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The lack of mental and social harmony, in Aneeta Desai's cry the peacock

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Abstract

The scene of Indian writing in English today is marked with a rare creative energy which has been making waves in the literary world. Till the decades of the fifties and early sixties, the Indian writing was more or less an imitation of the west. The high brow and elite were the main subjects of literary deliberations. The environment was purely aristocratic and the writers either ignored or overlooked the middle and the lower classes of society which were and are the pulsating realities of India.

Keywords: Contemporary indo-Anglian

Introduction

The reason, perhaps, was insufficient exposure to the creative artists dominating the scene in those days. Moreover, the literary background of the writer was profoundly influenced by the British and American literature. Not that the influence of the western world was in any way detrimental to the growth of Indo-Anglian writing but the writer of the day could not get effectively involved with the basic issues of society and naked realities of life.

Anita Desai has been making significant contribution the contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction in experimenting with the themes of inner consciousness. Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depths of her female characters, Desai may be said to be doing something unique among the contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction writers. Her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action. Shrinivasa Iyengar observes that in Desai's novels: "the inner climate, the climate of sensibility --- is more compelling than the outer weather ^[1]." She is not interested in social or political probing.

M.K. Naik also finds that Desai: "is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities ^[2]." Her concern as a fiction writer has been more with thought, emotion, sensation and the various levels of consciousness than with the crude action and experience. It is especially in this field that Desai has added new dimensions to the contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction.

Without getting into any language controversy, Desai employs "the language of the interior" to deal with the "inner climate" or the "interior landscape" of her characters minds. Through this language she has recorded the stream of consciousness of her main characters. Desai has accepted that when she first began to work seriously and consciously on her novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Marcel Proust that influenced her more strongly, and hence she found that the technique used by them suited her purpose. Like these novelists, her fort is also the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depth of the mind and bringing into relief the hidden cantors of the human psyche. It is depth which attracts Desai. In reply to a question from Jasbir Jain, She said: "it is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character or situation rather than going about it ^[3]."

Desai makes it specifically clear that her concern as an artist is with the individual men and women – "individuals, always and invariably ^[4]." She is concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual and has tried to portray the tragedy of human souls trapped in adverse circumstances of life, and the tragic effect is intensified because the external conditions not only oppress the protagonists from outside but also flaw their nature from within. Desai's novels are about human fate, bewilderment, suffering and loneliness. They deal with the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assault of existence.

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She believes in death as the ultimate fact of life and the prime impulse behind her fiction is the existential predicament rooted in the awareness of death.

Desai's popularity is not so much due to the choice of her themes as to their treatment by her. By writing about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husband, Desai has given a new dimension to the Indian novel in English by turning from outer to inner reality.

Solitude is necessary for an inward turning. Desai feels privacy needs to be fiercely protected for all else is linked to it; contemplation, intuition, visionary sense, and finally critical faculty. "Only the individual, the solitary being," said Desai, "is of the interest, one must be alone, silent in order to think or contemplate or write [5]." It is necessary for while to live without words if words are to acquire any meaning, to use the language of silence if the speech is to be made effective, and live with images, so that they can cohere and emerge.

Desai strongly believes: "all human relationships are inadequate," and "basically everyone is solitary [6]." The involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster and the loneliness of her characters is the outcome of this inadequacy of human relationships. Her protagonists are mostly lovely women, who though they have reached different stages in life, are all fragile introverts "trapped in their own skins." They are Hyper-sensitive and introspective.

Desai's concern with the portrayal of psychological reality makes her prefer characters who are peculiar and eccentric rather than general. In an interview Desai told Yashodhara Dalmia:

"I am interested in characters who are not average, but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against the general current [7]." For Desai, each character is an embodiment of some unexplained mystery which the novelist wants to peel and unravel layer by layer. Most of her protagonists are sensitive and solitary to the point of being neurotic. Cry, The peacock is considered the first step in direction of psychological fiction in English, in India, and Desai's skill lies in gradually transforming a sensitive character like Maya into a murderess.

Though Cry, The peacock is Desai's first novel, but it can be regarded as: "a trend-setting novel [8]" as it deals with the psychological rather than the physical aspects of its characters in poetic terms. The protagonist, Maya's life offers a study in human psychology and neurotic behavior. Her condition deteriorates from one of mild hysteria at the beginning to the full-fledged psychosis at the end, and in this state she murders her husband. Maya is an unusual woman, introvert and childlike, totally lacking in the virtues of grace and self-possession. But she is worth analyzing because she exemplifies Desai's concern with thought, emotion and sensation.

The novel is the story of Maya alone because the whole story is projected through her consciousness. As it deals with Maya's sensibility: "the major action of the novel. Therefore, takes place in the protagonist's mind [9]."

