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The Theme of Protest and Freedom in *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

The conflict between social institutions and individuals is a complex and perplexing issue for many scholars. While reflecting on this issue, some scholars propagate the privilege to individuality, the others to the social institutions. Many scholars consider it as a matter of mutual coordination and interest. The need for a relative space for an individual and the requirement of the social institutions for regulating control over an individual's uncensored wills are equally important. However, safeguarding or maintaining the margins of both entities is complex work. Regulating uncensored wills or reducing excessive encroachment of institutional authorities is a difficult task; it needs to be addressed with a scientific approach. The Indian social system is conservative and has been maintaining its dominance over the women's class from the time unknown. The society, after allotting all the privileges to male members, refuses to consider women as individuals, having space and freedom. It expects women to be timid, docile, submissive and obedient. As a result, they feel tyrannized and experience untold sufferings. When the patriarchal system becomes over oppressive, it leads women to absolute confinement; the life of complete closure is highly disappointing and

frustrating. The forces that obliterate their rights include gender discrimination, marriage-system, orthodox traditions, customs, rituals and class status. A woman is born with a destitute to experience a collision with the subjugating elements in her life and while wrestling against it she has little success. She goes through a perpetual war against the controlling institution while creating a space for her individuality and freedom. The factors like these rob women characters of happiness and advantages and lead women to live an insignificant life, full of suffering.

Keywords: Patriarchal Domination, Freedom, Resistance, Protest, Existential Battle, Free-Will, Individual, Society, Marital Disharmony

Anita Desai is a reputed writer nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize, Sahitya Academy and Padma Bhushan award. Her contribution to Indian English Fiction chiefly lies in shifting the focus of narration from the outer realities to the inner psychological turmoil. Her women characters appear to show a psychological resistance to established social norms and values. The novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, dramatizes an existentialist conflict of a woman against an unfeeling male-centric world. The protagonist, Maya, possesses a strong desire for freedom and detestation for oppressive social norms, resulting in her psychological war against her domination. However, as a sensitive individual, she is prone to succumb to her psychological riddles than to her social problems. The novel represents a psychological protest of a woman against social barriers. The novel encapsulates a traumatized tale depicting the blunted relationship, owing to extreme sensitivity and immeasurable loneliness of a girl obsessed by childhood prophecy of some disaster. As the title suggests, it is about Maya's agonized cry for love and involvement in her loveless marriage. The couple suffers a loveless bond owing to their poles-apart temperament. Gautama, as his name suggests, is detached, objective and balanced while Maya signifies love and life. The temperamental incompatibility resulting in lack of communication and loneliness is aptly described in the following words, "How little he knew of my misery 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" (CTPp.9)

Maya was born and brought up in a well do, an educated family where there was no scarcity of comfort. Her father was a lawyer who showered all his love and provided all sorts of comforts. Although her mother died long before, he never let his daughter realize the vacuum that was created after her mother's death. He paid all his attention to infuse his tastes and qualities into his daughter. The excessive indulgence influenced Maya to grow up into a tender-hearted woman. Because of her highly sympathetic nature, she could not bear the scenes of the suppressed and the oppressed. Her heart pounds at the thought of the tamed animal being not treated fairly. The scene disturbs her extremely because of which she could not sleep peacefully that night.

She had a great affinity for her father who adored her, provided all his attention and

showered all his love and care for Maya. However, the excessive attachment snaps Maya's contact with the real world and does not enable her to understand the harder side of human existence. Her introspection about herself is revealing. "The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes... Delight makes me drowsy.... I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. (CTPp.36-37-38)

The marriage proposal, for Maya, was based on friendship and mutual respect between Rai sahib and Gautama, rather than Maya's interest. As she entrusted her father wholeheartedly, she enters into the marriage bond without hesitation. Gautama was highly educated, intelligent and a careful thinker but he was not sensitive like her. He is cold, unfriendly and unfeeling in his approach. Unfortunately, the poles-apart nature does not enable the husband and wife to bridge the gap that lies between them. They fall into misery. The divide that exists between the husband and wife is finely expressed in the following words. "In his world, there were vast areas in which he would never permit me and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me. On his part, the understanding was scant, love was meagre....The things we leave unsaid would fill great volumes; what we do say, only the first few pages of the introduction. (CTP p.104-105)

