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A BRIEF JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF MAYA, THE PROTAGONIST OF ANITA DESAI'S 'CRY, THE PEACOCK'

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai occupies a distinguished place among the Indo-Anglian writers whose maiden novel 'Cry, The Peacock' puts her in the front rank of contemporary novelists. She has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction. Her 'Cry, The Peacock' explores the turbulent emotional world of Maya, the Protagonist.

SUMMARY

Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock' is a highly sensitive and extremely emotional woman. She also has a delicate conscience. In fact the novel deals with the intense passions of this childless woman who is haunted all the time with a childhood prophecy of impending disaster. According to the prophecy, she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and others that it should be forgotten. After her marriage her husband Gautama also expresses his utter disbelief in such things. But the prophecy goes on haunting her and with the passage of time it has really become difficult for her to handle its pressure. It takes all her peace of mind and ultimately has made her desperate. With the passage of time Maya started to lose the grip of her psyche. She suffered from neurosis and went on fluctuating in the realms of sanity and insanity. In a fit of acute mental imbalance she pushed her husband from the terrace (he dies) and finally committed suicide or disappeared or was taken to a lunatic asylum. Anita Desai makes her 'Cry, The Peacock', an open ended novel leaving the readers free to form their conjecture.

In fact the novel deals with the intense passions of this childless woman who is haunted all the time with the oncoming catastrophe. The atmosphere built up in carrying on the details of stifling and oppressive tensions in the mind of Maya is nerve wrecking. Gautama, the husband of Maya, is a busy, prosperous middle-aged lawyer. Though cultured, rational and practical, he fails to understand the feelings of his young wife. Maya seeks some understanding on the part of her husband but always gets depressed and frustrated on account of his sense of indifference. As a child she enjoyed her life like a prince. Maya developed a father fixation and liked everything about her father who presented before her an epitome of love, protection, care, sophistication etc. In fact Maya had been an over-protected child. She had not been exposed to the harsh realities of life. Her father had kept her so far away from the society that she could not even imagine that coming across snobs and psychopaths were common incidents of life. As she lived inside the protective shell made by her father, she lost her self confidence and courage to confront the world around her.

The cause of the tragedy of Maya is not due to the fact that she is hyper-sensitive and dreamy but that she strives to seek the same fatherly protection and affection from her husband, Gautama, a practical and an unsentimental lawyer, who has neither the time nor the capacity to shower tenderness on his wife. Gautam is much older than her and she married him not because he was very handsome or attractive but because he seemed to her quite mature, and had been a friend of her dear father. She thought that he could offer her support and solace but to her utter dismay he accuses her of her father-fixation and does not show any interest in her fantasies and dreams. He despises her for living her life as a fairy tale. This offers a contrast in her life. Maya, who used to cherish rosy dreams, the blue skies and flowery ideas, is now dismissed as a crazy creature with no capacity to think. The analysis of the inner world of Maya shows that the sharp contrast between Maya and Gautama is one of the main causes of their tragedy. The difference between their attitude, temperament, upbringing etc. makes their lives miserable.

Again it is not that it is only Maya who fails to establish a mutual understanding with her husband. Her husband also fails to do the same. His failure lies in not providing the solid support of a protector to a helpless wife who looks up to him for love and support. Maya finds herself in a helpless situation when she realizes that the man in whom she tries to see the face of a protector is entirely bereft of this capacity. Maya always looks for some understanding and some sympathy in her desolate life. As a child, she had seen the suffering of her father when his only son had left him. She had missed her brother deeply. As a young girl, she had suffered mental anguish at the albino's prophecy. The harsh fate, which was read out to her while she was very young, hovers constantly in her fevered brain. Both on the physical and mental plane, she was denied the free, spontaneous and rhythmic pleasures. She remained subdued and suppressed, hiding this painful prophecy in some dark corner of her heart and soul. Then her differences with her husband render everything doubtful. Perhaps the memory of that half forgotten prophecy prevents the total fulfilment of her married life. She is torn from all sides and desperately needs some better approach from her partner. But we see that Gautama fails to impart her a sense of protection and contentment.

In fact the very success of Anita Desai lies in the fact that she has been able to create Maya as an exceptionally delicate, emotional and mentally weak character so that she can fit into the structural pattern of the novel. Though Maya loves her husband and at times we can even notice her intense love for him, she never gets the same love in return. When she desires a close contact with him, to ease her anguish, he preaches Gita's doctrine of non-attachment to her. When Maya fails to get Gautama's love and when her efforts to make him understand her feelings and predicaments get completely exhausted, she takes recourse to passiveness. She gives up her efforts to catch his attention, to force him to share her troubled thought processes. Gradually she starts to follow the path of total negation. She knows that she cannot make him understand her words. Even if she tries to formulate a comprehensive answer, he would not, or possibly he simply could not understand her. He is pragmatic, unimaginative and is deeply engrossed in his work. Maya's arduous search for love and for some understanding and sympathy fails miserably.

