ANITA DESAI’S PRIMARY CONCERN TO NEUROTIC FEARS - A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, a contemporary Indian novelist of international repute, is one of the great novelists in the modern Indian English fiction. She entered in a new era of psychological realism with her very first novel *cry, the peacock* (1963). Her strong point as a novelist becomes in the words of K.R.S.Iyengar: “The exploration of sensibility the particular kind of sensibility that is ill at ease among barbarous and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists.” Her engagement with the psyche of men, women and children takes her complete attention to the question of being and the business of nausea of existence.

In Desai’s fiction we cannot avoid the women as a subject because women have a significant place in her novels. In the majority of her works we have women narrators. The story is presented through the feminine consciousness. Desai examines the actual, social and emotional bonds that shackle women and is thus primarily concerned with fate of the married woman in Indian society. The theme of martial unhappiness and an unhappy marriage causing loneliness and alienation in women characters is certainly repeated in most of her novels. In *cry the peacock*, Gautam and Maya go away from each other. Since Gautam cannot understand the feelings of Maya, Maya is highly deserted and she does not tolerate it. Finally she is so much shocked that she kills Gautam and then she commits suicide. Whereas in *Voices in the city* (1965) it is on account of the self-seeking indifference of the young wife to her husband. Nirode’s mother and her three children came, one by one, to Calcutta seeking their destiny to find themselves more alienated from everything they tried to belong to their mother, their friends and the city itself.

Right from Rabindranath Tagore, the emergence of Indian novels in English has been pointed out. Along with the male novelists, the female writers have also come out with their memorable novels. In the beginning, the female writers wrote to arouse the conscious of their own gender. Thus they became instantly successful.

In India, Ruth Prawer Jhabwalla, Shoba De, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai follow the tradition of their contemporaries in the Western countries. Their main characters look at the indifferent and callous attitude of the masochistic society towards the aspirations or the conditions of ordinary women.

Mrs. Anita Desai is quilt different from the other Indian women novelists. She is more interested in her characters than in creating the atmosphere which is used to define the characters. To her, telling a story is less important than creating characters. In the
scenario of female writers, it was Mrs. Anita Desai and a few female writers. Who brought out the inner struggles of female characters.

Anita Desai does not cope with traditional pattern of novel writing. She is a different sort. She attempts at a unique individual penetration. She is more concerned with the routine life and with the predicament of human relationship on the basis of the actual realities of human existence.

Her novels are as follows: Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Bye-Bye Black bird, The Peacock Garden, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Clear Light of Day, In custody, Fasting, Feasting, Fire on the Mountain and Baumgartner’ Bombay.

Desai won the Sahithya Academy Award for **Cry, the Peacock**. She creates in her novels a private world of her own. Her novels, she thinks, are not written to proclaim some of her pet theories. To her, writing is a matter of instinct silence and waiting. By adopting the technique of stream of consciousness, she has dealt with the thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness. Most of her characters feel alienated and exiled, even if they are found in crowded ambience. She is interested in the interior world of her protagonists than in political or social realities.

**Maya** the protagonist cum heroine of “cry, the peacock”. Maya is the most sensitive woman suffering from neurotic fears by her nature. She always thinks of her dear dog’s death. She is filled with despair. She rushes to the garden tap to wash up her eyes to wipe out the vision of the dead dog. She runs here and there. She cannot tolerate the death of the pet dog. So she has been mourning over the death of her dear dog. Maya is less and less able to control herself. In her mind, there is the death of Toto. She could not look into that face of Toto, because of her own fear about the death of her dear dog. This death and her fear are skillfully built-up in this story. Maya’s intense desire to love and to be loved constructs the plot and sub-plot.

Maya is shown as a childless young wife married to an advocate of great repute, called Gautam. Her mind has been filled with fear of death from the opening of the novel. Maya is only responsible for the poetic beauty of life. In this novel Maya has been always in the panic from the beginning to the end. Her continuous longing for love fails to establish complete communication with reality in life.

Maya continues to suffer from the feeling of suffocation and for not having the support of her inner self. She has been waiting sadly for Gautam, her husband to come home. She cannot bear the sight of the small white corpse. She hopes that her husband would console her feelings, but her thoughts and expectations are destroyed completely, when her husband comes to the house, because he takes quite action by telephoning the P.W.D. to send scavengers with truck to take away the dead body. She wants her husband’s soothing voice to relax her mind. Instead of that her husband tries only to dispose of the dead dog. She does not expect callousness from her husband. This action of her husband makes her feel more worried.

