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An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2016.1.1.11

Cry The Peacock: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract

Anita Majumdar Desai is a Sahitya Akademy Award winning writer. She received this award for the novel *Fire on the Mountain* in 1978. She has fourteen novels to her credit. As a novelist she has been shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize successively in the years 1980 for the novel *Clear Light of Day*, 1984 for the novel *In Custody*, 1999 for the novel *Fasting, Feasting*. She was born in Mussoorie on 24 June 1937. She is an Indian novelist and the Emeritus John Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She was born to a German mother, Toni Nime, and a Bengali businessman, D.N. Mazumdar.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Diaspora, Nightmare, Prototype

Cry, the Peacock is a novel written by Anita Desai. This was her first novel. This novel was published in 1963. Maya is the central character of this novel. Gautama is her husband. Maya is a young and sensitive married girl. She is troubled by a childhood foretelling of a fatal disaster. Her father is a well established advocate in Lucknow. Her mother died at an early age. Her brother went abroad to carve out his future. She lived with his father. As she was alone in her family, she received her father's affection in great abundance. She lives a carefree life. She develops an unbalanced view of life. She takes world as it is made for her. Her pre-marital life with her father is full of love, affection and care that she receives from her father. After marriage to Gautama she wishes to receive same love and affection that she received from her father. Gautama is a busy, prosperous lawyer. He does not get time to care for her. She feels ignored and depressed. She becomes melancholic. Gautama in place of supporting her, scolds her for being morbid. He on noticing her gloominess warns her of turning neurotic. He is so engrossed in his work that he hates her mental illness. He blames



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her father for spoiling her. She was obsessed with the prophecy made by an astrologer in her childhood that after four years of her marriage; either she or her husband would die. Her father directly rejects the prophecy. He calls it fake and garbage. He asks Maya to forget this prophecy. She obeys her father and keeps the prediction of the albino astrologer repressed in her conscious, but this does not last long.

She is unable to forget the frightening words of the prediction. After her marriage to Gautama she is counting day by day. Now four years are to be complete. She now thinks it is either Gautama or she. When she was with her father she had forgotten the terrifying words of the prediction, as her father gave her proper care and adoring attention. Gautama is a busy person. He does not care for her. He is unable to gratify her strong craving for love and life. She finds no one to company her. She at this stage was in dire need of attention and love, but she does not get any of these. She is left to the seclusion and silence of the house. She becomes victim of the loneliness of the house. She muses over her husband's being short of love and care for her. She once, in fit of desolation and distress, tells him directly to his face:

Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you have never loved. And you do not love me....

Gautama and Maya are different in nature. Maya is romantic by nature whereas Gautama is rational in nature. She takes pleasure in colorful, beautiful and sensuous; Gautama is not romantic and he does not take interest in things sensuous, beautiful and colorful. Maya is a woman of instincts. She is an errant and high stung child. As symbolized by her name Maya she stands for the world of feelings. Gautama's name on the other hand, symbolizes somberness and impassiveness towards life. He is down-to-earth and balanced. Thus we find the difference of temperament between both husband and wife. This disparity of disposition is bound to have marital disharmony.

Gautama did not pay attention to her. She suffers from haunting fears of "shadows and drums and shadows". Had he been caring to Maya, he would have protected her from continuous mental suffering. There is a gap of communication between Gautama and Maya. This further alienates her. Had she been in company of people, she might have avoided thought related to the prediction of astrologer; but as she is devoid of company, she continuously broods over the depressing thoughts of the albino astrologer. She tries to avoid thoughts of the albino astrologer. She visits to her friends Leila and Pom. She even visits Mrs. Lal's party or the restaurant and the cabaret. These all attempts prove to be futile to drive out the creeping terror. The prediction of albino astrologer is deep rooted in her mind. The visit of Gautama's mother and sister Nila brings a brief relief to her and she enjoys her eventful life in their company; but once they are away she finds the house drain and herself without help with her horrors and nightmares.



