

A quest for autonomy in marriage: A study of Anita Desai's novels

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Abstract

Marriage is a ritualistic process that establishes the relationship between man and woman, both at the social and interpersonal level. Patriarchal culture believes that Marriage is the final destination for women. She loses her autonomy, freedom, and identity after tied in the nuptial tie. She devotes herself completely to her family members. She has to dedicate her life until the end in accomplishing the monotonous work without any complain. Anita Desai has realised the peculiar position of Indian women after marriage. Her woman has the quest for creating an identity for herself after marriage. They do not want to end up as a domestic worker or be the true shadow of their men. Their desire for selfhood lies deep inside their subconscious level. Anita Desai has explored their psyche to bring out the voice of freedom. This present paper traces to find the women's quest for selfhood in marriage in the Anita Desai's Novels.

Keywords: Quest, Autonomy, Marriage, Anita Desai

1. Introduction

Female subjugation is the embellishment of masculine thought process which is enacted in the domestic and social sphere. Patriarchy enforces this stereotypical image on woman. She cannot change the patriarchal hierarchy that supports her exploitation since long. Her voice of protest has been silenced by reference to scripture and social laws. Women desperately search for their individual identity by denying accepting male prejudiced values. Feminine revolt has been up surging in the social and literary field to release her from the economic, religious, and social exploitation.

Anita Desai is a powerful literary figure among the contemporary Indian novelists in English. Her literary canvas is adorned in flamboyant style with a human touch. Her novels are clear manifestations of feminine sensibility. Her woman protagonists aspire to have individual and emotional pleasure. They seek to achieve it by breaking the patriarchal laws that victimise them. Her protagonists rebel against the traditional system in their own individualistic way. They fail miserably due to their wrong approach in handling them. She has a profound faith in the institution of marriage. The selfhood of a woman is not appreciated in the Indian context. Her desire is thought to be secondary in consideration with family needs. Such attitude torments her soul and is the root cause of her misery. Anita Desai has successfully drawn the image of modern married women who forcibly compromise with their traditional role but with a resentful voice. They withdraw themselves from the people around them and want to have an alined life. Their existential predicament leads them towards loss and destruction. She uncovers the unfathomable and frenzied fabric of India woman's life. Education and a new orientation of women makes them abiding by male dictated terms.

Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* is a study of feminine sensibility in an exceptional manner. She gets deep into her characters and brings out the deep and intense thought that lay untouched. Her art of storytelling is not presentation of some sequence of events but an analysis of psychology of her characters. *Cry the Peacock* is a journey of Maya, an

emotional, refined and sensitive woman whose excessive love for life is in clash with Gautama who crushes her feelings with his philosophical lessons from Gita. Every approach of her towards him ends up with disappointment. Their marriages have been decided on the mutual friendship of Gautama and Maya's father. Their incompatibility begins the wider age difference between the two.

The real predicament in Maya's life starts after the death of the pet dog Toto. In the moment of crisis, Gautama does not understand her state in the absence of her pet dog. Being childless, she has been more affectionate to her pet. Such thoughts never creep into Gautama's conscience. She starts losing confidence in herself. Albino astrologers prophesy of constantly haunts her. As per the prediction after four years of marriage one of the couple will die. She confines herself to the superstitious world of death and darkness. Her weakened state is further aggravated by Gautama's unresponsive approach. She grumbles: he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge gold... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me...it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. (*Cry, the Peacock* 9)

Maya's relation with Gautama has not been a happy one. Their disagreement of opinion over various subjects creates a gap, which remains unfilled until the end. Her womanly desire has been crushed by Gautama's constant reference spiritual texts. Maya struggles between her secure childhood environments represented by life like a toy princess and her wish to experience life beyond the politics, social activities and lessons from Gita has been suppressed. She fantasizes about joining with nature. The smell of flowers, the dance of birds, the beauties of nature send vibrates her spirit to live with fullness. Her world is enclosed with meaninglessness. Maya's isolation and loneliness is the outcome of her inability to adjust with her fruitless life. Her approach towards Gautama always ends with frustration and disappointment. Gautama is too busy with his work that he hardly attends to Maya's

desires. Their dichotomic differences lead her to catastrophe. Usha Pathania, figures out the basis of discord between the two, notes:

Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other. However, this element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama." (Pathania, 14)

Maya gradually moves towards insanity. She sees images of death in flowers, in doves, in darkness. Her occasional experience of lunatic vision has been a vital factor in taking her life towards misery. She has suppressed her hostility against the patriarchal figure like her husband and her father. She has been a submissive daughter and a wife. Gautama is responsible for her unfulfilled aspiration. Her marriage does not in the way she had desired. Her emotional and physical pleasure from her partner remains a mirage. Regular incidents of direct and indirect rejection of her sensuous approach towards Gautama make her rebellious. His cold response has been the result of his logical bent of mind. His philosophical lecture from Gita on detachment and his mature age clash with Maya's childish and sensitive mindset. Peacock's mating and fighting, their sensuous call as Pia, Pia aggravates her sexual yearning which remains ungratified.