Her intense desire for love only leads her to unhappiness, depression and disillusionment. We can see Maya carrying the burden of her unsuccessful marriage on her weak shoulders but dare not go away and leave this all behind. She is clinging to this dead marriage which she knows can never be revived. This only shows that despite her education and independence, she is traditional to the core. At the same time she is not even mentally strong enough to lead an independent life without anyone's help. She just cannot bear to think of leaving Gautama and living independently. Perhaps the stigma of divorce is too dreadful for her. Maya feels herself a total alien in the sphere of her married world. Here no one is there who can understand her emotions and feelings, her fears and anxieties and her likes and dislikes. There is no one with whom she can discuss her problems and predicaments. Although Gautama is there, he has no time to soothe her. Her agonies multiply but she knows it very well that Gautama is not her saviour. Maya's poetic world stands in sheer contrast to the prosaic world around her. Not only Gautama with his dull, dry countenance is viewed as an embodiment of cruel environment but also his mother and sister who too gallantly following their own vocation, ignore the agonies of Maya. They are all aware of Maya's sensitivity and her sudden outbursts of emotions but none lends his or her helping hand to her in her hour of need. Maya does not remember her mother and Gautama's mother appears to her the pillar of strength, the embodiment of love and affection. But despite Maya's repeated requests, Gautama's mother could not help her. She had to go to attend to her other useful works rather than looking after this sickly child. Hence Maya, who is demanding love, understanding, and attention from her husband and his family, naturally feels ignored and neglected. The prophecy of the albino astrologer starts exerting its terrible impact on Maya and makes her restless. She feels defenseless and utterly lonely. If one of the determining causes of Maya's tragedy is the incompatibility of their marriage then the other is the albino astrologer's prophecy and the myth surrounding the peacocks' cry.

Maya recollects the prophecy and with the passage of time starts comparing herself to the peacocks, who fight before mate and who are aware of their death. The margin between the two worlds, the receding one of grace and approaching one of madness, breaks her physically and mentally and gradually reduces her to a insane creature.

Her deep mental agony constantly goes on troubling her but Gautama cannot reach deep in the recesses of her heart to find out and locate the area of her trouble.

No one is able to help her. Gautama could have but he lives in his own world with his own philosophy and notion of understanding. Maya gets desperate and utters that she is caught in an inescapable net of fatality and under its tremendous impact and pressure she is going insane. Like Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, she is desperately in need of somebody, a saviour, who can save her from the ultimate disaster. Whoever it may be-her father, brother or husband, the fact is that she is desperately in need of somebody. The outburst of Maya is really pathetic because in spite of having loved this world very much and nourished the desire to live in it, she finds it impossible on her part to escape from the impending disaster and none is there to help her.

In fact it is very painstaking to see an educated and modern women like Maya being unable to get out of the clutches of prophecy and blind superstitions. Even if we forget the other issues like marital discord, the childlessness and other accompanying situations, we cannot ignore the fact that myth and superstition alone play a vital role in driving this woman to madness and insanity. It is really painful to see Maya's mind slowly closes itself to reality. Her disturbed mind, with its firm hold on life, fixes on the idea that it is Gautama's life that is threatened. The basic instinct for life gets a stronger hold because Maya, with her sensuous love for life and her desire for self-preservation, shifts the burden of the prophecy on Gautama's life. She does not feel prepared for death while Gautama, she thinks has reached a stage of detachment which approximates stillness. She wonders if death could disturb him. She rationalises after the event, after her impulsive push that sends him hurtling down from the terrace to the very bottom of death. Her final retreat into the world of oblivion is, no doubt, the outcome of her frenzied act which was done in utter desperation.

To conclude, it can be said that through the character of Maya, Anita Desai has projected the image of a frail, dependent and submissive woman who fails to rise above her limitations. Because of her upbringing in a highly protective and closed environment, she always feels the need of a support or a protector. In the modern world of today when women are striving to attain an individuality in a more free and emancipated world, this protagonist of Anita Desai is seen seeking shelter and refuge in the world of oblivion. The oppressive and stifling conditions of her married life and the mental anguish that she experiences in the form of a dreadful prophecy lead her to a total disintegration and destruction.

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