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A Psychoanalytic Reading of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*

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Abstract

Cry, the Peacock, a purely psychological novel is written by Indo-American author Anita Desai. This novel published in 1963, is a landmark in Indian English literature. Anita Desai has introduced a neurotic heroine along with her psychological problems in this novel. The introduction of a female protagonist who is psychologically imbalanced has never happened before in the history of Indian English literature.

The female protagonist Maya has undergone traumatic psychic experience since her childhood. Hence, she is much obsessed with death. Anita Desai has effectively conveyed Maya's journey within as well as her existential problems. Desai has used soliloquy, monologue and stream of consciousness technique to expose the troubled psyche of Maya.

This paper is an honest attempt to make a psychoanalytic approach of Anita Desai's fiction *Cry, the Peacock*.

Keywords: psychological, neurotic, frustrations, stream of consciousness, psychoanalytic.

Introduction

Anita Desai has championed in the field of fiction writing. She has earned a unique place for herself among the best novelists of the world. Desai's contribution to Indian writing in English is praiseworthy. Desai's vocation is the womenfolk in general. She takes interest in the life and problems of women; basically women living in different cities of India. Desai focuses on the predicament of town-women.

Desai is a writer of Indian origin. She was born in Mussorie, India on the 24th of June, 1932. She has studied in the Delhi University and started her professional career here in India before joining different foreign colleges and finally Massachusetts Institute of Technology as Emerita John E Burchard Professor of Humanities.

Anita Desai has showed her interest in writing since her childhood and her literary excellence has been established with the publication of *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. She has continued gifting one after another award winning novels. Some of her novels are: *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc. Desai has been thrice short-listed for the Booker Prize for her novels *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting* in the year 1980, 1984 and 1999 respectively.

Cry, the Peacock, the maiden novel of Anita Desai reveals the inner most psyche of Maya, the female protagonist. This novel has received a warm welcome by the readers for the introduction of a completely new theme. The psychological suffering of a beautiful young lady has touched every reader. The female protagonist Maya has earned compassion and love even though she is a neurotic as well as hypersensitive young lady. The novel has also earned a unique place in the history of Indian writing in English for the narrative beauty and technique.

This paper concentrates on the psychological aspect of the novel. Here an honest attempt has been made to make a psychoanalytic approach of *Cry, the Peacock*.

Literature Review

Cry, the Peacock picks the stupefaction of Maya's psyche confronted with the problems of self-fulfillment in conjugal life. The novel shows how delicately Desai has portrayed the abnormal behavior, obsession, psychological conflict etc. of the neurotic heroine Maya. Maya attracts the attention of both the readers and researchers. Hence her character and conflict have been studied widely and analyzed. Many research works have also been done on various aspects of *Cry, the Peacock*. For example, Roger Iredale writes an article on Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock: The Father in the Unconscious*, S. R. Jamakhandi writes on Artistic Effects of the shifts in point of view in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, D.S. Malini writes on *Cry, the Peacock* as a Poetic Novel, Bharati Ashok Parikh writes on *Cry, the Peacock: A critical Analysis* etc.

This paper attempts a psychoanalytic approach of *Cry, the Peacock*.

Statement of the Research Problem

Anita Desai has been considered as the pioneer of psychological novel in Indian-English literature. Desai's prime focus in all most all of her novels is the exploration of psyche of her female protagonists. She exposes the psychological world of them in her novels in a very delicate manner and *Cry, the Peacock* is not an exception to it. Therefore it is quite reasonable to make a psychoanalytic approach of *Cry, the Peacock*.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are –

- a) To find out the psychological aspects in the novel.
- b) To find out the influence of the character's psyche on his actions.
- c) To analyze the author's handling of psychological issues in the novel.

Research Methodology

The research problem stated is closely associated with literature. Hence data have been collected from both primary and secondary literary sources. Basically descriptive and analytical methods have been used in this paper.

Psychoanalytic approach to Cry, the Peacock

Anita Desai presents her female protagonist Maya as a hyper-sensitive and neurotic married woman who is obsessed with death. The novel begins with Maya's crying helplessly and uncomfortably upon the death of her pet dog Toto. She even grows hysterical. Actually Maya, being a sterile woman, has a mother-child attachment with Toto. Maya considered Toto as her child-substitute and could not bear the loss. On the contrary Maya's husband Gautama has no such feelings for Toto. He, with a view to console his wife promises to buy a new pet. But Maya only wants love and companionship from her husband at the time of despair. Gautama fails to be an emotional support to Maya and hence she feels isolated.

