



The Theme of Loneliness A Comparative Study of Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock and Bharati Mukherjee's Wife

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Introduction :-

Bharati Mukherjee, born in 1940 in Calcutta, married a Canadian fellow-student, Clark Blaise, at the University of Iowa, in 1963. She lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980. She became a naturalized Canadian, got Canadian citizenship and lived in Toronto and then in Montreal and held teaching positions at McGill University and Concordia University. She migrated to the U.S.A. in 1980 with her family and became a U.S.A. citizen in 1988.

Abstract :-

The India-born writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. The immigrant writers in America can be divided into two categories. Firstly the 'willing immigrant' writers who settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it their home. The second category consists of the 'un-willing immigrant writers' with African origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave ship. But Bharati Mukherjee considers herself different from other European writers for a variety of reasons: "I am very different from other non-European writers in saying that, to me, the loss of old culture is exciting. Is exhilarating. Is a plus rather than a minus. Just describing the extraordinary wealth and comfort that was natural part of my childhood-and which I would have inherited, in whatever damaged ways, if I had stayed on in India-made me realize that I was thrilled to have the opportunity to give it up, to assume a new identity. That kind of Third World hierarchy where your opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family was horrendous to me."¹

There is today a considerable body of fiction in English written by Indians. In the last two decades, two women writers, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee, have won world-wide recognition. There are other women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande who have made great strides but the kind of critical attention that has been given to Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee is unparalleled.

Anita Desai has to her credit nine novels, besides two collections of short stories. She won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, besides the Winifred Holby Award, and the Guardian Award. Her books have been short-listed for the Booker Prize. *Custody* is now slated to be picturised by the famous Merchant Ivory combine which has brought Jhabvala's novels to the screen. Bharati Mukherjee's creative output consists of three novels *Wife*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Jasmine*, two works of non-fiction and two collections of short stories. It is with her winning the prestigious National Book Critics Award in 1988 for *The Middleman and Other Stories* that she has come into limelight.

In *Cry, the Peacock* and *Wife* there is a marked similarity with regard to the central episode they present. Maya in Anita Desai's novel and Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's novel take the extreme step of killing their husbands. This final act is the culmination point of gradual disintegration of personality. While there are obvious points of similarity, there are also significant differences. What are the paths that the protagonists traverse before they reach the moment of catastrophe? Is there a tragic inevitability about the conclusion that both novelists reach?

The anguish in Maya's life may be traced to the fact that she believes surrender of self to be subtraction from her personal freedom and wholeness. While Maya longs for love, she is at the same time afraid of involvement. Maya's unhappiness can be traced in part to external circumstances—her over-protected childhood and adolescence which makes it difficult for her to face the realities of adult life, the Oedipus complex for excessive love and dependence on her father which makes her seek a father substitute in her husband Gautama which obviously is not possible. This complex prevents her from achieving a satisfactory sexual relationship with her husband. Then there is her superstitious belief in the albino astrologer's prophecy itself, her father's handling of the episode, the dismissal of ayah, the hounding out of the astrologer—make Maya push the disagreeable prophecy deep into her subconscious. The death of her pet dog Toto triggers her memory and once again she is caught up in the horror of the possibility of her imminent death. All these are the carefully woven mosaic of forces that undermine Maya's sense of well-being. But strictly speaking Maya's unhappiness is the product of her own consciousness. She is one of those highly sensitive creatures who are precariously balanced between reason and unreason. There is a tension in her, produced by her vibrant love of life and beauty and her obsessive fear of death.

Anita Desai's fictional prose is densely textured, enabling her to convey vividly Maya's sensuous delight in her surroundings. Her delight in textures, scents, sounds and even silence is palpable. It is this very love of life that increases her horror of 'non-being.' Anita Desai depicts the life of her protagonist Maya on two levels, the external and internal. At the external level, life is meaningless- because Maya's pervasive need for love, understanding, communion of souls she longs for, are not available. Gautama and Maya are not kindred souls. The kind of love that Catherine and Heathcliff feel for each other, which makes it possible for Catherine to declare so confidently "I am Heathcliff" is something Gautama cannot imagine even. There is gradual disenchantment, frustration, a sense of aloneness-which is almost existential in its intensity. Maya's neurosis deepens till the dividing line between sanity and insanity disappears. One of the most poignant features of the exploration of Maya's inner landscape is that Maya herself is conscious of her descent into madness. She is helpless to arrest it.