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She is always busy in thoughts of albino astrologer. When rainy season comes and she hears peacock's cry, she recalls his talk about the myth surrounding the peacock's cry. She is frightened when she listens to the cries of the peacock. She compares peacock's cry with her sleep. She realizes that she would not be able to sleep in peace anymore. She thinks that she is bound to suffer. She gets day by day neurotic. She is intensely in love of life. She thinking of her death approaching gets hysteric. She wants someone to help her and looks around for her savior.

Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in a need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in Love and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore-only death and waiting.

Maya is unable to fresh her mind. She suffers from headaches and she experiences rages of upheaval and panic. She is getting insane day by day. She sees the visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her. Her house also seems to be a symbol of loneliness and darkness. It appears to her like a tomb. Here she is busy contemplating of her future horrors. Maya's condition is critical, she is progressing towards insanity; but she is not completely insane. Once, during her period of reason a thought comes to her mind, she thinks of the prediction by an albino astrologer. According to the prediction either Gautama or she would die after four years of their marriage. She thinks that Gautama would die not she. This thought gives her consolation. She is in love of life whereas Gautama is detached from life. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks as he is detached and indifferent to life; it will not affect him much if he dies. In her perversity she is even haunted by the word 'murder'. Gautama remains always busy in his work; he is so engrossed in his work that he is oblivious to the dust storm blowing outside the house. When she asks Gautama to company her to the roof, he accompanies her to the terrace being lost in his own thoughts. Even her belief in God does not save her. When she passes through the sight of bronze Shiva dancing, she prays God to protect them. Climbing the stairs she finds her cat suddenly past them in a state of great alarm. When both reach the terrace, Maya is enraptured at the sight of moon. When Gautama comes in front of Maya; she feels awkward. She in a fit of agitation pushes Gautama over the ramparts to "pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom". She goes totally insane. At the end of the novel Gautama's mother and sister take her away. It seems strange that Maya believes in the authenticity of the prophecy. Her father believes prophecies to be nonsense. She knows Gautama and his family "hoot with derision at the mention of superstition". Earlier she used to think, it was she who was destined to die. Later she began to think that it was Gautama who was destined to die "Gautama's life that was



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threatened” (164). She does not disclose the prophecy before her husband. She prefers to keep it secret. She fears for her own life.

He must not know, not even guess. Never, never, never. If he guessed, new dangers would arise like sudden fires out of the cracked earth.....Ah, if Gautama found out, would he, might he not put me in peril of my life? Did he not love life too...(151).

Several reasons have been given for Maya’s neurosis. It has been indicated in the novel that Maya’s romantic nature is responsible for her neurosis; critics also support this. But in psychology we find several other reasons for irrational and superstitious beliefs. Freud attributes irrational beliefs to concealed resentment.

It can be recognized most clearly in neurotics suffering from obsessional thinking... that superstition derives from suppressed hostile and cruel impulses. Superstition is in large part the expectation of trouble; and a person has harboured frequent evil wishes against, but has been brought up to be good and therefore repressed such wishes into the unconscious, will be especially ready to expect punishment for his unconscious wickedness in the form of trouble threatening him from without.

From the outward appearance it appears that Maya is submissive and obedient daughter and wife. But probing in to her unconscious would reveal that there is suppressed hostility in her unconscious against her husband and to an extent against her father. She is a creature of instinct. She holds Gautama responsible for her unfulfilled romantic needs in the marital relationship. She is also angry because after four years of their marriage it is she who will die. She grows anxious thinking that she will die and Gautama’s death seems her to be solution. She unconsciously thinks to kill Gautama and the prophecy seems to her the external justification.

Maya is a creature of instincts. She is romantic in nature. She has no control over her natural wishes. According to Freud normal people manage their instincts and act according to needs. Maya’s case seems to be totally different. She is totally dependent on her instincts. Maya looks for satisfaction of her instincts in the marital relationship but she is denied it by Gautama. Gautama is an analytical person. His nature is in total contrast to her nature. Gautama views “nothing subjectively, nothing with passion” (150) whereas Maya is “flooded with tenderness and gratitude” (11). When he merely touches her hair, falls “into soft, velvet well of the primordium of original instinct, of first formed love” (11), when he draws a finger down her cheek, and takes to hating her own pretty face for failing to make any impact on him.

