

Reason versus Emotion in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock portrays a conflict between emotion and reason. Maya, the married woman, carries emotional values whereas her husband, Gautama, embodies rational ideals. She falls a prey to the patriarchy. She gets disillusioned when she realizes being distanced by male members, whom she considers her protectors. As a result, she turns neurotic and murders her husband. The murderous instinct grows out of her deserted life, together with the sense of her insecurity resulted from an astrologer's prediction of her or her husband's death four years after their marriage.

Key Words: Trauma, neurosis, irrationality, reason, gender and patriarchy

Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock focuses the female protagonist, Maya. She is born in an orthodox family and brought up by her caring father. She contradicts with her husband, Gautam, both in temperament and world views. She is sensual whereas her husband is rational. She develops an affinity with poetry and Kathakali Dance and seeks pleasure in natural beauty:

The blossom of the lemon tree was different, quite different of much stronger, crisper character, they seemed cut out of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother of pearl, into curving, scimitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent, too, was more vivid- a sour, astringent scent, refreshing as the ground of lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. (22)

Viewing the world emotionally, Maya believes that love is a driving force to achieve the ultimate goal of life. She loves her husband passionately. It is her love that permits her to "touch him feel his flesh and hair" (88). Maya's love for life also allows her to "hold and tighten her hold on him" (88). Life allows her both to feel Gautama and "all the pulsating world around him from the frieze of stars silently exploding in the summer sky to the faintly fluttering owls making convert, hidden love in the crotch of the fig tree" (88).

However, Gautama perceives the world rationally. He prioritizes materialistic gains to human emotion: "The realities of common human existence, not love and romance but living and dying and working, all constitutes life for the ordinary man" (98). Gautam believes that the world "dies for what is known to us as reality not for ideals" (98). Life is not a matter of "distinguishing between the two, but of reconciling them" (23). Gautama views that the ideals like love and kindness ultimately resolve into reality for the man, "a matter of dealing with the bills

that come in” and for the woman, “of worrying about them- or of rearing children and paying for rearing” (23).

Unlike Maya, Gautama, an objectivist, remains against sentimentalism and gets preoccupied with his official works. He ignores natural beauty such as flowers, butterflies and moon. Maya and Gautama have quite distinct perspectives on life. Maya, being romantic, defines love as a reality whereas Gautam, as a rationalist, interprets it as an illusion. He, being influenced by the Hindu scriptural text *Bhagavad Gita*, is an advocator of detachment theory and accepts it as a guideline for a better life. Maya is fond of physical love, but Gautama discourages from having physical relation with her. She agonizes: “he tolerated my hold for a moment, I consideration of bereavement, I expect, then moved away, pretending to gesture to gardener who was sprinkling the lawn so as to lay the dust before beds were brought out” (16). Maya desires Gautama to indulge in sensual world:

“The blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different: much stranger, crisper character, they seemed cut of hard moon shell lemon leaf; I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxieties, for now, when his companionship was a necessity. (22)

Gautam fails to understand Maya ‘s psyche and ignores her biological needs: “there was no way I could make believe that this, the night filled with several scents, their varying essences, and associations, their effects on me, us, were as important, the very core night of our mood tonight” (22). Gautama, being influenced with the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, is detached from Maya’s sensual world: “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, understanding was scant, love was meager. Not to be loved as one does love” (89). Both Maya and Gautama have different world views.

Maya suffers from loneliness and negligence because of Gautam’s philosophical outlook. She always desires for both physical and spiritual relation. But he always neglects. He always gets busy with his papers until late night: “Telling me to go to sleep he worked at his papers, he didn’t give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed” (14). Gautam quotes the lines from the *Gita* to release Maya from emotional world, trying to convince her that involvement in sensual world is attachment, leading one ultimately to death:

Thinking of sense objects man becomes attached thereto. From attachment arises longing, and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion, from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes. (95)

Maya gets frustrated being deprived of Gautama’s love. She feels humiliated being rejected by Gautam: “He thought it pain, there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of negligence, of loneliness, of desertion” (167). Maya tries to cling to him for love and affection, but he withdraws from her. She admits that their marriage is not the union of

two souls, rather it is forced upon them from outside. Despite their contradictions and unmatched marriage, traditional society stands as an obstacle to get them separated:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage based upon nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (38)

