



Familial Relationships in Anita Desai's 'Cry, the Peacock'

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT Anita Desai holds a significant place as modern Indian English novelist. Most of her critics have focussed their attention on the psychological and existentialist approach in her novels. For them 'existentialism' seems to be a favourite subject of Anita Desai where the characters recognize the world as negative and meaningless and feel alienated. Their critical attention revolves round her manner of individualising the characters and presenting them as hypersensitive, solitary and introspective. Such an approach to her novels completely ignores an important dimension of her fictional writing i.e. her attempt to record reactions and responses of her characters to each other in their effort to adjust in their respective familial relationships. The present paper attempts to focus that Anita Desai has made the theme of familial relationships basic and central in her novels and her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock' is concerned with failure of the central character Maya to have a meaningful and sustaining relationship with any other member of the family in general and her husband Gautama in particular. Anita Desai holds a significant place as modern Indian English novelist. Most of her critics have focussed their attention on the psychological and existentialist approach in her novels. For them 'existentialism' seems to be a favourite subject of Anita Desai where the characters recognize the world as negative and meaningless and feel alienated. Their critical attention revolves round her manner of individualising the characters and presenting them as hypersensitive, solitary and introspective. Such an approach to her novels completely ignores an important dimension of her fictional writing i.e. her attempt to record reactions and responses of her characters to each other in their effort to adjust in their respective familial relationships. The present paper attempts to focus that Anita Desai has made the theme of familial relationships basic and central in her novels and her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock' is concerned with failure of the central character Maya to have a meaningful and sustaining relationship with any other member of the family in general and her husband Gautama in particular.

Anita Desai is widely praised as the finest of her generation of Indian writers in English. She is known for the difficult task of moulding the English language and idiom to her purpose without a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian. Her works like any other important work of art, have been created not in a state of vacuum, but are endowed with the efforts of the author who is acutely conscious of her social milieu and responds to its various aspects in an artistic manner. Her works offer an increasing sobering commentary on the human conditions while focussing on familial relationships and conflict between the individuals facing the overwhelming and seemingly incomprehensible power of family and society. In the well-knit Indian social system, the individual as a part of the family exists in relationship with others as father or mother, as a son or daughter, as a husband or wife. As most of the characters of Anita Desai are not ready to mingle themselves with the outer world by shedding of their individuality they are not able to make harmonious relationship with others. Thus most of the familial relationships depicted in her novels are hollow and meaningless. Here it would be appropriate to quote Dr. N. Raj Gopal who has said that "The inner most psyche of her protagonists is revealed to us through their interaction with those who are emotionally related to them on the basis of kinship. For the purposes of fiction, no human relationship is more fertile and potential than that in the family and especially among the kins." He goes on to comment that "the emotional crises among kins are born of the realisation that the kins fall short of the ideal in such relationship"¹.

In her very first novel, 'Cry, the Peacock', Anita Desai is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmonious and unfulfilled family relationships. The heroine, Maya, has been depicted in many roles discharging difficult familial duties. Born in an old orthodox family, Maya enjoyed life which provided her love and pleasure along with discipline in her father's house. She is a pampered child, surrounded with all comforts and marks of affluence. As a young girl, living under the protected roof of her father's house at Lucknow, she has the affectionate and kindly care of her father who is over indulgent towards her. She feels like a princess living in a fairy-land. Moreover, she is motherless and suffers from deprivation of the maternal

love. In this type of atmosphere, the growth of her personality is not normal and she suffers from the cause of egocentricity and possessiveness. Due to over caring nature of her father and the absence of any other woman in the family, she remains deprived of the sort of training she should have received to meet the challenges of life where pain and pleasure co-exist. The fairy world of her father's house makes her unable to face the realities of life after marriage. Besides all this, she is also haunted by Albino astrologer's prophecy who had predicted early marriage for her and unnatural death to one of the couple four years after the marriage. At that time Maya was not much worried about it but after marriage due to Gautama's unresponsiveness and too much of her introversion, the Albino astrologer's prophecy reverberates in her mind as the four year period stipulated by him is just coming to an end. Though Gautama in his own way is indulgent and affectionate enough for Maya but it is the inner spiritual contact that fails to click. It is due to this communication gap between them that Maya hesitates to lay bare her mind to Gautama and is driven towards insanity which becomes the cause of tragic end of both of them.