Freud sees sex as a prototype of all pleasurable experiences of life. Maya’s nature makes her seek full satisfaction from this experience. Maya has been married to a comparatively older man Gautama. It is guessed if she were married to a younger man, she



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would have been better sexually satisfied. Gautama remains detached from sex, this disappoints her. Even when they are involved in sex, this remains passionless. There are several passages in the novel which describe her sexual dissatisfaction. Maya herself makes a frank admission of sexual disillusionment at the beginning of the novel.

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. (9)

She is deeply frustrated by his coldness and gives herself a pillow-beating. Gautama does not pay attention towards her sexual needs. Her frustration grows day by day. She begins to sexualize her surroundings. She sees in the papaya tree sexual significance.

I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the female papaya tree and twine about her slim trunk, and the firm, wax-petalled blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the male...(92).

As she loses full control of her mind and instincts she starts experiencing hallucinatory vision of lizards and birds copulating in weird settings.

Of lizards, the lizards that come upon you, stalking you silently, upon clawed toes, slipping their club like tongues in and out, in and out with an audible hiss.....they have struck you to a pillar of salt which when it is motionless they will mount and lash with their slime-dripping tongues, lash and lash again, as they grip you with curled claws, rubbing their cold bellies upon yours, rubbing and grinding, rubbing and grinding (127).

Maya is not sexually gratified. Her noticing lizards and taking this as an experience is sign of her symbolic gratification of sexual desire. The image of fighting and mating peacocks is also symbolic of Maya's sexual frustration. When she was a child, she used to enjoy peacock's cry, but now when she is depressed and melancholic; memories of her childhood enhances her problems.

But sleep was rent by the frenzied cries of peacocks pacing the rocks at night-peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with agony at the death of love. The night sky turned to a flurry of peacocks' tails, each star a staring eye (175).

Maya is sexually frustrated; she could look for other options. But her moral conscientious does not allow her to breach the confines of marital morality. She is not even able to sublimate this powerful biological urge like Leila, her friend who takes pleasure in serving her husband selflessly. Her married life is emotionally and socially sterile.



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Continuous sexual frustration leads her to psychic problems. If she were emotionally and sexually satisfied, she would have led a more balanced and secure life. Freud rightly observes:

Experience shows....that women, who, as being the actual vehicles of the sexual interests of mankind, are only endowed in a small measure, with the gift of sublimating their instincts, and who....when they are subjected to the disillusionments of marriage, fall ill of severe neurosis which permanently darkens their lives.

Freud considers sexual dissatisfaction to be cause of neurosis. Indian society is rigidly organized; it does not allow sexual relationship outside the institution of marriage. Freud blames rigidity of sexual morality for neurosis in women. He writes:

The more strictly a woman has been brought up and the more sternly she has submitted to the demands of civilization, the more she is afraid of taking this way out; and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty, she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis. Nothing protects her virtue as securely as illness.

Maya also seeks a neurotic solution, but this proves to be futile for her problems. The other reason for her problems appears to be her long experience of eventlessness. She does nothing interesting and creative that could sooth her mind. She is never given importance and has never been a leader. Socially she is not recognized. She does nothing worth for society. Her social life is sterile. She is so lost in her personal problems and activities that she feels suffocated within it. By outward appearance her life appears to be set and happy as she has a permanent home, a better earning husband and a well defined future. These give us impression that she should be worried for nothing. But inwardly she does not have any security and she feels imprisoned. Her unconscious desire for freedom does not get space. She is bound within the circle of house.

She is a girl of romantic instincts. She wants to enjoy the scenic beauty of the world. But her wish to visit beautiful places is always frustrated by her husband Gautama. She keeps memories of scenic beauty of Darjeeling in her mind. She used to enjoy its soothing weather and natural beauty in her childhood. She longs to go there with Gautama, but Gautama frustrates her. Gautama remains always busy in his work. He does not like to give time to Maya. When Maya makes a request to him to visit Daejeeling, he outrightly rejects it.