Cry, The peacock dwells mainly on the theme of incompatibility and apathy between married couples. Maya, the central character of the novel, represents many such women who yearn for a loving and sensitive response to their emotional demands. In the husband, Gautama, we find

a typically insensitive and apathetic person who regards the loss of a pet dog, Toto as a common everyday happening. To Maya, this emotional burden becomes unbearable and to a great extent unmanageable thus unhinging her mentally.

Mainly through Maya's consciousness is unfolded the tragic story of a woman almost completely misunderstood by her husband who regards her as little more than an attractive household appurtenance. Perry Westbrook thinks: "Maya's problem is more than socio-cultural one. It is deeply rooted in the spirit, and it is incurable [10]," as all the diseases of mind and spirit are. Her loneliness is the result of lack understanding and communication between her and Gautama. Their strained relations are visible in the very beginning of the novel. Toto's death is the cause of Maya's present misery because it was more than a pet to her. Sensitive Maya is shocked to see the way in which practical Gautama dismisses the whole incident in simple words: "it is over. You need a cup of tea" (pp. 6-7). Maya feels that he neither knew nor understood her and complains: "how little he knew of my misery, or the way to comfort me. But then he knew nothing that concerns me" (p.9). Gautama has seen and known her only physically but: "did not notice translucent skin beneath," nor did he give another thought to "the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed" (p.9). It is the loneliness of the mind that afflicts Maya.

Gautama worked late the day Toto had died and Maya goes to bed 'alone'. He did not really suffer long and had a reassuring logical calm but Maya is unable to accept things so easily and lightly. She thinks of disturbing him in his studies and confessing her loneliness, but hesitates: "dare I go in ?, beg for comfort? Confess my loneliness and terror of loneliness?" and she discards the idea at the very next moment saying "useless, hopeless" (p.27). Maya knew that care and concern, consolation and sympathy should come naturally and automatically. These are not the things to be begged of. Gautama was not with her both physically and mentally when she needed him the most. "What is the use? I am so alone" (p.22), she complains.

Maya's heightened imagination sees the clear night, flooded with stars as 'death' lurking in those spaces. The darkness and the isolated stars remind her of her terrible loneliness:

"The darkness spoke of distance,

Separation, loneliness – loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bound

Of that single word and its associations, and went spilling and spreading out and about, lapping the stars, each one isolated from the other by so much" (p22).

Maya tries to concentrate on the voice that droned 'Radha-Krishna, Radha-Krishna' in a bemused rhythm and found: "it only transported her back to the awareness of the loneliness of time, the impossible vastness of space" (p.26.). Where did I stand in it?, she asks herself and finds herself all alone, both in time and space. Maya's awareness of loneliness of time and emptiness of life is vividly juxtaposed with the archetypal figures of Radha and Krishna. In her relationship with Gautama, Maya is not seeking a fulfillment of the mundane love, but of the archetypal love. She is longing for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. Rightly Iyengar observes: "it is the inner contact that fails to click [11]."

Maya and Gautama make several attempts at serious conversation but they fail to connect, as a nameless barrier,

some unease at the back of mind, grain of sand that irked and itched, prevents effective dialogue between them. What is real to her is shadowy to him and what are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her. Maya realizes that while: "his companionship was necessity" she "required his closest understanding", which points, on what grounds this closeness of mind was necessary" (p.19). There was complete gap in communication between them. Maya was lonely in Gautama's company. "I was alone. Yes, I whimpered, it is that I am alone" (p.9).

Maya feels isolated because of the cold distance in Gautama's attitude towards her. Reflects: "it is his hardness – no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking reveal me. It is that – my loneliness In this house" (p.9). Maya would have tolerated any amount of harshness had it come with sympathy and love from Gautama. But distance with coldness that too in husband-wife relationship is difficult to tolerate. Secondly, one needs expression because it does not only reveal one but also relieves one. Dialogue is necessary in communication but Gautama is such husband who does not give his wife a chance to talk and thus express herself. Maya suffocates and chokes in absence of communication. Moreover, her talking is irksome chattering to him who disturbs him in his thinking and Maya confesses "abstract thinking never was a great success" (p.10) with her.

The other important factor contributing to Maya's loneliness besides Gautama's cold distance is the fact that she has no children, and: "childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say" (p.10). The death of a pet does not affect a woman who has children so strongly as it had affected Maya. She is extraordinarily sensitive and thus also reacts extraordinarily. Toto's death and Gautama's coldness do not move her to tears. On the contrary she gives herself up to a fit of furious pillow-beating. We see Maya's hysteria for the first time and hysterical woman moving steadily towards insanity. Desai told Jasbir Jain: "naturally as a writer one is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than every day, average ones."^[12] Maya is Desai's first eccentric character. She is a psychological case to be handled and treated sympathetically.

