
Social Evaluation of Cry, the Peacock (Anita Desai)

Binita Jhanji

*Assistant Prof. in English, National College for Women, Macchiwara,
Ludhiana (PB) India.*

There has been a general feeling that Anita Desai (Born 1937) has not taken the theme of social criticism so seriously, as she is a psychological novelist. It is true, social criticism has not been her major concern and therefore she is not an overt critic of society. And yet if her novels are studied closely it becomes clear that it has a very clear idea of the historical moment and she knows quite well the social milieu in which she fashions her fiction. She focuses consciously, sometimes too narrowly, on the feelings of a feminine self, but she does not ignore the role of the social context that creates that situation.

While attempting social criticism, a novelist has to create a situation of conflict between the protagonist and the social environment. Mrs. Desai has chosen the life of metropolitan towns as the foreground and the rural experiences as the background of her novels.

Society stands as a collective noun for the people of various castes and religions living together. Anita Desai's vision of modern life seems to focus on the experience that our society is not a closed circle in which everybody is related to each other. It is no more the outcome of the desire of male and female, parent and children, brother and sister, woman and woman for close relationship and a kind of union. The need and the urge for freedom is however limited by social and family environment. No wonder, these limitations lead to frustrations in many cases and corruption in society. The quest for freedom naturally comes to clash with aristocratic and elitist view of life. Refused to appreciate the sentiments of others results in clash and conflicts. Anita Desai explores the confrontation between the women's longing for individual freedom and the traditional male possessiveness. The lonely protagonist isolated from society constantly searches for some kind of belongingness in the novels of Anita Desai.

Oedipal relations or parent – fixations always lead to frustration in marital relationship. Maya, a beloved child of her father, married Gautama, against her father's wishes, despite a large difference in age. She took her husband as a substitute for her father. As a result, even in her married life, she continues to dwell mentally and emotionally in the world of her father. Gautama being conscious of her father – fixation, tells her: "You have a very obvious father – fixation which is also the reason why you married me, a man much older than yourself."

Sometimes, gap of communication between mothers & daughters or daughters –in-law and mothers-in-law is also responsible for withdrawal, alienation, loneliness and isolation while living in society. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) Gautama's mother is a glutton for work. She notices Maya as

she would notice a pet dog. She shows only occasional interest in Maya, but she is interested in her only because she hopes to get yet another cheque from Maya's father in aid of the many charitable institutions with which she is associated. She knows that for her mother-in-law she was not even one of those human beings whose comfort and health she felt responsible for, but merely "one of those outsiders who could be used for this purpose & were, therefore, necessary not necessarily loved.

Social criticism in *Cry, the Peacock* is presented through Maya, the hypersensitive heroine and Gautama, the hard-boiled realist. Maya is a young woman whose soundness of judgement is fast disintegrating in the loveless company of Gautam.

May in Indian language, suggests unreality or illusion. Her own consciousness and the process of her growing up are the reasons of her unhappiness. The relationship between husband and wife is miserable, unhappy and disappointing. Anita Desai underlines the importance of the gap of communication between the two. Right from the beginning, mutual understanding does not exist between the two. For Maya, the death of her pet dog is the end of the world. But for Gautama it is a natural occurrence. He very efficiently and precisely disposes of the dead body of the pet. He tells Maya, "I sent it away to be cremated ... it is all over come and drinks your tea"¹. Gautama mocks the very idea of mourning as an irrational pursuit after immortality. But Maya remains thinking of Toto, as Gautama's views do not prevent her from thinking. Moreover, at his word 'disappearance' she starts wafting on a stream of thought. Even while mourning Toto's death, it is not tears which relieve her but "a fit of furious pillow beating, picking everything but crying. From childhood experiences, I knew this to be sweetly exhausting" (p-9). Here it is shown how in India woman cannot even weep when she is in deep sorrow. Helpless, she can only cry like a child for solace and comfort.

Further, Anita Desai wants to criticize the lack of love in the relationship of modern society. There is no love between Maya and Gautama. Maya ponders over her husband's lack of love for her. Once being intensely agonized and frustrated, she tells Gautama straight to his face: "Oh, you know nothing, understand Nothing. Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me - how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me....." (p. 112).

Temperamental incompatibility is always there in Maya and Gautama. Whereas Maya is romantic and has love for the beautiful and the sensuous, Gautama has no romantic love for flowers. Gautama practices philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Gita, as a result of which Maya and Gautama experience marital disharmony. Maya reflects on it with deep concern. It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a mobility 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.

Even after getting alienated from Gautama's family, Maya wants to establish contact with Gautama's mother and with everybody thinking that "If I could but tie them all into one burning knot of contact and relationship with me, nothing, not even the fiercest fingers, would be able to extricate and banish me - or Gautama" (p.164). But Gautama's mother is a glutton for work. She always moves so much works so hard that her arm-pits are always stained with perspiration. She notices Maya as one would notice a pet dog. Her activities of charity and public service always keep her busy. Maya sees her always rushing away as a rhinoceros charging through the forest rushing away either to her dispensary, or her crèche, or her workshop for the blind.

Lack of Love and passion, emotions and feelings is again clear in Maya's relations with Gautama. Their marriage is a by-product of their parents. The unusual triangle is most of Anita Desai's novels is a man, his job and his wife. Generally speaking family means living of two or more persons together and having understanding of each other. But in modern families, as husbands are quite busy outside, they seldom pay adequate attention to their woman at home. Anita Desai wants to attract our attention to the problems of both love marriages and arranged marriages also. She wants to emphasize that emotionality is a must in a marriage whether it a love marriage or an arranged marriage. Thus the central image of the novel is the image of the society gasping between life and death. Modern society is rational, practical and materialistic in its approach. Realism is therefore a prominent mode of perception.

The title of the novel is quite symbolic & therefore meaningful in the context of Anita Desai's social awareness. There is always a cry in the modern society, but there is no fulfillment. And if there is no fulfillment, it is sort of denial of life. The modern man or woman is in love with life and yet has obsession with death which leads him/her to the final crack-up.

Thus the surroundings had been familiar to Anita Desai and she depicted about the contemporary life of the Indian subcontinent, in particular the qualitative changes that have come to be seen in the post-independence era. It can therefore be safely said that although she focused on the psychology of her protagonists, she remains critic of society and social evaluation is both meaningful and relevant.

REFERENCES

1. Anita Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* (Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1986) p.6.
(In subsequent cases, page numbers are given within brackets)