

UNIQUENESS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ANITHA DESAI NOVELS

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Anita Desai is diasporic writer. She is Indian Novelist and author of children's books who excelled in evoking character and mood through visual Images ranging from the meteorologic to the botanical. Her style often is poetic and descriptive revolving around fiction and fantasy using symbols and flashbacks. Many of her novels tells about middleclass women their struggle to prove themselves in the society. She uses technique of Symbolism in her novels. Anita Desai portrays females desire of liberty from social and traditional bondages in the patriarchal society in her novels. She denies a narrow feminist approach. She herself asserts that she writes about women for she knows and understands them best. She is known as Mother of Indian psychological novel genre. Over the years Desai won many awards and recognition for her work and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize Thrice. Apart from writing, she has been actively involved in Teaching too.

ABSTRACT: VOICES IN THE CITY is depicted as EPIC OF CALCUTTA . Whereas CRY THE PEACOCK is narrated by the neurotic heroine, Maya. Peacock is a National Bird with flying colors yet its sadness never noted is well depicted the Characters of Maya. The alienation between Maya and Gautama is because of Maya's intense involvement in her own inner world of Phanatism. Maya is deeply attached to the pastlives almost in world of memories while Gautama values the importance of action because of his rational nature.

Quest of Identity Cry, the Peacock

A fiercely individualistic novelist like Anita Desai is always an enigma to the traditional reading public and the self-styled critics of Indian English novels. Both are generally put through a tough time in being compelled to set a pace with her "robustly outspoken manner of propagating the typically unconventional but painfully realistic thesis that the ritualistic hypocrisy of the institution of marriage is increasingly taking the shape of the dead Albatross around the necks of the modern, emancipated, self-respecting women. The difference between make believe supernatural horror and the modern horror world of the conjugal lives is simply this, that the former can be wished away, but the latter demands the heaviest price from the married woman-to preserve the semblance of social prestige.

Seven of Mrs. Desai's novels deal with the same theme, the existential problem of alienation of the emancipated, modern woman and her feministic sensibilities leading to maladjustment in marriage. In Custody has been deliberately biased on a different plane. Desai has repeatedly tried to project the idea that a blissful conjugal life is "a rainbow-colored dream of a romantic mind, or wishful thinking of an immature intellect. In a marriage, adjustment for a woman means deleting her individuality, her inner self, her conscience, so that the ideal couple represents the self-satisfied, vainglorious husband and his legally bonded woman slave.

All the marriages in her novels are more or less business transactions, the under-counter profits naturally handed over to the male partner. But not infrequently this order is violently convulsed, the caged bird batters its head against the iron bars and manages to leave a few bloodstains, a wife revolts, runs away, commits suicide, becomes a homicidal maniac, finds tremendous freedom in blessed widowhood, the great No is said at last to ensure freedom of body and mind, by implication Mrs. Desai makes it clear that either one should remain unmarried, unfettered and unaccepted by the society as such, or marry and be damned to an everlasting private hell. In consequence, therefore, she is taken with definite discomfort by the complacent reading public. Her novels are indeed chilling encounters of

the traumatic experiences of married lives of a modern woman, in the garb of a wife, a mother and a daughter. This loneliness is conditioned by her family and society in general. Her neurosis is the direct result of clash between the hypocritical outer world of her marriage and her inherent honesty that resists any opportunistic compromise.

Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, sets the pattern for her other novels. The title of this novel sensitively relates the spiritual agony of Maya, the half-child, half-woman romantic heroine, who identifies herself with the peacocks in the agony and ecstasy of their fatal love-experience: "Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine." (97) Gautama and Maya and around them all other couples are victims of the poignant existential problem "of maladjustment in marriage. Maya's marriage to Gautama is more or less a marriage of convenience, a sealing of friendship between two like-minded, mature guardians of Maya. (40) A match between two more different individuals is difficult to conceive. Maya with her "round, childish face, pretty, plump and pampered ... the small, shell-like ears curling around petty ignorance, the soft, overfull lips ... the long, curled lashes and the very heavy, very dark black brows, the silly collection of curls, a flower pinned to them—a pink flower, a child's choice of a posy," (105) and Gautama with his tall, thin, stooped form, graying hair, pallid skin, nicotine-stained long, bony fingers, practical, matter-of-fact approach and clumsy mannerisms.

As Srivastava rightly suggests, "The plot of the novel is woven of threat road strands which cause Maya's psychic turmoil: her obsession with death, her father fixation and her incompatible relationship with Gautama as also the resultant alienation".¹ Maya's childhood is dominated by the figure of her father who is a constant presence in the novel. Just like Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *The Light House*, her father is a lingering presence even when he is not there. Gautama is unable to become her father's substitute because Maya is so immature that she can't accept him as he is. The ever present fear of insanity is added to it. Hers is a desperate attempt to hold on to sanity when memories come to life, were so vivid, so detailed, I knew them to be real, too real, or is it madness' (pp.97-98).²

Gautama with all his wits and intellect takes a woman no more than a chattel whereas Maya always craves for love and identity. She is aware of 'maya', the illusion. Peter Alcock observes that she is "surrendered to glamour of 'maya', the illusion and pride of this world as opposed to her dharma-devoted. The Gita-quoting, sure, significantly named husband Gautama. He believes in detachment on every count as The Gita preaches: The, whose mind is not agitated in calamities and who has no longing for pleasure, free from attachment, fear and anger, he indeed is said to be of steady wisdom.³ But it is difficult for Maya to act according to the message of The Gita as she wants to love and be loved. It is not possible for her as their ways are different and there is misunderstanding and lack of communication. Contrary to the character of Gautama, Maya appears to be a romantic figure inordinately given to nostalgic reminiscences and this in large measure contributes to their psycho-emotional detachment and temperamental incompatibility. She also fails to adjust with his family. Consequently she feels lonely. Her loneliness, obsession, seclusion and alienation make her stick.

