



The Feminist Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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In the growth and development of the Indo-Anglian novel, the feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively later manifestation. Anita Desai presents “the welcome creative release of the feminine sensibility” (Rao, 1972 : 50), which emerged thoroughly in the post-Independence era. Desai is a novelist of considerable merits and has enriched the Indian novel in English in various ways. It is her thematic concerns and technical innovations that have been chiefly responsible for making her “a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction”. (Maini, 1977 : 216). Desai’s interests are far more psychological than social, political or sociological. Exploration of the deeper and inner-most core of the consciousness of her characters, particularly, her female protagonists, constitutes, by and large, the singular forte of Anita Desai as a novelist and also as a woman-writer.

However, before detailing the feminist dimension as portrayed by Anita Desai in her novels, it is highly pertinent here to have an overview of the critical theory and praxis of feminism, in general, the world over, and in India, in particular. Feminist critical theory is considered to be a political discourse, a literary and theoretical commitment to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism and not merely a gender study in literature. In fact, feminist critical perspective and theory become pertinent to the study and analysis of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes.

India has always been proud, and justifiably so, of its enduring family values. The changing lifestyles and the growing prosperity give the modern women confidence and they are no speaking out their concerns – physical security, emotional well-being, financial self-sufficiency or their rights. The dynamics that are at work around women inside and outside the homes, therefore, need close scrutiny. Literature can never float in a neutral ideology and a ‘perfect’ text should have the potential to yield itself to different interpretations. Josephine Donovan goes to the extent of advocating the paradigmatic shift in the study of a text from the traditional ‘aesthetic’ aspect to the newer version such as its ‘moral’ aspect. Even within a

system, the focus keeps shifting from one angle to another. For instance, feminists tend to move from ‘andocentric’ to ‘gynocentric’ approach to the issues of women. Even women begin to build their ‘heterocosm’ totally opposed to patriarchally accepted social norms. In literature, authors portray women in two easily identifiable categories – ‘good’ women, the ideal version and the ‘bad’ women, the spoilers of men. But the true-to-life models, perchance, lie somewhere in between.

Generally speaking, feminism is a complex and complicated term that eludes a precise definition. All the advocates of feminism do not necessarily concur with one another in dealing with the atrocities against women or in defining a common framework of approach. “But it is really the very product of culture of change” (Singh, 2001 : iv). The liberal feminism presupposes the position of women in society as unequal, denying them the ‘autonomy’ or ‘freedom’ in public arena. Radical feminists strategically aim at attacking the subordination of women in terms of body politics – the sexual oppression. Thus they could differentiate between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ The Marxist-Socialist concept of feminism analyses the class system based on wealth. They insist that fundamentally men and women are the same and the distinction lies only through their social status. The Socialist feminism has three strands of tradition – the social construction of gender, the theory of power through capitalist patriarchy and the ‘dynamic duo’ approach – the interaction of sexual and class oppression, as propounded by Heidi Hartmann. Identity crisis and lack of self-assertion among women lead to hypersensitivity and hysterics and ultimately transforming them into neurotic patients. This is known as psycho-analytic feminism. The existential feminists determine women as martyrs – the internalized concept embedded in their different roles in society as wife, mother, sister etc. the French feminism is more oriented towards creating awareness about their physical beauty rather spiritual or moral issues and it is devoid of any postulates. Lastly, the post-modern feminism emphasises the heterogeneous kind of women’s oppression, bursting the bubble of universality of suffering of women. Each school of thought focuses on one facet of feminism, excluding or incorporating other ideals.

Desai’s novels, however, foreground quite a different variant of feminism, one that was not confrontationist, outlandish and flamboyant. Hers is a sombre, sober, psycho-analytical rendering of her female protagonists. Her debut novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is the story of her protagonist Maya to an older man, a detached, sober, industrious lawyer. Theirs is an incompatible marriage. Temperamentally, they are antithetical to each other. Maya is a highly sensitive woman, while her husband Gautama is too cool, calculating and professional to be able to reciprocate her sentiments and disturbed emotions. H.W. Williams has rightly remarked,

“Cry, the Peacock is a disturbing novel, mostly takes the form of interior monologue, delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya” (Williams; 1976 : 87).

The novel begins, with quite an ominous ring:

“All day long the body lay rotten in the sun” (Cry, the Peacock 5).

