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CONNECTING NEUROSIS AND FAILED MARRIAGE IN ANITA DESAI'S FICTION

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Abstract: Anita Desai's novels reveal the inner sensibility of the protagonists, as they are trapped in their mundane existence and are forced to conform to stereotypical roles. Therefore, Desai's fiction offers us a world where we find collective family on one hand and a sensitive and alienated woman on the other. In most cases her protagonists are married. But, for having a neurotic make up, they fail to cope with their surroundings, especially marriage. Hence, an essential way to read Desai's fiction would be to find the connection between neurosis and failed marriages in the novels.

Index Terms: Neurosis, Marriage, Anita Desai.

Anita Desai remains one of the prominent writers of Indian English Fiction and is known for adding a new dimension to Indian English Fiction with her sensitive portrayal of the inner lives and troubled psyche of her female protagonists. While her contemporaries like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and others were emphasizing on social, political reality of the emerging India of that time, Desai shifted her focus into the inner world of women. Her novels delineate the inner sensibility of the protagonists, as they are trapped in their daily lives and are forced to perform all the roles. Therefore, her fiction offers us a world where we find collective family on one hand and a sensitive and alienated woman on the other. In most cases her protagonists are married and having a neurotic make up, they fail to cope with their surroundings, especially marriage. Hence, an essential way to read Desai's fiction would be to find the connection between neurosis and failed marriages in the novels. Notwithstanding a body of critical literature invested in the oeuvre of Anita Desai, there seems to be a lack of adequate attention to exploring the issue of failed marriages in Desai's works and more specifically to examining the role of the neurotic make up of Desai's female protagonists in contributing to the failed marriages. This paper aims at addressing the issue in the light of the theory of neurosis as put forward by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Karen Horney.

The existing body of critical literature on Desai focuses on various issues like existential crisis, Indianness, and use of imagery in her novels. These works also emphasize on the feminist strains in Desai's novels. Some of them offer critical insights into the psychological issues in her protagonists. But even then in them the scope of the psychoanalytic study remains restricted. These full length critical works include Usha Bande's *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict* (1988) and Jasbir Jain's *Stair to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* (1987) which attempt to examine the characters of Desai and explore it from psychological perspectives. Meena Belliappa's *The Fiction of Anita Desai* (1971) attempts to locate Anita Desai in the tradition of Indian English fiction focusing on her first two novels. *The Atlantic Critical Study of Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain* (2005) by Rama Kundu examines themes like existential crisis of the female protagonist as well as the feminist discourses in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. R.S. Sharma's *Anita Desai* focuses on Desai being a "novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind and psyche." (Sharma 166) *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study* (2000) edited by M.K. Bhatnagar and M. Rajeswar is a collection of twenty three critical essays on a number of novels by Desai and deals with various issues like alienation, fate, superstition and psyche, use of images,

symbols and other poetic devices. N.R.Gopal's *Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai* (1999) attempts to focus on Desai's themes in her novels as well as her technical skills. R.K.Gupta's *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective* (2002), as the title reflects, examines Desai's fiction from the perspective of feminism. Madhusudan Prasad's book *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (1982) critically examines the existential crisis of Desai's protagonists. From the review of these full length critical works dealing with various themes related to Desai's female protagonists, it may be summed up that these critical works grapple with the crisis of her female protagonists.

Besides these critical works on Desai, a range of critical articles and reviews deals with various issues in Desai's fiction. Like the full length critical works on Desai, the issues that the articles explore can be categorized into five broad groups: Self-alienation; search for identity; feminist perspectives; structure and techniques of the novels, use of imagery and symbols in the novels and existential crisis. A number of articles deals with the issues of marriage and incompatibility in marital relationships but these articles limit their attention to the neurotic nature of only one protagonist of Desai, namely Maya, in the novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). In his essay "Anita Desai's Novels as Post-modernist Projections" (2014), Md. Amir Hossain has drawn our attention to "The theme of the marital alienation in the mind of women as impacted in her popular novels" (Hossain 222). While commenting on Maya and Goutama's lack of communication as husband-wife in *Cry, the Peacock*, Hossain points out that the cardinal reasons behind marital discord and loneliness of Indian woman are "age-difference, difference in maturation, Indian Philosophy of segregations and mental relationship between husband and wife" (Hossain 224) and hence doesn't address the issue of neurosis. In one article "Temperamental incompatibility in Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*" (2013), Rumita Sharma emphasizes on the marital discord between Goutama and Maya and observes, "This novel grapples with the theme of incompatibility and lack of understanding in marital life." (Sharma 581) In her words, "In short, the fatal distance between Gautama and Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) arising from a temperamental incompatibility is the basis to the theme of psychic disintegration." (Sharma 582) The article "Neurosis and Incompatible Marriage: An Analysis of Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*" (2016) by Asmat Jahan and Shaifta Ayoub also limits its focus only to Maya's journey from neurosis to psychosis on account of incompatible marital relationship. They observe, "The novel captures the inner consciousness of Maya who is caught in the vicious web of anxious deliberation. Throughout the narrative, the long passages of introspection provide a picture of Maya's mind." (Ayoub and Jahan 114) This paper explores Maya's childhood and her present married life with Goutama. Therefore a review of critical literature on Desai's novels reveals that critical attention to the issue of neurosis in her protagonists is limited mostly to Maya. A full length study is therefore essential to examine the scope of the theories of neurosis when applied on Desai's range of female protagonists who fail to negotiate marriage.

This paper intends to explore the neurotic conflicts of the female protagonists and its impact on the marital relationship. The gap in the existing body of critical literature on Desai seems to lie in exploring the neurotic make up of the females and its contribution to the failed marriages.

A study of psychoanalytical theories of neurosis as put forward by the theorists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Karen Horney, however, appears to offer clues related to the behaviour of the protagonists in the novels. Sigmund Freud in his lectures on the theory of Neurosis in the book *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920) identifies the neurotic symptoms as substitutes for sexual satisfaction. Freud identifies the "libido" with sexual impulse and Freud's concept of Neurosis is that of an illness caused by self-denial. He explains the symptoms, meaning of neuroses in part three of the book. Freud observes, "The neurotic symptoms then have their meaning just like errors and the dream, and like these they are related to the lives of the persons in whom they appear." (Freud 221-22) Jung, another exponent of this theory, disagrees with Freud that neurosis arises from some infantile sex-traumatism and is based on subconscious dispositions. Rather Jung finds that neurosis arises out of conflict and he situates the causes behind neurosis primarily in the present. Jung also identifies neurosis as an "adaptation" that has failed. Jung defines neurosis in his lectures on Analytical psychology that Neurosis represents an unsuccessful attempt on the part of the individual to solve the general problem in his own person. Jung also assigns greater importance to the social environment in the production of the neurosis. Jung adds that Neurosis is itself a self-cure, a struggle to find a less burdensome solution to conflict, one which will work. The theory of neurosis as put forward by Freud and Jung can be related to the neurotic tendencies in Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Karen Horney came up with a different theory of neurosis centred on the interpersonal relations in the formation of personality and coping strategies in

her book *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950). In the introductory section “A Morality of Evolution” of the book *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Karen Horney says “The Neurotic process is a special form of human development, and--- because of the waste of constructive energies which it involves--- is a particularly unfortunate one.” (Horney 13) Horney puts emphasis on culture and environment and opines that the Neurotic process is a special form of human development but it includes the waste of constructive energies. Karen Horney gives the concepts of real self, self-realization and the idealized image. According to Horney, the basic factor in a child’s growth remains his beginning alienation from self. The result is that he starts losing self-confidence and “his relations to others would be disturbed without his having become inwardly unrelated to them.” (Horney 21) The gradual outcome of this process is that unconsciously imagination sets to work and create in his mind an ‘idealized image’. Thereby it gives the individual the much-needed feeling of significance and superiority over others. Horney is of the opinion that a Neurotic, to all outward appearances, may lead a normal life as a member of family and community, attend to his work but he lives in two worlds- that of the secret, private life and the normal life. Though Horney discusses the theory of Neurosis from intrapsychic angle, he also speaks about interpersonal ones. His concepts of ‘superior to others’, ‘triumph over others’ are directly concerned with interpersonal relations. Horney modifies the traditional psychoanalytic theory and minimizes the role of biology with an emphasis on culture and interpersonal relations. Horney differs from her contemporaries who believe that neurosis is more like a severe mental condition caused by negative experiences during childhood and other negative impact. In her other book *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis* (1945), she speaks about the neurotic conflicts and their solutions that are to be found in the three types of coping strategies: “Moving towards people”, “Moving against people” and “Moving away from people” which are crucial in dealing with the complex interpersonal relationships in life. The concepts of “real self” and “idealized image” given by Horney and her prescribed coping strategies seem to relate to the cases of Desai’s protagonists’ as they suffer from this conflict of “real self” and “idealized image” and also develop coping strategies in different stages of their married life. An extensive study can be made of this issue with the help of the theory of neurosis.