Maya's loneliness has played a significant role in transforming her to a neurotic woman. Moreover, Maya's insatiate biological urges have strong influence on her psyche. Her revelation about her intimate relation with Gautama as husband-wife shows her disharmonious conjugal life. She says:

“Telling me to go to sleep while he worked on some papers, he did not give another thought to the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.” (page no. 14)

Thus, Maya feels rejected and remains lonely even at the presence of her husband.

Maya, as a child has been her father's princess. Her father Rai Sahib has given her all the comfort and luxury. Above all he has proved to be a loving father who takes extra ordinary care of his daughter. According to Maya, 'she lives like a toy princess in a toy world'.

Maya has been married to Gautama who was her father's friend. She has wished that Gautama would be her father-substitute. But Gautama fails to show or provide her with the type of love and care that Maya hopes to get from him. Gautama, as a husband has lagged behind to create the sense of emotional security in her.

Maya's psychological imbalance has grown with the time. Her obsession with death is also increased and deepened equally. This obsession is the bitter fruit of a prediction of an Albino astrologer in her childhood. Maya considers Toto's death as a signal to the realization of the prediction. She has admitted upon Toto's death:

“it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow... (page no13)

Maya as a child was taken to an Albino astrologer who predicted to her:

“Death to one of you when you are married and you shall be married young. Death –an early one –by unnatural causes --- Four years after your marriage.” (page no. 14)

Upon being informed of the prophesy, Maya's father has considered that as baseless. He has advised Maya to forget it as a bad dream. Later on, Maya's incompatible marriage and psychological disturbance has awoken the prophecy that lied

deep in her heart. As Maya enters the fourth year of her marriage, her fear of death of either of them has increased. Gautama terms her talk of fear as 'nonsense talks'. Gautama has not tried to reduce her psychological burden by sharing her pains and worries. Gautama considers Maya's wills and woes as childish, tiresome and even distasteful. He calls it her madness considering her as a 'spoilt child'.

Maya's love sickness has never been cured; hence she becomes more and more frustrated in the course of time. At night she hears the heart rendering cry of the Peacocks for love. Peacocks fight before love-making. Maya asks Gautama to listen how desperately Peacocks cry as 'Lover, lover, Mio, Mio – I die I die'. Gautama fails to hear the love-cry of the Peacocks as he always gives a deaf ear to that of Maya. For Maya, sex is important for a healthy married life as 'in it not union but communion is concerned.' But her husband remains cool against her warm emotions. Maya complains to Gautama:

"Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing...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. But you...You've never loved. And you don't love me... Love has no importance for you." (page no-96)

Maya comes to the conclusion that Gautama is unfit to this romantic world because he shows no interest in love and life. For Gautama, living does not matter whereas it means a lot to Maya.

Finally, Maya has realized the prophecy of the astrologer by killing her husband. Later on, Maya, at a sudden frenzy suicides by jumping from the balcony of her Lucknow house taking along her mother-in-law.

Findings

The findings of this study are –

1. Cry, the Peacock is purely a psychological novel that narrates the sad story of a psychologically imbalanced woman.
2. Anita Desai's mastery over the handling of psychological theme is incredible.
3. It shows how marital disharmony leads to psychological disturbance.

Conclusion

Anita Desai has skillfully delineated with the introvert and hypersensitive female protagonist Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya is found obsessed with the prediction of an early death after her marriage since her girlhood. Desai as her forte uses psychoanalysis as a method to explore the psyche of her neurotic heroine. Maya is psychologically torn between her happy childhood and unhappy married life. Maya's alienation problem, overloaded mental stress, lack of emotional support, love sickness, depression, influence of the prediction – all worked together to make her psychologically imbalanced. Being a psychological dwarf, Maya is unable to confront the harsh realities of life. As a consequence of psychological imbalance, Maya, a tender hearted woman becomes a murderer. The author has used stream of consciousness technique, monologue and soliloquy to expose the psyche of Maya.

This study provides scope of further study on various topics of the novel.

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