (78) So writing the story of Maya is significant not just because she is driven away from parental embraces but also from her own body. So one can find in Maya an assertion of her desire, a proclamation against societal odds and a lament on the loss of the self.

Being a housewife and having limited relationships in her ‘two inches of ivory’ Anita Desai is like Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. She is not so much concerned with the external affairs as with the inner weather. She considers outer reality to be the least in comparison with the internal conflicts. Maya is born of an upper middle class Brahmin family. Having grown motherless, she was pampered by the father, Rai Sahib. Although sensitive and well educated, she is treated as a child rather than a mature, willing to be heard and spoken to. She has been reared in a protective atmosphere. Her father tries to fill the loss of her mother and creates a fairy world full of dreams. This is the reason why he marries Maya to Gautama, his own middle aged lawyer friend. But both prove to be poles apart. If Maya stands for the poetry of life, Gautama for prose. Her mental and emotional needs come into confrontation with her husband’s practical outlook. The novel shows how sharply contrasted childhood experiences of the couple can cause dissonance in their married life. Her inclination to her father worsens her relation with her husband. Gautama blames her father for her immaturity and calls her a ‘spoilt child’. Desai clearly shows how a motherless female child’s psyche is damaged which further effects her relations with all around her. She sought her guardian and protector in Gautama but finds that in him, “understanding was scant, love was meager.”(89)

Maya’s predicament can be linked to the failure to find a refuge either in marriage or in family. The spilt in her personality results in her loss of belief in herself. Her obsession with the father figure and separation from the mother along with her failure to identify herself with Gautama, has led her to isolation. She is trapped with the fear of albino’s prophecy. She confines herself in a world of superstitions and is unable to do away with the constraints imposed by the orthodox society, with its belief in horoscope and future- telling. She nurtures both- love and fear of the unknown. Though her father defies these false beliefs, Maya is unable to overcome her fears. In the fourth year of her marriage, she is seen building this fear to such an extreme that it leads to an unexpected explosion.

The gloomy state of affairs is unacceptable to Maya. Hence she eases her tension psychologically by thinking how peacock stamps its feet and strikes its beak against rock,
and how it seizes the snake to break its body to relieve its own pain. This affects her consciousness badly and she craves for an urgent outlet of her emotions. Thus under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband is a revenge reaction arising out of her own basic frustrations- unhappy married life, unfulfilled longings and a reaction against her husband’s cold unresponsiveness. Through this murder and suicide, she experiences fulfillment and is relieved from the anxiety of past and present dilemmas.

Anita Desai studies the inner life of her characters but she never allows them to forget their social and familial ties. Maya looks at her brother, father and husband to save her from this psychological predicament and cries,” Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying.” (84)

The quest of Desai’s protagonist is not only one woman's quest but the quest of a human being towards some understanding and acceptance of her predicament. Though there are other more women in this novel apart from Maya but hers is the heart-rending story. Nila, Gautama's sister and his mother, these two are the women who symbolically present positivity and strength. Nina has the ability to fight the odds which come into her life. Her view of life as presented by the novelist is “After ten years with that rabbit I married, I have learnt to do everything myself.” (135) As far as Gautama's mother is there, she is more concerned with her social work than the crying need of lonely Maya who asks her to stay for some more time with her.

There are two more women in the novel whose presence is noteworthy, Pom and Leila, who are Maya's friends. Leila's marriage is a love marriage and she had eloped with her lover who is a consumptive. She has faced all the vicissitudes of life and put up a brave fight as the wife of a patient struggling for life. She accepts her lot as her destiny and does not grudge or complain. She reacts violently when Mrs. Lal and other women at the party do not come up to her expectations.

Pom is another character who faces the problems which are quite common in the lives of women in India. She lives with her in-laws under many restrictions. The complex webs of many do’s and don’ts are there around her every time. Mrs. Desai, through Pom, elaborates how women have to live a suffocated life and take permissions from their in-laws for every work. Life for her is, “like two mice in one small room, not daring to creep out, for fear they'll pounce on you, ask you where you're going, when you'll be back,why you aren't wearing the jewellery they gave you.”(55)

Anita Desai, through Mrs.Lal’s character, wants to show that a women and her family is not considered complete and meaningful without the birth of a son. Mrs. Lal pretends to be well off with four daughters, but she longs for a male child. Even though we may glorify and rationalize daughters, yet daughters are considered a liability because of the evil of dowry in our society. Moreover, only sons are considered as true successors of their parents. The novelist elaborates how women in a male dominated society are
sexually exploited and treated as commodity to be enjoyed through the cabaret girls in this novel.

Women in Desai, tend to make constant comparisons between their father's houses. In their search for a sense of fulfillment, women continue to rely on the house. When it becomes clear to that the house cannot fill their emotional spiritual vacuum, they choose to withdraw. Withdrawal becomes a symptom of Maya. To study the predicament of Maya, it is important to see her life as structured between her father's house and her husband's. Both locations act as a reflection of her an attractive figure-nurtured by the values of her class, she also becomes a threat to that very system.

Through Maya's character, Anita Desai upholds a new vista of feminist writing. Maya stands apart from all the women characters in the novel. She is the most interesting and psychologically mystifying among all Desai’s female characters. She represents a class of women who silently suffer at the hands of the men. Her actions and reactions may not always draw one's sympathy and can be dismissed as the useless thoughts of a luxurious mind. Her suffering is also luxurious suffering but the demands of the social changes put forth by the novelist can't be ignored. The fashion of living away from the parental house, the mother living away from the children and the increasing busy life, are some of the fractions of changing patterns.

The novelist has thus highlighted the female predicament in various aspects. She excels, particularly in elaborating the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by negligence and loneliness. Certainly the novel is about Maya but all the secondary characters like Nila, Pom, Leila, the mother etc. contribute to the poly timbered voice of the women and the issues related to them.

Works Cited: