

Husband-Wife Relationship in Anita Desai's Cry The Peacock

Suksham Ahluwalia

Associate Professor, Department of English

Arya College Ludhiana

Abstract :

Desai occupies an unassailable place in the galaxy of Indian English Women Novelists. She is one of the strongest voices of women writing in Indian Society. Every novel of Desai is unique in itself. Her novels are concerned with the emotional world of women revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of female sensibility.

Keywords : Estrangement, Lonesomeness and lack of communication.

Desai is best known for her studies of Indian life. She has written exclusively in English in the mid-1960s. Indian novelist, short story writer, and children's author, Desai is indeed a name to reckon in the field of literature. She is considered as the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. Throughout her novels and short stories Desai focuses on the personal struggles of anglicized, middle-class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition bound patriarchal culture. She tries to understand closely the predicament of her female characters. Her specialty is the quest for sensibility and her writing exposes inner realities and psychic echoes of her characters.

Anita Desai believes in the intricacy of human relations and hence through her novels she deals with it predominantly the male-female relationship. She presents by and large the hopeless dilemma of female specifically the female suffering under their unfeeling, thoughtless, unresponsive husbands, fathers and brothers. Resultantly, her female protagonists suffer from estrangement, departure, lonesomeness, separation and lack of communication. They even way out to psychosis. Her protagonists are estranged from everything and everyone. They are estranged even from their own selves. They are not normal people but persons. Her female protagonists turn either into rebels or neurotics as a result of their alienation from the world.

The depiction of man-woman relationship in her novels shows her accomplished craftsmanship. She honestly broods over the fate and future of modern middle class woman more particularly in male-dominated society and her annihilation at the altar of marriage. The important thing is that the novelist does not challenge the vainness of marriage as an organization. She successfully discloses the inner world of her female protagonists through their relations with family members, society and other members. In

her novels, most marriages are proved to be blending of mismatch. Men are considered to be rational whereas women are sensitive and emotional. Her female protagonists have their different attitudes and interests so they look at things in different ways and react to the same conditions differently. Generally, women have been both racially and psychologically dependent on men. Therefore, if there is any hullabaloo of relationship or connection, it is measured not as a breakdown of connection but an entire loss of self-identity. It is subsequently considered as neurosis. Stress, uncertainties, despair, dissatisfaction, nervousness and dread become her protagonists fate and they lose their sense of reason and psychological dignity, for example Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

Anita Desai like other Indo-Anglican writers is constantly concerned with the problem of interaction between man and woman, between the individuals and the society. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some vital stage of their lives. In most of her novels, she deals with the threats and intricacies of man woman relationships. Therefore, Narsimhan Raji rightly points out that:

“The most recurrent themes in her novels are hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships.”¹

The present novel under study is not exception to that. In it, the dreamy and irrational wife, Maya and her practical lawyer husband, Gautama have tense relation because of their discordant personalities. In fact Maya’s marriage with Gautama, a man double of her age takes place out of Maya’s wish to satisfy her father. Therefore she has to live in her husband, Gautama’s house and tolerate the cruelties of her husband and in-laws. Maya is sensitive and emotional while Gautama is insensitive and rational; Maya is fanciful while Gautama is realistic; one is emotional and high-strung; the other is detached, philosophical and remote. Maya is soft and warm; Gautama is hard and cold. Maya is extremely sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous; her husband is materialistic, practical, pragmatic and unresponsive. The wife is the creature of instinct; the husband is that of intellect. Thus, their marriage is more or less a marriage of convenience. To Gautama love is merely an attachment. It is insufficient and too little. Gautama is very choosy in the matters like love, attachment and interestedness. He, being practical knows the dangers of admitting love.

The marital bonds between Maya and Gautama are very weak. For Maya passion, revenge, murder or exciting things like love, life or death of Toto are basic and important things. For Gautama, these things are not so important. Therefore, the marital bonds that fasten them together are very brittle and weak “neither true nor lasting” but “broken repeatedly”² In connection with the incompatible temperaments of Maya and Gautama Meena Bellippa appropriately comments:

“The incompatibility of character stands revealed – Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels even without touching.”³

There is marital dissonance amid husband and wife. The novel is a family drama. It deals with the nuptial disharmony between husband and wife i.e. Gautama and Maya. Maya craves for love and

relationship in her unhappy wedding with Gautama. Therefore, the peacock's cry is a suggestion of Maya's anguished cry for love and life of participation. Maya's conflicts arise out of the unrewarding marital bonds which are characterized by a lack of contact, relatedness and communication. Maya believes in involvement whereas Gautama is the preacher of detachment. Though they are living as husband and wife for many years now, still they are like strangers to each other. Maya considers love as an ecstatic feeling. She talks of life and death. Like peacocks, she wants to enjoy the ecstasy of life. But unfortunately, Maya is unable to achieve the interpersonal fusion – the union of body and mind – with her husband. Her agony is evident in the following lines:

“But then he knew nothing that concerned me..... Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers.”⁴

Thus, there is twist and stress in the relationship of husband and wife. They are not able to respond properly to each other's behavior patterns. Perhaps it may have occurred because of contrasting levels of understanding of both. Maya is emotional, highly sensitive and a sterile woman and Gautama is a busy, prosperous, middle-aged lawyer. The husband is too much engrossed in his own affairs as a result he fails to meet the demands of his young wife. His sensibilities, being too rough and practical, do not suit Maya's sensibilities. She is the pampered child of Rai Saheb, and is brought up in an atmosphere of luxury. Although Gautama is a faithful husband who loves and cares her in his own way yet Maya feels that she is not loved or is being neglected. Thus, she is never satisfied and happy. In fact, the essential element i. e. companionship is missing in their relationship. Usha Pathania, a well-known critic, in this connection says: “Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other.”⁵

There is a gap of communication between Maya and Gautama. Maya has too much attachment with her father and she takes Gautama as a substitute for her father. In fact Maya's life is very much connected with her father's individual attention and affection. As a result, she fails to lead self-regulating life. She expects individual care and love from Gautama as her father and Gautama fails to give it. Maya feels frustrated because her husband, Gautama fails to prove himself to be a perfect substitute for her father. It is also true that Gautama does not respond positively to the feelings of Maya's young heart and also fails to remove Maya's father obsession.

Maya prefers to live in the world of reminiscences and Gautama in the world of contemporaneous. Maya is a jailbird of the bygone. She submerges herself in the world of reminiscences. Gautama assents actuality and truths. He accepts them very practically as they are. However, Maya instead of accepting the truths of life tries to live in her fancy and fairy domain. She never tries to come out of her father obsession. She is the victim of it. She recalls her childhood days and indulges in it. She also recalls the treatment that her father meted out to her. She thinks that she is loved by her father only. She looks for her father in Gautama and Gautama does not pay attention to it. Being oversensitive, Maya is dreadfully distressed at the death of her dog, Toto. She loses her mental peace but Gautama disregards passionate desire

of Maya for the pet dog. He tries to console her by only saying that he would bring another dog for her. His approach is of very carelessness to Maya. He fails to console her. He is not able to understand her sorrow. She thinks that it is not his rigidity but he deliberately tries to maintain the distance between them. It compels her to consider him to be thoughtless and inconsiderate. “But then, he knew nothing that concerned me.”⁶ At the very beginning of the novel, Maya’s pet dog, Toto dies. Maya has an attachment with it. It upsets her very much and the matter is worsened for her. For her, it is not only the death of pet but it is more than that. Therefore she becomes disturbed and distressed. She herself confesses: “it was not my pet’s death alone that I mourned today.” She has fanatic attachments with her pet dog, Toto. She is childless and perhaps because of this she might have that attachment with the pet. Being sterile, she might have taken the dog as a child substitute: “Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say.”⁷

In the death of the pet dog, Maya also sees a reflection of her own death, an illusory realization of the prophecy. The prominent reason behind Maya’s excessive grief over the death of the dog seems to be her attachment with it. Since Maya is childless, she suffers inwardly. Loving the pet dog like a child with the motherly affection is the basic impulse of Maya. But Gautama feels nothing uncommon in the death of the dog as perhaps he never liked pet animals. He tries to console Maya by saying that he would bring another dog for her. He couldn’t understand Maya’s attachment with Toto and hence hurts her. The death of the dog may be trivial for Gautama but it was lot for Maya. He fails to understand Mays’s shock and sorrow by this incident.

One of the reasons for the failure of Maya-Gautama relationship is the nature of their sexual relationship. Maya always yearns for bodily union and Gautama is cold, engrossed in his studies. The other reason is that the marriage between Maya and Gautama was more or less a marriage of comfort and suitability. Gautama was a friend of Maya father. Both of them were sharing the same thoughts. Gautama was the regular visitor of Maya’s father.

One more reason for their marital discord is that they are different in every respect – age, temperament, mentality, spirituality, intellectuality, sensitiveness etc. As a result they could never come close to each other mentally as well as spiritually. Therefore there is incompatibility between them. Maya’s sexual desires are not reciprocated by Gautama in a satisfying way. When Maya’s mind is full of unsatisfied sexuality, Gautama can only think of work. She pines to satisfy her physical starvation. When her physical need is not satisfied, she would lie wakeful the whole night suppressed by the physical starvation. In the course of time, she started to consider her relationship with Gautama as a relationship with death. Perhaps Anita Desai has used the foreteller albino as merely a literary device and through this she has revealed the concealed fear of Maya. Thus the sensuality of Maya is not reciprocated by Gautama in a satisfying way. Maya’s mind is filled with unsatisfied sexuality but Gautama pays no attention to all her cravings. “His eyes remained blank of appraisal, of any response.”⁸

When Maya's world is full of sensuality and sexuality, Gautama's world is full of rationality and detachment from pleasure and sexuality. Maya's world is the world of senses, sounds, movements, odours, colours and music, but Gautama always failed to satisfy Maya's expectations. She wanted to be with her husband, to share his love but Gautama fails to provide it. Whenever Maya is in romantic mood, Gautama remains detached. Because of this she is not able to sleep throughout the night. Maya tries to sleep but she couldn't. She hears the peacock crying and relates her predicament to that of peacock – yearning for love, summoning their companions. "Pia, pia..... Lover, Lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die.⁹ " Maya likens her cry with the cry of peacock in the following words: "I heard their cry and echoed it."¹⁰

Once, Maya expresses her desire to see the Kathakali dance in the South. Gautama advised her that she should wait for that till a kathakali troupe comes to Delhi. This is the indication of the indifferent attitude on Gautama's part towards Maya. Maya is suffering from sense of father-fixation and therefore compares Gautama with her father. But she finds nothing of her father Rai Saheb in him. She finds no tenderness, no sophistication of her father in him. She expresses her feelings in the following words:

"I longed with the fiercest desire, not even for Gautama, but for my gentle father who would have said to me, with assured and reassuring calm."¹¹

Maya all the time seeks for assurance that everything will be well in her life but it is never attained from Gautama's side. It resulted in a vacuum in Maya's heart which slowly but steadily filled with negative thoughts. Besides, she suffered owing to the prophecy of the albino that one of the couple will die in the fourth year of marriage. It haunted the mind of Maya all the time. She became insane and thought that Gautama was not involved with life and did not care for it. It was unimportant for him whether he was alive or not. She thought if only one of them was to be alive obviously she should live and not Gautama. She goes so frenzied that she murders Gautama and meets her own death. As Gautama has got inconsiderate and indifferent attitude towards the sensibility, emotions of Maya and also the difference of philosophy of life of both, there is marital discord between them. Maya believes in attachment and Gautama believes in detachment. Gautama's philosophy of life can be understood in his quote from „Gita“:

"Thinking of the sense objects, man becomes attached thereto. From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born"¹²

It is Gautama who believes in detachment gives no importance to attachment in life. He equates love with attachment. He has misconceptions about love and truth. Perhaps it may be because of his practical mindedness. His conception of love and truth is devoid of the emotion and tradition. Besides, he can't put Maya's passions and longings in their proper perspective. Maya suffers for Gautama's unresponsiveness towards life as well as Maya. Consequently, Gautama appears Maya to be: "He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain and would always remain so."¹³

Maya loves life whereas Gautama remains unmoved by any earthly pleasures. His definition of love and life is based on the principle of detachment. Therefore he is against of Maya's conception of life. When Maya refuses to understand Gautama's principle or logic, he cries out in utter disgust: "Really, it is quite impossible to talk to a woman."¹⁴ Hence Maya and Gautama could never match each other because of their temperamental and mental differences.

References :

1. Narsimhan, Raji. Sensibility Under Stress, New Delhi: Prakshan, 1976, p-23.
2. Ibid., p. 40
3. Meena Bellippa. Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction (A Writer's Workshop Publication).
4. Desai, Anita. Cry, the Peacock. London: Peter Owen, 1963, p. 14
5. Usha Pathania, Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and
6. Desai, Anita. Cry, the Peacock. London: Peter Owen, 1963, p. 9
7. Ibid., p. 13, 143
8. Ibid., p. 40
9. Desai, Anita. Cry, the Peacock. London: Peter Owen, 1963, p.82
10. Ibid., p.83
11. Ibid., p.52
12. Ibid., p.95
13. Ibid., p.97
14. Ibid., p.105