The unexpected death of her dog, Toto, steals her calmness and makes her uncontrollable. Her fragile mind breaks down and fails to recover from the loss of her pet. She looks forward to hearing a few comforting words from her husband, but the arid and hard nature could not console her. Instead, she feels offended and falls into despair. His indifferent and self-indulging nature becomes unbearable and causes uneasiness in Maya. She is deeply grieved and feels offended when he makes scathing remarks, which shatter off her illusion and make her feel anxious. The pain of not being loved is expressed in the following words. "You've never loved. And you don't love me....When I tried to involve him in my matters, my wants and cares, which to him were childish, tiresome and even distasteful. (CTPp.112-113)

Gautama's highly rational approach becomes an obstacle in the way of their happiness because of which he fails to understand the sensitive nature of his wife and fails to provide comfort to her in her difficult time. The incident of the death of the dog brings forth the fact. Maya appears to be very sensitive and experiences tremendous frustration and disappointment after the death of her pet. Gautama approaches the situation rationally and fails to relax her in her emotional turmoil. It shocks Maya awfully and drags her away from her husband. She lacks rational introspection and engirds deeply in her psychological problem. In this sense, it is the rational attitude of Gautama, which becomes responsible for growing indifference in the couple.

Gautama was reared up in a completely distinct background. He studied hard to become a successful lawyer. The philosophical family background rained in him thoroughly. He showed the posture of a self-reliant person. A sentimental and pampered girl like Maya could not understand the temperamental difference between her husband and family.

"No one, no one else' I sobbed into my pillow as Gautama went into the bathroom,

‘loves me as my father does.’ The curtain fell behind him, in tragic folds. He did not hear me- the tap was running. The vacuum into which I spoke made me more frantic, and yet he was not really meant to hear. In Gautama’s family, one did not speak of love, far less of affection. One spoke- they spoke- of discussions in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries across the seas, of political treaties with those across the mountains, of distant revolutions, of rice scarcity and grain harvests... Gautama’s mother... I could mean anything more to her than yet another human being to be made comfortable in a hostile world” (CTP, p. 46-47).

Gautama’s rational nature and stoicism problematizes his married life and influences Maya psychologically. It sets the divide between them, both emotionally and intellectually. Born and brought up under the supervision of a patriarch, she could not think of protesting against it. She suffers mutely without expressing her feelings. When Maya’s emotional struggle to cope up with patriarchy falls short, she turnsfrantic and experiences hallucinations as she sees shadows in the night and hears drums. In her hysteria, she is reminded of the astrology: the imminent death of either Gautama or her. On the other hand, Gautama seems to be unaware of the trepidations and contemplates the matters very lightly.

The novel reveals a shocking and extensive tale of women’s subordination and deprivation. It attempts to reiterate the fact that the subjugating condition is responsible for innumerable sorrows, sufferings, alienation and disappointment in the life of Maya. It brings into light that the patriarchal system has its upper hand in suppressing women. The women characters like Maya endeavour to struggle against it, but ultimately succumb to the more powerful forces. Such a subjugating state is widely disappointing and frustrating.

The novel shows that it is the tradition of arranged marriage that ruins Maya’s life. Her father, Rai Saheb, marries his daughter to the man of his choice. He prefers Gautama because he is modest and rational in temperament like him. Gautama, a man of rational outlook, is not a patriarch in the strict sense neither the family carries any rigid traditions and customs. Although not the victim of the patriarchal mindset, Maya certainly is the victim of mismatched pairing. The problem emerges owing to the poles-apart nature of the partners. Her husband's stoicism is oppressive, which makes her feel neglected in the family fold. She experiences severe confinement in domestic life and her marriage becomes devoid of interest. Her sensitive nature is unschooled and does not know how to adjust to the existing problems or cope up with them to retain her existence. Unfortunately, she falls short in her existential battle and is crushed underneath.

Gautama’s apathetic nature fails to comprehend his wife’s complex mental processes. The smothered feelings increase the bitterness and hostility in the husband-wife relation. The disharmony in relation widens and ends with a disaster. The absence of friendly and caring nature fails to avoid the tragedy. Had Gautama been gifted with a loving temperament, the catastrophe would not have occurred. On the other hand, it appears that Maya could not adjust

to the arid and rational approach of her husband. The mismatched marriage leaves a deep and unnoticeable scar on her mind. She feels dominated and tries to escape from it. She fights a symbolical and sentimental war against patriarchal hegemony and transcend sit by embracing death.

Several women characters from Indian English fiction are found to be the victims of androcentric tradition. They appear to be caught in a typical conflict i.e. whether to defy the authority or to accept it with reticence. It appears that many of them prefer to repress than to be defiant. However, when they incline to control their rage, it causes trouble from within. The repressed situation leads them to disappointment, reticence, despair and sometimes to self-destruction. In the face of utter domination and subordination, they become self-destructive like Maya.

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