An average evening for Maya is hardly more than “a quiet formal waiting” (Cry, the Peacock 7). Their marital life is punctuated all along by “matrimonial silences” (p. 12) and her husband’s “hardness his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy” (p. 9). The novel tells the story of a young sensitive girl Maya obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable alienations. Their fate reminds one of that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*. Maya is pained and anguished by the cold in difference and the Total Lack of communication on Gautama’s part :

“How little he knew my suffering, or of how to comfort me. Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body, or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed” (Cry, the Peacock 9).

The central theme of marital incompatibility and discord lays stress particularly on women. Maya and Gautama are the chief exponents of this problem with emphasis and poignancy all around them. The title of the novel sensitively relates the spiritual pangs of Maya, the half-child, half-woman romantic heroine, who identifies herself with the peacocks in the agony of ecstasy of their fatal love-experience :

“Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine” (Cry, the Peacock 97).

At the very outset, one becomes fully aware of Maya’s infantilism, hyper sensitivity and a highly disturbed state of mind. The death motif is built skillfully into the theme of the novel. Her pet dog Toto’s death fills Maya’s mind with a premonition of some impending tragedy, as she exclaims in Chapter I of Part Two of the novel :

“..... 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” (Cry, the Peacock 8).

Like Macbeth, she is haunted by the dire prediction because “four years it was now, we had been married four years I knew the time had come. It was now to be either Gautama, or I” (Cry, the Peacock 32-33). The prediction of the albino astrologer creates a terrible commotion in her consciousness. Reacting to the untimely death of Toto, she rushes to the garden tap “to wash the vision from her eyes” (p. 15). But her husband remains unaffected and would shrug “her words off as superfluous, trivial” (p. 19). A restlessness always boils within her and the estrangement holds them apart –

“Maya feels defenceless and utterly alone in the company of the bleak, comfortless figure passing as her husband” (p. 146).

In her perturbations and, on receipt of her brother's letter, Maya tries to convince her own self by way of self-arguments and interior monologues, that for the fulfilment of the astrologer's prophecy, her own was not necessary; it might well be Gautama's because
"the man had no contact with the world, or with me" (p. 175)

Thus convinced, the eccentric Maya pushes Gautama off the terrace to death, not much sure what she was going to get by this mariticide. Symbolically rendered, this mariticide may be imagined as the take-off point for the women's liberation movement in the then India during the early 1960s, a rather more drastic variant than its bra-burning global counterpart. But Maya did not get any solace and ultimately her psychic problems, aggravated by her infanticism, drove her to a sort of schizophrenia. Maya felt herself as –

"a body without a heart, a heart without a body" (p. 196).

And, in spite of her rationalisation in the end she kills herself. A painful and languid remorse keeps on haunting the stricken conscience of Maya :

"Gautama, had you but caught me then, you might have stayed me !" (Cry, the Peacock 142).

The lines from songs and couplets she used to murmur and whisper to herself in her father's and husband's homes, no more bring her joy and satisfaction :

"But the only one I can recall is once that now brings tears to my eyes :

'I might, after all, have achieved the way to grace,
Had you but granted me a few years more, O Lord.'

I conjure up odours and temperatures out of the air, seeking to recreate the world I have cost, and succeed in summoning up a host of visions so vivid, so brilliant, that they sear me and annihilate me, my body and my surroundings, and I am torn between two worlds – the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness. My body breaks in the battle" (Cry, the Peacock 148).

Maya, the female protagonists, thus unravels the enigma of the feminine psyche in myriad ways, and yet keeping her identity, her individual personality. Born and brought up in a wealthy Brahmin family in an ethos of traditional values of culture, and luxury and almost cloistered life, she appears rather unaware of the harsh realities of domestic life. Self-acknowledged, she behaves a la 'toy-princess' :

"...my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But was a pretty one" (Cry, the Peacock 89).

Thus, Anita Desai, through her novels, portrays the feminist yearning for an autonomous space in the male-dominant Indian society, albeit in a much broader perspective. That her novels, therefore, portray females' desire for individuality, dignity, equality and liberty from social and traditional bondages in the patriarchal society, is an established and well-researched aspect of Desai's forte as a novelist, and a

woman novelist at that. Denying to take a narrow feminist approach, she herself asserts that she prefers to write broadly and mainly about women for she knows and understands them best.

“Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth.”

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