Being an eccentric woman Maya has a taste for the curious. She wants to go to Travancore, Cochin and Mysore to see Kathakali dances and hear the beating of the drums. But Gautama turns down her request saying that it will be expensive and second excuse is work. Gautama is always calculative and money-minded and has no care and concern for the sensitive demands of his young wife. In fact, he had no time for her and wanted to avoid her company because he felt she lacked maturity.

Maya's reaction to her friend's pregnancy is really surprising and surely does not come in the domain of normal behaviour. Pom's pregnancy bored her and made her cry. In spite of Gautama's teaching that facts are made to be accepted, to be studied and not to be wept over she fails to accept things normally. The failure of Lals' party also disturbs her intensely. She could never digest the idea of a party merely to gain information and probe the muddy depths of our neighbors' minds. Maya is not an average woman.

Maya's childhood had been free, she had led a protected and pampered life and had been brought up on the fantasies by

her father. Now when confronted with realities of life and its disappointments, she is unable to face them. Maya's unhappiness and loneliness are related to the recess of her growing up. In fact, she never grew with time and had retained her child-like sensibilities even after her marriage. She had no social contacts and lived a life which was by its very nature self-centered.

Maya's condition has been viewed by some critics as that of insanity, aberration, or father-fixation. She was a spoiled child and wanted the same treatment from Gautama. She feels that he is not as caring as her father is. Maya continuously and constantly compares and contrasts the two and comes to the conclusion: "no one, no one else loves me as my father does" (p.46). But Maya's problem is neither insanity, aberration nor father-fixation. It is a longing for love: "of the peace that comes from companion life alone, from brother flesh" (p.18). She pines for contact, relationship and communion but does not get any. Maya is a creature of the inner world and wants to converse and communicate in the language of the silence which Gautama fails to understand. Her most intimate moments with Gautama made her realize that in sex it is not the union but the communion who is important and sought. She: "yearned for the contact that goes deeper than flesh – tat of thought" (p.104). Her intimate moments with Gautama made her more lonely and she always kept silent on such occasions. She confesses: "but those were the times when I admitted to the loneliness of human soul, I would keep silent. The things we leave unsaid would fill great volumes: what we do say, only the first few pages of introductions" (p. 105).

To Maya, silence is more eloquent and effective than speech. She wishes: "if we had ever had the capacity to live with silence" (p.69), but Gautama failed to understand her language of the silence. Like Keats Maya also believed: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter"^[13]. Gautama failed to see her beneath her skin. She longs to: "fall, fall, long fall into the soft, velvet well of the primordial, original instinct, of first-formed loved" (p11). But in Gautama's family one did not speak of love, far less of affection, instead they discussed politics.

The most important reason for Maya's failure to adjust and adapt herself to married life was an absolute absence of mutual understanding and communication with Gautama. Moreover, the choice had been inflicted on her by her father who chose a husband twice her age. Maya's hypersensitivity reacted sharply against the smugness and complacency of her husband. Smoldering silently at the indifference displayed by Gautama, she reacts violently by pushing him off the wall. Desai plunges deep into the far recesses of the human mind exposing its rawness and complexity.

Maya – appropriately named after the most elusive of Indian perception of nature of reality – Maya is agonizingly aware of the net of the inescapable. "God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, or release? This net was no hallucination, no --- Am I gone insane?" (pp 97-98). This heated imagination of Maya mixes prophecy and myth into a nightmarish certainty. Thus death and waiting mark, for Maya, almost every facet of the phenomenal universe. All order goes out of her life and she goes insane gradually. The dust-storm on the evening of the tragedy is symbolic of Maya's disorder and disturbance and distance in the husband-wife relationship also reaches its climax: "this evening

underlined so significantly the vast difference between us, between our worlds and our destinies” (p.196).

The two worlds of Maya and Gautama are sharply contrasted in that both present the extremities of feminine and masculine principles. Maya is sensitive, imaginative and instinctive, whereas Desai has discovered a perfect logical man in Gautama. Som Sharma and Kamal Awasthi write in their joint paper: “psychologically feminine is deeply into feeling and sensation, whereas the masculine is into intuition and thinking.”

Maya dislikes the highly materialistic attitude of Gautama and complains that he never notices anything basic, like Toto’s death. He takes death as a fact and regards all romanticism and sentimentalism attached to it as bogus as: “it brings a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end” (p.14). The long discussion between Maya and Gautama on life, death, attachment, wisdom, logic and faith ends in a failure as Maya fails to understand Gautama’s point, and he also comes to the conclusion that it was impossible to talk to a woman. It proves that there was no mental harmony between the two.

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