Maya is forced to continue her fragmented conjugal life. Despite being wife and husband, they never share their joys and sorrows with each other. The episodes of Arjun's letter and the party with Sikh couple substantiate how they distance from each other. They get to know each other for the first time four years after their marriage. Gautam knows that she has a brother named Arjun: "Who? Gautama asked, turning over, puzzled. 'Arjun' he frowned. And you never heard from him in all these years? Or spoke of him to others? Why not me at least?" (120). Gautama also understands that Arjuna had rebelled against his father. Maya also comes to know that Gautama had the friends like Sikhs, his neighbors, at hostel. The Sikh, Gautama's friend, gets surprised to know that Gautama has never briefed her about his college life: "He never told you that we were neighbors in the hostel at college? And how I used to sing so loudly that he would come to the door to shout at me or send me a note?" (65).

Despite Maya's understanding on the suppression of male domination upon her, she fails to release herself from the patriarchal mindset. Because of her upbringing in patriarchal society, she has internalized the male values, and accepts them unconsciously. She depends on male, and expects to perform the same role by her father, brother, and husband at the time of crisis: "Father Brother Husband Who is my savior? I am dying and I am in love with living" (84).

Desai shows that tradition and family customs regulate woman's role in Indian society. Family plays an important role in the life of women in Indian society. Desai identifies woman with the male members of her family. Her affiliation with them holds significance in her life. Woman's well-being depends on her relationship with her family members. If she distances from her family members, she loses her self, leading to a mental breakdown. As Sunaina Singh says: "Since women are both culturally and emotionally dependent on men, any disruption of the affinity or consanguinity is seen not as loss of relationship but as a "total loss of self which is then perceived as neurosis" (36). Maya adheres to Indian tradition and embraces the patriarchal values. However, she realizes that Gautama does not love her: "You did not want me" (94). Maya's fear of losing her bond with her husband makes her insecure, leading her to a traumatic condition.

As a result of Maya's repressed sexuality, she demonstrates abnormal behavior, defined as her madness by the patriarchal society. She, questioning the patriarchal conventions, is being declared an outcast: "But I am not like you; I am different from all of you" (100). Maya counters Gautama for being indifferent to her feelings: "You listen to me tonight. You never will let me tell you this. Why? Are you afraid? Because you cannot meet it? You feel out of element? You can't bear to be not alone" (97). Maya's blame hurts Gautam's ego. Exasperated with her questions, he accuses her of being 'mad': "This is madness, Maya, quite uncalled for" (97). Gautama's accusation of Maya is the reflection of his chauvinism which traumatizes her.

The male characters-- Gautama, Maya's father, and the astrologer—are the representative of patriarchy that defines woman being commodity. The cabaret dance episode in the novel reveals the patriarchal nature of the society. She hates the males treating cabaret dancers as an object of recreation. She boycotts the dance as a protest. She identifies herself with the dancers because she herself is a victim of the patriarchal society. Maya detects the anguishes in the males' face: "None of them looked as though they were doing what they wanted to do. They all looked so sad to me –so terribly sad "(78). Maya thinks that their body and mind were fallen apart when they danced:

Vigorously they pumped their long, muscled legs into the air, and soon they begin to pant with the effort. Their arms they held in positioned martialled into them by unimaginative teachers, but limpy, as though they were not conscious of that they had arms. The only portion of their anatomies of which two or three, at least appeared conscious, were their protrubent posteriors. (72)

Maya realizes that male domination is the root cause of female exploitation: "It is like passing seventy years of one's life in a graveyard –being born in one, and dying in one. It's a waste –a waste" (79). Maya describes the male audience as haunting wolves: "Once they came out wearing little paper-sailor hat which they threw into the audience with wild catcalls that tingled down our spines as though they were the howls of praying wolves haunting in packs, in the darkening jungles" (73). Further Maya exposes the audience: "Greened animal- like, squirms and gesture betraying pleasurable and covert discomfort, it revealed in its band glow such a seething mass of pimps and lechers, of those who imagine they can offer an attitude of superiority over the poor and beats" (75).

However, Gautama differs from Maya in perception. He believes that the cabaret dances are happy: "And they're as happy as they are capable of being happy" (78). Gautama projects them as braggarts and their show as "exhibitionism" (78). Gautama asserts that it is not an exploitation over the women if they show their thighs and other parts of their body in show. He clarifies that they are "merely physically aberrant women of small ambition who think it a compliment if a man leer at their thighs" (78). The dancers, according to Gautama, must show gratitude towards the audience as they have given them a privilege to make a show of their thighs. He opines that men have the right to treat women as the source of entertainment.