'Cry, the Peacock' shows how different experiences of the couple during their childhood in their families lead to disharmony in their later married life. Maya and Gautama belong to two different worlds which is the cause of incompatibility and unhappiness in their married life. Maya, who is the protagonist of the novel, has a very happy childhood in her father's house. She is left to enjoy the full share of her father's affection as she is motherless and also her brother Arjuna runs away from home at an early age. That's why she starts thinking about the days spent at her father's house in her childhood whenever she feels frustrated in her married life. Gautama, on the other hand, has grown on the prescriptive norms and traditional expectations. He has been brought up in a totally different family atmosphere. His mother is a social worker. She works very hard and moves about pretty fast to attend to needs of her dispensary, or her crèche, or her workshop for the blind, the disables and the unemployed. His family members have innumerable subjects to speak on and they speak incessantly of: "discussions in parliament, of

cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government”². His father is a freedom fighter and wants to write a book about freedom struggle and a free India. He also has no time to make emotional attachments with his family members as he is busy in one activity or other. Thus both overprotective and restrictive family environments bring about adverse effects on the individuals which prove fatal for them and make them unable to have normal family relationships after marriage. Maya grows as a highly sensitive and emotional type of woman and Gautama is an over busy and intellectual type and is practical to the core. It is due to this temperamental difference between the two that their marriage proves to be incompatible.

The fulfilment in relations in marriage which Maya desires to have is discerned by her in the married life of two of her close friends Leila and Pom. She remembers how devotedly Leila was busy caring her husband when once she went to meet her. Similarly Pom who does not bother about anything and is a typical woman with “lust for newness, for brightness, colour and gaiety” (p. 60) is in total contrast to Maya who is “fragile, with deep cultural roots and refined sensibilities”. However Maya now rejects the idea of meeting her friends as there is not one of them who connects as an anchor to her. She is not able to achieve fullness in familial relations just like her friends have as she lacks Leila’s theory of acceptance and Pom’s good behaviour and flexibility of mind. The hollowness of various familial relationships in the novel is also highlighted through the depiction of the character of Nila, who’s married life is not happy and who has come to her brother, Gautama to seek his help in getting divorce from her husband. But Gautama is not ready to fight her case as he considers it below his dignity to fight divorce cases like cheap lawyers.

Though Maya does not find Gautama according to her expectations and has adopted a complaining attitude towards him she herself is also responsible of her tragedy to some extent. Due to her over sensitive and over possessive nature she is not able to have a meaningful relationship with her husband. Maya’s obsession with death derives her to a curious insanity. Her insanity prevails over her common sense which finally forces her to push Gautama over the parapet who falls down to death and becomes the victim of her madness. Her giggles of laughter at the end of the novel are partly due to her idea that now she is free to enjoy life but the dark cloud of insanity is not yet clear from her mind and probably in a fit of madness she jumps out of the open balcony and meets the same end at Gautama did.

Thus the novel abounds in variety of familial relationships and has many references which give a deeper insight into the nature of relationships the characters make with each other. On the one hand, there are characters like Maya and Gautama who lack the flexibility in their relationship and ultimately meet their tragic end; and on the other hand, there are Pom and Leila who are always trying to give meaning to their married life. If Maya feels safe in her father’s world, her brother Arjuna rebels it. If Nila is unhappy in her married life and is seeking divorce, there is her mother who hates the matters like divorces which keep the children away from her father. Anita Desai is a close observer of what she has called “the web of (family) relationships, sticky and sweet, clinging and trapping.”³ It is therefore, natural for her, who depicts the “tensions and anxieties of being modern in a traditional society to make family the centre of almost all of her novels”⁴ and that is true of her first novel ‘Cry, the Peacock’.

REFERENCE

1. N. Raj Gopal, *A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai* (Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 4. | 2. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1999), 46. All subsequent references from the text are from the same addition, and the page numbers in all such cases have been given in parenthesis immediately following the quotation. | 3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s website: <http://web.mit.edu> | 4. N. Raj. Gopal,