She peeps into the lives of people around her to get an answer to her dilemma. Pom is a friend of Maya, who faces the problems which are quite common in the lives of women in India. Lila, Maya's friend, married a tubercular patient for love. She turns furious while talking about marriage, but takes care of her ailing husband. Mrs. Lal's cites an example that woman and her family is not considered whole and without the birth of a son.

Maya was too ugly to fascinate Gautam. "He might be charmed by it, momentarily, diverted by it, for a while, but to capture him entirely, if a fleshly face could do it, it would have to be a finer one, the elongated, etiolated one of an intellectual, refined by thought and reflection, bereft of the weakness of impulse, aloof from coarseness and freshness." (Cry the Peacock. 102). She endures the marital changes in her life without protest. In an impulsive state Maya gives a hit to Gautama when he comes in between her and the rising moon. She kills him in a frenzied state. Like the peacock she has to die after fulfillment of her desires. She justifies her act of murder.

She says, "In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity 'Gautama'! 'I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him saw him fall then, pass through' (Cry the Peacock 208).

Maya does not regret for Gautama's death. For her, its act of revenge for the incorrect thing which has been done to her. She is sent to her father's home. Later on she commits suicide and withdraws 'into the dark quiet' (Cry the Peacock 184).

Anita Desai has justified in dealing with feminine sensibility. Women's pain, their cry, their problem has been perceived differently by Anita Desai. She simply does not tell a story but brings the inner turmoil of her characters to make it more appealing. Voice in the city is the struggle of three educated siblings for a meaningful existence. Their voices for survival in the city of Calcutta make the voices of the city. Monisha represents a typical Desai's character with her existential dilemma and her nihilistic attitude towards life. She struggles

to significant existence in a mismatched marriage in an orthodox family.

Monisha's parents Mr. and Mrs. Ray does not enjoy a good marital relationship. Their marriage has been more of convenience than of love. Mr. Ray is proud father who has more liking for his title and name than for his family. Mrs. Ray on the other hand shifts her interest to tea estate. In course of time they develop abhorrence for each other. Their children who are brought up in such an unfriendly environment develop scar in their personality.

Monisha's marriage to Jiban has not been of her choice. She accepts her parental decision without any resistance. They do not have any common choice. She marries in reputable, middle-class family. Family rituals starts immediately after marriage by touching the feet of elders. Monisha has been initially reluctant to do. She is pressed by Jiban to do so. It has been a complete misfit. She hates to adorn herself in the image of traditional Bengali woman. As a rule, they walk five steps behind their husbands to show their mark of respect. They love to involve themselves in the household activities like cutting vegetables, cooking and taking care of children. She loves to read Kafka, Dostostoveky and Camau etc. Monisha's concern to furnish her intellectual and literal interest after marrying in a traditional joint family is rejected. She is always busy in preparing food, listening to the orders of her mother-in-law and serving food to elders. She feels restless in her role. She needs a little privacy, but it's not fulfilled. She is not very communicative with her relatives. She presses the feet of her mother-in-law without in a detached manner. Jeevan also wants her to be a little patient to his family members.

Monisha's strange and hostile encounter in her in-laws house is resultant of her barrenness. Medically she cannot be cured. Her sister-in laws have discussed her medical report openly. Her cupboard, which is full of books, has been criticized and discussed with awful comments. Rules and regulation has imprisoned her completely. She cannot travel alone. She does not find a tinge of hope anywhere that will release her from this subjugation. She finds no one from the human world with whom she can share the agonies of her heart. She utters several shlokas of *Bhagvat Geeta* without having a firm faith in it. She finds no one in her life with whom she can share her pathetic condition. She mentions her pitiable condition in a diary: "if I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair"(Voices in the city 121).

She fails to become an inseparable part of jiban's family. She suppresses her desires and becomes a sleepwalker. She does not enjoy the soothing touch of a loving husband in moments of personal crisis. Rather he wants her to be good to her family members by tolerating their ill-treatment. Finally she puts an end to all humiliation and cruelty by burning herself. She is accused of theft. This is the final point of her tolerance. She took the money from jiban's pocket without informing him to pay Nirode's hospital bill. She is questioned like a thief about jeeban's money and humiliated with similar action. She no longer can tolerate such shameful act.

