

GENDER AND SPACE IN ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

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This paper is a critical examination of gender space in Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, from the point of view of feminism. Desai emphasizes on the miserable state of highly sensitive and emotional women who are tortured by negligence and loneliness. Through the character, Maya, Anita Desai confirms a new vista of feminist writing.

Feminist realism began when women started to complain about the domestic and public violence that was happening in the society. It opened spaces for the victims to transform their torments in to gratification of their dreams. All people have their own space in the society. Women's claims to social space will be complete only when they are positioned comfortably in society and are able to create their own identity. Both gender and space are defined by society. Women now are engaged in creating new spaces for themselves. The writings of famous feminist Indian English writers like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, and Anita Nair portray their efforts to equalize gender differences.

Anita Desai portrays rebellious characters who are in patriarchal bondage. In her works, she portrays a world of disappointment, where a woman suffers as a lonely protagonist. Ego is the cause of dissatisfaction for most of her characters. Thus, a communication gap occurs in their interactions and her characters are often in search of fulfilment.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya belongs to a middle class Indian family. She feels depressed and isolated from her husband, who is

busy with his clients. She falls into a state of depression and it begins to affect all her relationships. Maya feels insecure because she is economically dependent and she wants to get freedom. Through internal monologues, Desai expresses the mental trauma of Maya. Moving on, we find that the protagonist is trying to move from the inner space of her mind to the exterior world of conflicts. Through the novel, Maya explores the interior space of Indian woman, who feels that her role as a woman is fulfilled only when she becomes a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Maya is barren and this hurts her deeply. She cannot relate to the reality around her. When she tries to distract herself through a pet dog Totu, Gautama tells her that it is a childish act. When this dog dies, he does not even look at its dead body. Maya confronts all her agonies using silence as the weapon. Maya speaks to her husband thus: “Don't you know that I will never mind if I die right now? No one word is necessary and all is over” (46). The sharpness of her words reveals the power of her silence and the gap in her relationship with her husband. Desai successfully presents Maya's predicament through these lines. The husband and wife do not share anything. Maya states that “he was not on my side at all” even while Gautama is sitting beside her, “but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so” (114).

Maya wishes for companionship and romance in her life, but Gautama is pragmatic and practical. If she is sensitive and emotional, Gautama is rational and congruent. She wants to escape from the realities of life, but her physical self holds her back. Gautama is unresponsive to her feelings. The emotional incompatibility that characterizes their relationship brings about an unbridgeable gulf between them causing acute mental distress to sensitive Maya whose condition is worsened by her father-fixation. As Gautama points out,

If you know your Freud, it would be very straightforward [...]

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. But then, it will probably destroy itself in the end, since passion of this sort is almost always self-consuming, having no object within its range that it can safely consume. Any little setback destroys it (168-69).

Her neurotic condition is worsened by her recollection of a prediction made by an albino astrologer in her childhood. She is aware of her being confined to her private hell: "Torture, guilt, dread, imprisoned these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain" (117). She becomes insane. As she says, "This is not natural, I told myself, this cannot be natural. There is something weird about me now, wherever I go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself? Or the world around me? (167).

She is faced with a terrible choice. She decides that Gautama has to die, as he is detached from her. Before she becomes insane, she contemplates about murder thus, "only for the sake of money, or property or anything solid, and dirty. Not for love, or life or basic things" (23). She thinks that she will get freedom only if Gautama dies. Ironically enough, she acquires freedom by murdering her husband. Maya understands that her marriage is a façade, an institution that is forced on people by the society:

It was discouraging to reflect as how much in your marriage was based upon a 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 a prettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (45)

The lack of communication creates a void between them. Her psychological and physical needs make her over-possessive of her husband. So, she is not able to have a meaningful life with him. She limits herself into the world of her husband and forgets to dream about her life. These frustrations drive her to extreme levels of neurosis and she pushes Gautama from the parapet. She too jumps from the balcony. Maya's suicide represents her release from her mental agonies.

Lack of communication was the chief cause of torment for Maya and Gautama. Her father fixation shatters her life. She does not understand the value of relationships. She becomes neurotic because she cannot understand the difference in the characters of her father and Gautama. Anita Desai excels in throwing light upon the miserable condition of highly sensitive and emotional women who suffer because of negligence and loneliness. Through her protagonist, Maya, Anita Desai underscores the relationship between gender and space, and its debilitating effects on the psyche of Indian women.

Works Cited

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