It is difficult to say at which precise point Maya decides that the death prophesied by the astrologer need not be hers but Gautama's. Thoughts of suicide turn into homicidal impulse. Gautama's fate is sealed.

In Mukherjee's novel, *Wife*, the problem between Dimple and her husband Amit Basu is one of communication, and an inability to come to terms with reality. Maya is a born rebel who cannot conform to society's dictates even in such a matter as the dress code, who finds no one in tune with her sensitive personality and tastes. Dimple is a far simpler character whose dreams are purely materialistic. All she wants out of life is a marriage to a neurosurgeon (a strange choice) and the luxuries of consumer society. She marries Amit, an engineer, who wants to immigrate to USA the golden land of opportunity. Her drab surroundings in Calcutta fill her with frustration but there is a difference in the quality of existential anguish experienced by Maya and the more pedestrian sense of frustration felt by Dimple.

Amit Basu successfully migrates to America but Dimple finds that it takes time to make good. Life is an uphill struggle where you are. Dimple is not a strong enough person to withstand the struggle. She does not have the required mental resilience. In fact here very name Dimple which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as a slight surface depression," symbolizes her essential shallowness. To dismiss Dimple's predicament as solely due to failure to adjust with an alien culture, is too simplistic.

Dimple is a psychically disturbed person-even as Maya is though the causes are different. Depression is a serious mental ailment which has been depicted with great skill by both the novelists. The stages of disenchantment with their situation in life, frustration, the onset of neurosis, the gradual but perceptible building up of mental tension till the final link with sanity is snapped-this is common to both the novels.

The interesting deviation is why does Dimple kill her husband and Maya kill Gautama? Have the novelists in question laid enough foundation in the early parts of their novels to make the tragic conclusion inevitable?

In *Cy, the Peacock*- a novel which uses imagery as a mode of expression-the very title hints at the tragic end-for the peacocks which cry 'pia, pia' end by destroying themselves and their loves. In *Wife* there are enough ominous signs. The visions of abortion, killing of the foetus, a violent act against herself and her husband, the savagery with which Dimple kills a mouse, one notices that violence is out of all proportion to the object being killed:

"I'll get you" she screamed. "There's no way out of this my friend." She seemed confident now, a woman transformed. And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering¹. Her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head.

Both the women go through mental trauma which allows them not peace. The sense of violence and aggression is heightened in *Wife* by the pervasive violence of American life. Dimple confesses that in America talking about murders was like talking about weather. Anita Desai similarly refers to the pervasive spirit of violence in the cities.

While Maya is resigned to her arid marital life, Dimple makes a pitiful attempt to prove to herself that she is attractive to men by an affair with Milt Glasser. She realizes soon enough that it merely makes her more miserable.

The actual act of murder is achieved in startlingly different ways in the two novels under study. Maya plans and carries out Gautama's murder in a chillingly causal way. With a kind of composure, clarity of mind and purpose that the mad sometimes display, Maya lures Gautama to the terrace and in a sudden burst of fury, because Gautama stood between her and moon-light, she pushes him off the terrace to his death. She tries to rationalize the act, Justifying it to herself by saying that Gautama is so uninvolved with life that he does not savour it-he merely exists-so death will not make a real difference. Maya's descent into total madness, her regression into childhood, and eventual death are accomplished with tremendous compactness.

Dimple's murder of her husband is presented in soft focus. It seems to take place in a neurotically charged atmosphere which is almost surrealistic:

She sneaked up on him chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable

spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder. (212-13)

One wonders if Dimple's stab seven times is some kind of weird reenactment of the marriage ritual where the couple take seven steps together. She seems to be symbolically destroying the marriage bond.

Conclusion

Anita Desai in *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharati Mukherjee in *Wife* thus present the theme of loneliness, with variation no doubt. The theme in both the novels has implications beyond the tragedy of the protagonists. Bharati Mukherjee's treatment suggests that Dimple's predicament transcends that of an individual enmeshed in the limbo of cultural shock, Anita Desai's protagonist face the predicament of the tragic isolation of the individual and consequent sense of the absurdity of human life.