Gautam, her husband, tries to make her calm and quiet to his best. But Maya cries helplessly. She continues to think of the moment of death of the small creature and
becomes panic-stricken. She even does not know how the dead body of the small creature of Toto has been taken away. She is horrified at what has been left behind her and she again starts crying. She is totally in despair lying on the bed; she tries to ponder over the dog’s death.

She expects that her husband would console her heart. But, instead of that, Gautam does not realize her inner feelings. Her memories are connected with small soft pretty corpse of the dog and the smell of the flash gives her different sensations. Her willing body, her loneliness and her wanting mind wait near his bed. Finding all alone, she starts pillow-beating, kicking everything, but crying non-stop. She can never forget the moments of trickling past. To her, there seems no yesterday and no tomorrow.

Maya is, moreover, obsessed with the prophecy of death—may be her husband’s or hers. This fear is also mixed with the longing of the dead animal. She connects her present with the past and tries to go into a sheltered life. Efforts by Gautam to heal or cure her internal wounds and pains fail.

Maya does not have healthy mind. She is torn by doubts and dread and the atmosphere around her indicates sub-human existence. No men are totally disappointed even for a trivial matter. Here Maya also is the best example of feminine weakness. Her hopelessness is not individual but it spreads and becomes universal. Her mental agonies and tension in her mind show miseries of her existence and narrow down the poetic beauty of life.

Maya is a sensitive, highly-strung young woman tottering on the brink of insanity and also highly emotional. Once Maya had many friends; but now they are like shadows. Maya sees in her movements an acting tenderness, a long sadness and a great bitterness. Maya once had a dream that she or her husband would live in peace. She is desperately in need of peace which comes from life companion alone. She wants physical contact, relationship and communion for her disturbed and agitated soul. The inner conflict of Maya has disturbed her mind severely.

Maya thinks of her imminent death. As the prophecy has predicted now it is the fourth year of their marriage. It is as though the moonlight has withered the shadows in her mind as well. It has left all dead-white or dead-black. When the dreams fall silent and the moon begins to sink over the trees, she knows the time has come.

For many months, she has fears of her own death. As time passes, she comes to reflect intensely the life’s meaning and further she develops extreme awareness of sight, sounds and smells around her. She desperately tries to imprint life’s experiences on her memory. She thinks her days are numbered now but she wants to live for more years.

There are four significant events which force Maya towards her illusions. Those events intensify her inner self: the death of the pet dog, Tota, Lal’s visit to her home, a visit from her in-laws, a shopping trip and a letter from Arjuna, her brother.

Voices in the City is mostly a third-person rendering of the ‘three voices’ in the city like the voices of Nirode, Monisha, and Amla. The use of the ‘direct’ method of explaining the action necessarily sacrifices the challenging possibilities of the first
person rendering. There is a brief glimpse into the ‘dairy’ of Monisha, and the last soliloquy of Monisha which ‘explains’ to the reader the not-so-surprising decision of Monisha to commit suicide constitute a very small portion of the book. The omniscient author offers explanation, and analyzes the changing responses of the three major characters to the challenge of the city. There is no difficulty in understanding the meaning of any act or gesture of the characters. The author is ready with psychological analyses.

Monisha, in *Voices in the City* reads from the Gita ‘my book’ she calls it the words of the Lord to Arjuna. The verses quoted may be said to convey the theme of the novel. The advice of the Lord that a man of steady wisdom ‘is satisfied with the Self, by the Self alone and has completely cast out all desires from the mind’ and that a ‘self-controlled’ saint ‘remains unmoved when desire enters into him’ suggest the ‘problem’ of the three main characters in the book.

The sordidness, the brutality, and the sheer dreariness of the physical world are the forces that Mrs. Desai’s characters are revolting against. The three main characters see more than the others; they see through appearances at the dreariness of everyday life. The ugly physical reality, for them, is both a fact and a symbol-symbolic of an attitude and of a value that they cannot accept.

The frequent brief glimpses into unsuspected aspects of life create the environment, and remind the three main characters of the irritating and challenging quality of external reality. The two sisters and the brother constitute an aristocracy, not of wealth, but of sensitivity, of suffering. They frequently react, sometimes hysterically, against the monstrous vulgarity of everyday life. The marriage-party on the railway platform, with its vulgar ostentation, its sniveling women and obscene men makes Nirode remark ‘God Look at them’.