Monisha is a prison of patriarchal norms and values. She tries to abandon such thought that suppresses her identity. She no longer gathers enough courage to defend against unsympathetic treatment of her in-laws. All the while, she has been silently protesting but finally surrenders herself in the lap of death. Her death symbolizes the vagueness of traditional

norms that does not care for the death of innocent lives. After her death, she could make jiban realize his mistake. Anita Desai is able to make the patriarchal masters to realize their fault through Jiban.

Where shall We Go This Summer? Is a picture of sensitive woman who finds it difficult to be attached with the stereotypical image of wife and mother and try to escape from it to find a solution to her dilemma. As the title suggests Sita's irrational decision of keeping the fifth child in the womb and her escape to the island for a significant existence is the main theme of the novel. Her temporal rescue to visit Manori Island in summer forms the basis of Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall we go This Summer?*

The story revolves round Sita, the protagonists, daughter of a freedom fighter and wife of a businessperson. The contrast identities of two powerful men in her life create confusion in her mind. Her childhood is spent in negligible condition. Absence of her mother and over busy schedule of his father affect Sita's development in the formative years.

Her inherent interest to with nature also occupies a primary position in her life. She chooses her flat near seaside so that the images of nature will over power her soul that she will remain unaffected by the mechanized world. Raman visualizes life in the male perspective and believes that Sita has no reason to be unhappy in her life as she enjoys a comfortable living, children. He perceives woman in her typical role of mother and wife. Sita does not want to attach herself with four walls of the house.

The violence and cruelty of the big city make her soul restless. She reacts in a bitter way to every minor and major incident, which happens around her. The callous response of people at the crow making a meal of an eagle makes her tormented. Even the young generation and small children becomes a part of it. Sita's daughter, Menaka's heartless reply after crushing the flower buds, her two sons attack on each other as if in a combat reveals the insensitiveness has crippled the modern life.

Raman marries Sita after the death of her father. The marital relation culminates out of sympathy for Sita. Afer her marriage she shifts to Raman's family. She cannot adjust with them because of her distasteful response to their daily schedule. She hates them for consuming large quantities of food; the smell of vegetables irritates her. She smokes cigar which none of his family members had ever done. They accept her with love and sincerity. Sita remains detached from them. Raman moves to a separate flat to make her happy. In the new ebvironment, also she finds adjustment problems. Raman's client's demeanor annoys her spirit. She feels choked in her well-structured aristocratic flat in Bombay, and strives to break away from it. She feels neglected after giving birth to four children and fifth is in the womb. Raman fulfills her physical and financial needs but, emotionally she remains barren, a thirsty soul. Middle- aged sita starves to get magical solution to her problem. She wants to flee to the land of Manori in the last stage of her pregnancy, Raman objects to it. He reacts:

Any woman-any one would think you inhuman. You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always, in my house. You have not had worries. Yet your happiest memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even your children. (134)

The magic land of crushed powder, sweet water, devotional songs has suddenly calls her to get away from the dreary mechanized city life. She denies listening to Raman and starts her journey towards Manori. Reality has a different image to show in the magic land. The unclean house without electricity, Moses with indifferent attitude, unclean food, muddy road and unsophisticated life make her realize remember the days in Bombay. She feels happy at Raman's arrival to take them to Bombay. Subsequently she feels cheated after learning that Raman's visit has been on the request of Menaka. She returns to mainland releasing her soul from fantasies and dream. She comes back with the realization that life is an incessant process of learning. It has to be lived with adjustment and cooperation.

Emancipation of women is not limited to social field only. She has explored psyche of woman through Maya, Monisha and Sita. She tunes to the unrecorded voices of Indian women, who are trapped in institution of marriage. She believes that women should not see herself as the reflection of men. They have their own individual identity. Patriarchal norms suppress their implicit and explicit desires. To conclude women's subjugation is a male perspective. Anita Desai has highlighted those Social practices, rituals and culture that subjugates woman and deny her self-autonomy. Through the portrayal of Maya, Monisha and Sita Desai tries to enhance our consciousness about women's subjugation.

As Madhumalti Adhikari surveys the character of Anita Desai and opines in *Violence Against Women: Inscription in Anita Desai's Novel*: "The moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their "objects "possession" to be ruled out and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and social discourse"(83).

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