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Editor-in-Chief

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www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Marriage to Morbidity: Women in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife*

Misha Jose

Guest Lecturer, Dept. of English,
Providence Women's College, Calicut, Kerala

The psyche of women enmeshed within a traditional patriarchal Indian context has always been a realm of special concern in Indian English Literature. This paper attempts to probe into the morbid psyche of two women, Maya and Dimple, the female protagonists in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife* respectively, to whom marital knot turns out to be symbolic of eternal bondage. The notion of an ideal family enforces them to curb all their dreams, desires and ambitions. Their smothering life with busy, insensitive, practical-minded husbands and the rigours which marriage imposes on them, gradually enfeeble their heart, giving rise to turbulent emotions which soon slither into a state of neurosis. The paper attempts to examine how the neurotic impulses ultimately provoke them to contemplate murdering their husbands, the final enactment of which pronounces their desperate longing for self-liberation from the clutches of patriarchy.

The predicament of women, their institutional subjection and freedom have been the major concerns of Indian women novelists since the 1960s. Their initial attempts were to challenge the ideal of the traditional, oppressed women in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands. Gradually however, women writers have moved away from the stereotypical portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women towards psychically perturbed female characters searching for identity, asserting their individuality and defying marriage and motherhood.

Anita Desai and Bharathi Mukherjee, two prominent contemporary writers in Indian English literature, have made significant efforts to give voice to Indian women's unvoiced resentments. Many writers of Indian diaspora engage the complexities of modern culture from a feminine perspective, while highlighting the Indian female predicament of maintaining self-identity in a male-dominated society. Often the protagonists in their novels are Anglicized Indian women who, disgusted with their monotonous life and lack of warmth in marital relationships, ultimately covet an escape from the folds of family institution.

Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* and Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife* both deal with the socio-psycho attitudes of human mind caught between personal desires and cultural restrictions. Embodying remonstrance and psychic protest, the protagonists Maya and Dimple strive for the protection and preservation of their dignity and self-esteem in a patriarchal society. They are not totally cut off from familial and social ties but remain within these orbits and protest against isolation, injustice and gender discrimination.

The psychological unfolding of Maya's neurotic mind forms and enfolds the plot of Anita Desai's first and most renowned novel *Cry, the Peacock*. The novel is a sketch of temperaments. It is the sane and insane rumbling of a mind hysterically running back

and forth in the past and present. At the peripheral level, it is an awful tale of a disgruntled wife murdering her mismatched husband. It is an account of the incompatible marital life of Maya, a hypersensitive woman who causes her detached and apathetic husband Gautama's death, by pushing him down the roof. The cry of the peacock symbolizes the elusive equilibration which she yearns for. Her world is a world where pity and fear mingle to become terror; where emotional fears she experiences cloud her sensibilities.

Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975), on the other hand, details the descent into madness of an Indian woman trapped in New York city. It sees Dimple, a young naïve woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As a typical Indian woman who was raised to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength to cope with the foreign and violent environment of New York city. She retreats more-and-more from reality, living in her own world of fantasy, until she arrives at a queer idea. Giving vent to her frustration she contemplates an act of self-assertion - the act of murdering her husband. "In the darkness she fitted her round little chin into a slight hollow of flesh on Amit's left shoulder.... If she were to ram her chin deeper into the hollow, perhaps she could crush the bone that lay directly under. Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt...." (Mukherjee 117) .

Both Desai and Mukherjee depict the theme of disillusionment with great skill and sensitivity. In both the novels, the plot unfolds through varied stages of disenchantment in life, consequent frustration, the onset of neurosis and the gradual, but perceptible, reinforcement of mental tension till the ultimate linkage with sanity is broken. Both Maya and Dimple are psychically disturbed characters. Having been brought up in a realm where they were taught to only dream and yield to emotions, they both suffer physically, emotionally and psychically on entering a marital life which shatters all their dreams and expectations.

Maya, whose very name suggests her love for illusion, is married to Gautama who harps on the philosophy of detachment as Gautama Buddha. He hardly understands the silent cries of Maya's sensitive heart and remains quite indifferent to the emotional turbulence tormenting her. A busy lawyer who ever holds his profession above everything else, he finds little or no time to spare for his wife, who desperately yearns for his love and presence. " 'You know nothing, understand nothing.' I raised my voice, 'Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me - and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me' " (Desai 112)

The problem between Dimple and her husband Amit Basu is one of communication, and an inability to come to terms with reality. A docile girl in her parental home, Dimple does not tell her parents about her desire to marry a neurosurgeon. Like an obedient daughter, she waits for them to find a suitable match for her, and is constantly assured by her mother that her father would soon bring somebody good for her. "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (Mukherjee 3).

Dimple's dreams are purely materialistic, and all she wants of life is the luxuries of consumer society. Her drab surroundings in Calcutta fill her with frustration, but she is hopeful that her life will change after they migrate to USA. Yet Amit fails to fulfill her

dreams and desires. She tries to convey her fears and forebodings to Amit but neither does he try to understand her nor is he capable of rising above a mundane understanding.