In the light of these three theorists’ explanation of the theory of neurosis, three protagonists of Desai and their marriage can be investigated. Maya, in Desai’s maiden novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), is a sensitive woman who is incapable of leading an independent existence. In Maya’s case, her childhood life is linked with her father’s excessive attention towards her and this filial affection has left serious consequences in her married life. Her marriage with Goutama is an instance of an incompatible one where she pines for his companionship but Goutama pays least attention to her emotional demands. The novel starts with the death of her pet dog and Desai from this point highlights Maya’s sensitivity. Death of the dog invokes in Maya an unknown fear, “Something slipped into my tear-hazed vision, a shadowy something, that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair.” (CTP 13) As the plot develops, Maya’s world comes into clash with the physical reality and it destabilizes her real self. Goutama is irritated at Maya’s nature: “Neurotic... Neurotic, that’s what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can’t bear one adverse word. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya- that is what her father has taught her.” (CTP 98) Maya becomes the victim of her own demands and gradually eliminates the real world around her. Maya’s case can be investigated through the explanations provided by Freud as well as Karen Horney.

While in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Sita is a contrast to Maya. Though fed up with her marriage and the duty of raising the children, Sita escapes to an island where she had spent her childhood days, she tends to reconcile with life and its problems at the end. Sita is disgusted with the problems of her life at the onset of the novel and she attempts to protest against her monotonous life by escaping to a place where she had spent her childhood. The novel has three parts and Sita’s predicament and successive escape are described in these sections. Sita, a middle-aged woman, escapes her marriage and four children with a whim not to give birth to the fifth child in her womb. This act certainly places Sita along with other neurotic protagonists of Desai but she finally comes back and accepts life as it is. The three sections of the novel capture the three phases of Sita’s mental state. In the first part, “Monsoon 67”, Sita puts a rebellious attempt to take the decision to go to Manori, “What I’m doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again.” (WSWGTS 32) The second part, “Winter 47” records Sita’s life twenty year back and her childhood phase where she has grown up as a compliant person. Unlike Maya’s father, Sita’s father was totally indifferent to her and this negligence has influenced Sita’s life. In her later life which constitutes the part one of the novel, we

find her in conflicts as a consequence of this past life. The third part, "Monsoon 67", is a continuation of the first part and reflects Sita's resigned nature. The novel ends with Sita's return to her normal life with her husband and children. Sita's case throws light on so many issues as search for love, search for home, absence of family especially mother in Sita's case, alienation and a parallel sense of belonging to someone- all of which can be discussed in the light of the theories of neurosis.

Nanda Kaul, the oldest among Desai's protagonists, in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) can be an interesting study following the theories of Karen Horney. Nanda is seen at Carignano at the onset of the novel, after living a long life full of duties as a mother and a wife. She has performed the multiple responsibilities of running the household, rearing the children, maintaining the status of the wife of a Vice-Chancellor in past. Now, she avoids all duties and relations and lives away from all "demands, requests, promises and queries" at Carignano. This strong sense of detachment of Nanda and her wish to live alone presents her as a very strong and formidable individual while the flashbacks reveal Nanda's past where she has been in compliance with her life and has remained a sacrificing woman just performing all duties. She ignored all her desires and remained a self-effacing one. The present state of Nanda stands a contrast to Nanda in past where she was attending guests, serving her husband:

Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the verandah that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after. (FOTM 29)

Nanda has never protested against this burden of duties but the isolation has led to her creation of a pride and victorious self in order to hide this fear of isolation. Therefore, in her later life she has shifted to Carignano with a realization that she has discharged all her duties. We also learn at the onset of the novel that "it was the place, the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for in her life- as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief- and at last she had it." (FOTM 3) The sudden arrival of Raka breaks her peaceful world and Nanda is disgusted at the thought of performing duties again. On the reverse, Raka's stay at Carignano and Ila's (Nanda's friend) death make it clear that the life that Nanda was so proud of, was just a pretence from her part to hide her sense of failure. Horney's explanations of neurosis help to understand the behaviour of Nanda in two phases of her life.

Thus, Desai's fiction focuses very much on the lives of protagonists who have neurotic strains and are unable to cope with their marriage leading to failed marriages. The theories and explanations on neurosis, as put forward by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Karen Horney, crucial as they are to the analysis of the fictional characters of Desai with their demands, anxieties, failures, and inability to cope with circumstances, relate very much to these explanations. Desai in her attempt to portray the inner world of her protagonists, foregrounds the psychological world of these protagonists and we will be able to understand this if we explore this issue in the novels of Anita Desai and attempt to find the connection between neurosis and failed marriage in her novels.

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