India is a highly patriarchal society where women are being treated as second sex (SimendouBou). Similarly, Graham Allen points out the position of woman in patriarchy: "They live in a society regulated by a god-like male authority figure. Their lives, like the lives of colonial subjects, are inevitably fractured or divided. Seen as other, as mute, objectified and outside of discourse" (160). Maya marries Gautama, much elder to her because her father chooses him for her. She hopes that her conjugal life would be happy but in vain. Because of the difference of attitudes on life, Maya finds it hard to live happily with him. They hardly communicate. Gautama focuses more on reading books and meeting his friends than communicating with her.

Being childless, Maya develops much attachment for her pet dog, Toto. Unfortunately, the dog dies by which she suffers a lot: It was not pets death alone that I mounted today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps, as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair"

(13). Maya disintegrates at Toto's death: "[. . .] saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from eyes, continued to cry and ran defeated into the house" (7). Gautama considers the pet dog as nonentity. He fails to gauge the intensity of Maya's grief over Toto. Maya cannot bear Gautama's indifference towards Toto: "Oh, Gautama, pets might not mean anything to you, and yet they mean the world to me" (19). Maya finds Gautama to be nonchalant towards her misery, her physical and psychological demands: "Engrossed in his busy schedule, Gautama continues to ignore Maya's needs remaining callously immune even to her physical desires. This is how Maya usually suffers the agony of her unfulfilled desires" (Kumar 23).

Maya is close to her father and shares an affectionate relationship with him. She, from her childhood, views the phenomenal world as "a toy specially made for her painted in her favorite colors and set to dance her favorite tunes" (36). Maya tries to explore her father's image in her husband. However, she fails to identify herself with her husband's world. She realizes being alienated from the affection that she received from her father: "As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding roles of the princes and regal queens" (41). Gautama accuses Maya's father for her morbidity: "You have a very obvious father—obsession—which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that, unless you mature rapidly, you will not be able to deal with, to destroy" (122). Gautama does not find maturity in her.

Maya cannot voice openly because of her husband's male ego. She suppresses her aggression and presents herself as a helpless childless woman. She realizes that her own body gets detached itself from her soul and "float away, to rest upon the dim mirror where I gaze upon it from a cool distance" (90). Rejected by her husband, Maya suffers from the sense of loneliness and insecurity:

God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility Of mercy, of release? This net was no hallucination, . . . Am I gone insane? Father! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in 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 any more—only death and waiting. (84)

Maya concludes that she does not have any space in the world of Gautama. He does not allow her to enter his world: "On his part, understanding was scant, love was meager" (89). Maya turns neurotic, having failed to repair her marital life with Gautama. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar states: "Maya is at once the centre and the circumference of this world. Her sanity—whether she is sane, hysterical or insane fills the whole book and gives it form, as well as life" (468).

Gautama rationalizes everything whereas Maya views it emotionally. Male values feed rationality and male superiority into him, ultimately suppressing her emotion. She also becomes the expression of conflicts between her traumatic experiences of being women and her internalized male values. Christopher O' Reilly contends Desai's importance is attributed to "her ability to convey the experience and generally restricted position of women in Indian society" (27). Once

Maya understands that male values and Gautama's rational perception supersede her emotional world, she decides to challenge patriarchal ideology. She further realizes that she cannot surrender to the patriarchy on the one hand and on the other, she fails to woo the love of her husband, leading to her nervous breakdown. Consequently, she slays her husband. The murder of her husband is also the result of her fear generated by the Albino who forecasts that she will meet either her or her husband's unnatural death four years after her marriage. As the title of the novel, Maya also cries for love like a peacock. She realizes that in a deadly struggle in her married life, either she or Gautama is to pay with life. She consigns Gautama to die because of her passion for life. M. Mani Meitei comments: "Lack of mutual concerns leads to apathy which causes the total breakdown of husband-wife relationship" (46).

Thus, the novel shows the victory of emotion over reason as Maya resorts to neurotic solution to free her from the patriarchy by murdering her husband. She fights with male values being guided by irrationality.

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