“Why don’t you?.....your father could take you wherever you wanted to go. He can” (40).

Maya wishes to watch Kathakali ballets performed in South India. She is fascinated towards it.

‘I want – I want’, to see the kathakali dances. I had heard of the ballets they have in their villages.....and the dancers are all men,...the masks the wear – you must have



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seen them? And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight- and perhaps they have torches (42-43)

Gautama does not take interest in going to South in hot summer. He asks Maya to wait for Kathakali performance in Delhi, as the troupe is expected to arrive in Delhi. The fact of Maya's contracted life comes alive in the scene of Gautama's all male party. Women are usually not allowed to join such parties. She breaking all old rules joins it. People present in the party take it lightly but Gautama gets furious. He not only scolds her but asks her to leave the party.

Turning his back to me, he stood talking to a friend, a glass in his hand, and his voice rose, in order that I might hear, when he said, 'Blissful, yes, because it is unrelated to our day, unclouded by the vulgarity of all ill-educated men, or of overbearing women...(104).

She does not give birth to a child. This further enhances her inactivity. She might have become happier if she had given birth to a child. This would have given her a sense of achievement. She would have been happier if she had a totally dependent child to look after and care for. She has been a submissive and obedient daughter. She finds her future life is going to be same as is in present. This further troubles her hyper sensitive mind. Her repeated brooding that she or Gautama would die seems to suggest that she is anxious about her life. She thinks if Gautama survives, she will die. Logically if she is to live and find the happiness Gautama will have to die. But she does not make haste. She gives herself considerable thought before she does anything extreme. Throughout the novel she keeps her wish hidden in her unconscious and also does not disclose the prophecy of the albino astrologer. Though she is a neurotic still she is not ignorant to moral restrictions against such wishes. She desires to kill her husband but her teachings to be a faithful wife stops her to this act in beginning. In order to avoid her problems she remains in neurotic state. Even this does not help her long. She appears to stumble under pressure and breaks in to pieces as a result of struggle within. Yet she hesitates. She knows if she does what she wishes she will have to face unnatural consequences and is scared of not only her inner conscience but society also. In order to avoid social and moral restrictions and to pacify her super ego she becomes a psychosis. Psychosis is a severe mental disorder in which contact with reality is lost or highly distorted. Once a person is entrusted to psychosis, physical needs become more important than social and moral restrictions. In fact in psychotic state, the moral agency becomes completely inactive. Psychosis would thus help her to come out of her inner struggle to act or not to act. She therefore looks forward towards a psychotic solution to her problems. Her turning psychosis is well accentuated in the scene of the dust-storm in which she is shown as running



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“On and on, from room to room, laughing as maniacs laugh once the world gives them up and surrenders them to their freedom.” (190). To guard herself against dust storm she shuts herself. This symbolizes her total withdrawal from the world of purposeful action and meaningful belongings. Her psychosis reaches its zenith in the violence act of pushing Gautama off the terrace. This act of Maya is not result of her sudden decision. This act is result of her prolonged psychic struggle within. She herself was not aware of her intense psychic struggle. Under the cruel clutches of psychosis she kills Gautama and after committing this crime she feels relax and openly proclaims that Gautama was not in love of life so he had to die. “It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who meant to live. You see, to Gautama it did not really matter. He did not care, and I did” (215-216). After killing Gautama she proves albino astrologer’s prediction right. Albino astrologer would not have predicted Gautama’s death but once Maya embraced psychosis it becomes fact.

To conclude, the essence of the novel’s development is to be found not in the gradual unfolding of the protagonist’s consciousness, but of her neurosis. Out of this arises an encounter of the self and the world outside. The novel deals with the problematic rather than the comfortable answer to the question of neurosis, nightmare and subconscious world. Maya’s attempt to liberate herself from fear of death becomes writing down of the stars. In the ultimate analysis Maya’s fear is for death and so her ultimate choice of flight and consequently, that leads to death and destruction of life. At the heart of the story fear exists by virtue of concrete facts of consciousness. This consciousness as depicted by Anita Desai, is dependent upon the look, through which conflicts in human relationships and domination.

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