Nirode, Monisha, and Amla see the city of Calcutta as a force to be reckoned with. Nirode feels the pressure of the city. He feels suffocated and threatened in and by the city. Monisha, loves loneliness and hence reacts against her relatives in Calcutta. She also feels trapped in the house of her husband’s parents. “There is no escape from it” she cries, and reacts with such a hysterical intensity that even her emotionless husband, Jiban, is surprised. The city to Monisha has two faces: its devilish face, and its ‘dull, vacant, hopeless face’.

The ‘haunting, warbling’ burbling life of the city makes her feel like a trapped animal. ‘Alone’ she would ‘feel more whole’. But the city neither offers nor respects privacy. Everything is laid bare ‘to their scrutiny.

Amla, the youngest, is also not proof against the infection of the city. The city, to her, is a monster which has laid its hands upon Monisha, ‘scarred and altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet and uncaring elder sister’. Her brother and sister, she feels, are being gobbled by a monster; ‘the monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blood life, but one that was subterranean, indirect, stealthy and odorous of mortality had captured and enchanted or disenchanted-both her sister and brother. She remarks to Nirode, ‘this
city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?’

To Monisha, in the beginning, the city is something which denies her ‘her privacy’ and she is ‘whole’ only when she is ‘alone’. At the end of the novel the mother and the city merge into a single symbol. The mother merges with the city and the city becomes the mother, ‘an amalgamation of death and life. Throughout the novel images of dirt, of unmentionable misery, of unimaginable poverty, of decay, death, and dissolution underline the symbolic significance of the city. “There seems to be nothing left to say—not for human beings, city beings, such as these, such as myself”.

Amla too sees the city in terms of images of clinging wetness, disintegrating softness. Rain in Calcutta frightens her. As she wades through rain to her aunt’s house, she is frightened by the fall of a rain-wet chameleon.

The birds near the race-course are a “version of disaster, symbolized by the stirring birds who were not afraid, who waited”. These were the city birds “belonging to death’s city, where funerals were processions”.

The three main characters make journeys—spiritual journeys. From doubt, frustration, and disillusionment they travel through suffering and stumble their way to solutions of their own. It might be acceptance or abject self-surrender or self-annihilation.

The failure in presenting the character of Monisha is more pronounced and she is not a personality at all. She is very vaguely drawn and flirts like a ghost in the consciousness of her brother and her younger sister. The ‘diary’ of Monisha represents an ineffective attempt by the writer to present her character, to state her ‘problem’. As is to be expected the middle-class environment which destroys Monisha is more vivid than Monisha herself.

The brief soliloquy is supposed to serve as an explanation of Monisha’s frantic search for feeling which culminates in suicide. But this crucial experience of seeing the street-singer is too brief. There is something very contrived about the whole situation. Monisha never really succeeds in establishing herself as a living character.

All in all, the novel is not an unworthy successor to Cry, the Peacock.

Mrs. Desai’s world is very restricted. It excludes much that is authentically Indian. Her characters are from the well-to-do sections of Indian society. Their problems are psychological or spiritual, not social, or economical. They passionately discuss issues like conformity and rebellion, attachment and detachment. But the ordinary problems of everyday life are never really touched upon. Since Mrs. Desai’s characters belong to the affluent sections or Indian society they never really have to face the problem of the struggle for existence. Hunger, starvation, poverty, and the mute misery of the millions of Indians are never touched upon by Mrs. Desai. She writes about characters of class because she knows them very well and can understand them sympathetically. But these sophisticated ladies and gentlemen constitute a very tiny fragment of the massive Indian society. Hence in terms of its representativeness, the world of Mrs. Desai is very limited. Its strength comes
out of its limitation. But the limitation is real.

The credit goes to her technique as it enriches the novel by lifting it above the mere narration of a fiction or depiction of a character and provides it the very life, blood and the psyche. Her technique does not only suit the existentialist theme inhabit upon in the novel but also go a long way in her outward the inner turmoil of her protagonists. This technique is deftly used by Mrs Desai in capturing authentically a psychological realism, intensified psychological effects a propagate consciousness. Through its use, she aims at transparent the diversified complexities of man-woman relationship and the varying state of human soul.

REFERENCE