With a sense of alienation leading to utter desolation, Maya and Dimple gradually slip into thoughts of death. Death becomes an obsession for both of them. For Maya it is the astrologer's prophecy that turns out disastrous. As a child Maya was once unwittingly taken by her *aya* to a temple to get her future told. However to Maya's horror, "the fearsome magician" prophesied in a threatening tone that four years after her marriage, one of the spouses would die. The obscure unspeakable event leaves an indelible mark in her superstitious psyche, haunting her frequently and rendering her solitude even more unbearable.

When the novel opens, she is in the fourth year of her marriage to Gautama. Maya is unable to extricate her thought from fears of death, and her sensuous love of life coupled with desire for self preservation make her shift the burden of the prophecy to Gautama's life. She herself does not feel prepared for death, while Gautama according to her, has reached a stage of detachment. Her superstition and solitude make her realize her suppressed hatred for Gautama as well as her intense love for life. Behind her final indulgence in violence, there has been a prolonged psychic struggle which she has not known herself. Her act clearly speaks volumes about the extent of agony and frustration that was suffocating her soul.

It is again the growing hatred for her husband that culminates in Dimple murdering her spouse. Thoroughly disillusioned after marriage, she finds life with Amit quite dull and unbearable, especially after being carried away by the American culture. The presence of her husband ever evokes a sense of guilt in her whenever she dares to step out of traditional Indian wife's role. Caught in a whirlwind of traumatic emotions with her tradition questioning her every act and emotion, she finally chops down Amit's head. Dimple's stab on Amit's mole seven times may be regarded as a kind of re-enactment of the marriage ritual where the couple takes seven steps together. She seems to be symbolically destroying the marriage bond.

The institution of marriage is apparently the most significant social issue that the two novelists focus in their work. "When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left, which is to languish in misery. Somehow she reveals an evident lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication leading to alienation (Bhatnagar, 160).

A callous man moulded by a biased social set up, Gautama refuses to recognize and respect the individuality and selfhood of his wife. He considers himself superior to her in everyway and sets out to assert it by correcting and contradicting whatever she thinks and feels. In their temperaments and attitude to life, the two are completely opposite to each other. By Indian standards, her life situation appears to be ideal. She has a secure home, earning husband and a well-defined future. However, the sphere of her social activities is so severely restricted that she begins to feel suffocated within it. Maya's grief echoes the predicament of all those wives who, like Maya, are bound by a culture which denies a woman freedom and enjoyment outside the institution of family that confines her position as an obedient sacrificing daughter, wife and mother:

Was it so unforgivable to wish to share in human friendliness? In companionship? To Gautama it was, for a woman, for a light-headed woman, a childish one like myself. In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me (Desai 104).

Their conversations during their evening walks provide ample evidence to the fact that it is Maya's inability to vindicate her emotions and thoughts before Gautama that actually worsens her mental anguish. "Yes, I cried, yes, it is his hardness-no, no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me" (Desai 9).

Loneliness and unrequited love drives Desai's heroines to the jaws of death. In *Cry the Peacock*, Maya's emotional problems aggravate only because of her intense love for Gautama despite his total indifference and carelessness towards her. It is only because he fails to reciprocate her love that she grows weak and frustrated. "Mostly women have been both culturally and emotionally dependent on men; any disruption of attachment or affiliation is seen not as a loss of relationship but 'a total loss of self', which is then seen as neurosis" (Gupta 153). Maya herself is conscious of her descent into madness, yet is helpless to arrest it.

In the case of Dimple, though she is at times shocked at her own intensity of feeling and her capacity to hate, eventually she exercises her ungratified passion through violence alone. She cannot come to terms with either her own culture or American culture, and the emotional estrangement from her husband makes her predicament worse. "She wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not . . . he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour TV, cassette, tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience" (Mukherjee 114).

She suffers from terrible angst and it takes away the sanity of her mind. She has nightmares of violence, of suicide and of death. Thoughts of illusion and reality alternate in her psyche-the illusion of committing suicide and the reality of butchering her husband. The world of illusion fuses with the world of reality and she murders Amit in a fit of frenzy.

Dimple's frenzied killing of her husband is the result of her notion that if circumstances do require such drastic act to win freedom, it may be resorted to.... The murder itself may be ambiguous in many ways, but it is symbolic of Dimple's assertion of power at a critical juncture. It has freed her from becoming a prisoner of ghetto, unbearable to her free-thinking mind, and she descends into depression, madness and murder (Tandon 57).

Both Maya and Dimple want to do away with the traditional taboos of a wife which they find to be stifling and unbearable. The frustration which results from it, forces them to deny their husbands the very right for existence in this world, thereby doing justice to themselves and asserting their right to live their life as they wish.

What these protagonists strive for is self-realization, self-fulfillment, carving out an identity, a true image of their individual beings, literal and figurative space to be themselves, to define themselves to make a foray into the outward, to make

their own mistakes and retrace their steps if the need be, rather than being chaperoned everywhere (Bhatnagar 1). They are alienated from the world, from society, from families and friends, and even from their own selves because they are not ordinary people but individuals made to stand against the general current of life; struggling against it to attain the aspired world.

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