As Sudhakar Rathnakar observes, Maya is "inept at acquiring a sense of detachment from the sensual, the material...⁴ in their temperament and attitude of life both are completely opposite to each other. Their married life is punctuated all along by 'matrimonial silences'. Unfortunately to Maya the 'beautiful nights', always speak of 'distance', 'separation' and 'loneliness'. Utter loneliness in the house pains her most. She complains that she is 'alone'. She fails to understand the total lack of communication on the part of her husband. She makes a frank admission of her sexual dissatisfaction born of Gautama's unpardonable negligence. She realizes, "How little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me... Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed' (p.9). This is her alienation in the house. Frustrated by his coldness, she gives herself up to a fit of pillow-beating'. As her disillusionment becomes a routine experience, she increasingly sexualizes her surroundings, perhaps by way of displacement.

The reader becomes fully aware of Maya's hypersensitive and highly disturbed state of mind when she is seen in the very beginning of the novel reacting to the untimely death of her dog, Toto. She becomes 'hysterical and screams on seeing the 'staring still eyes' of her dead dog. The death of her pet symbolizes the constant presence of death in human life and her psychic death. The nearness of death terrifies her. She is childless and her dog stands for a child to her, fulfilling her need for the love of a baby. Gautama's cold indifference to the death of their pet is symbolic of his unawareness of the feelings of his wife. It further indicates the lack of genuine understanding and communication between the husband and wife. The hollowness of their married life is again suggested by his leaving her to meet a client without saying a single word to her. It hurts her to cry out as she rushes to the bed room, '... to fling herself into the bed and lie there thinking of the small, still body, stiffened into the panic stricken posture of the moment of death, and of the small sharp yelp in the throat as it suddenly contracted' (p.7). The death of Toto is traumatic to Maya whereas it is nothing to Gautama. She rushes to the garden tap to wash the vision from

her eyes. She is obsessed with the gloomy prophecy of an albino astrologer almost from the beginning of the novel. She is always aware of it and it becomes an active tormenting presence in her consciousness. She keeps the prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautama enters the fourth year and now it is triggered off by the death of her pet dog. In course of time it assumes the shape of obsessional neurosis.

Alienated from the «elf and society, the carcass engenders psychic tumult in Maya and Toto's death blurs her vision.⁵ Gautama remains undisturbed and his attitude antagonizes her? Lack of communication, contact and relatedness is the chief cause of her anguish and alienation. The agonized remembrance of the past keeps jn dogging her and leaves her forlorn and lovelorn. Her affinity with Gautama is marked by loneliness and in communication. Her past clashes with her present and causes psychic dissociation. She pines for attachment and association in vain. An ever widening gap of communication between the husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. Maya muses : 'Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull... But of course, there was none...There was no bond, no love-hardly any love'(p.108). A sort of restlessness always boils within her and her strainedness holds them apart.

Toto's death fills Maya with the fear of the unknown. She reflects, 'something slipped into my tear-hazed vision a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair... surely connected with the corpse...' (p.8). At the subliminal level, Maya equates the soft decaying carcass of her dog with the decay of her relationship with Gautama. She gropes for some kind of meaning and this comes to her in flashes. She sees in her vision 'a black evil shadow' of fate. It is the shadow of the astrologer. As Rajeswar says "it keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on a tender leaf.⁶ The astrologer told her in her childhood; "... But... look at the horoscope, stars do not lie... Death to one of you, when you are married... Death an early one by unnatural causes... four years after your marriage' (p.29). They were married four years ago and so now she thinks of the time has come for death of either Gautama or her. Maya is a highly strung woman who feels the pressure of childhood memories and finds her conjugal life unsatisfactory. It makes her thoughts spiral into various aspects of her relationship with her husband. Her thoughts she says, 'Rose every now and then like birds that awake from dreams and rise out of their trees amidst great commotion circle a while then settle again, on other branches' (p.21). In the stream of her consciousness memories and impressions mingle. Her mind flirts from her pet to Gautama and back again. Maya is also socially estranged on account of her childlessness and is tormented by the fast approaching death.

To ward off her anguish, Maya retreats into her childhood events and happenings. Among them the most dominant image is that of the albino astrologer and his prophecy. But soon she realizes that it is nothing but a hallucination. Her present is frustrating, dissatisfying and unacceptable and the past is also not wholly gratifying. The memory of the albino does not prove her any comfort or hope of better time to come. She can not hope to achieve peace of mind and integration of personality. Gradually she reaches a stage of severe emotional disorder - 'the psychotic-disorder'. According to Paul J. Stern, "the principal feature of psychotic disorder is the loss of contact."⁷ Maya, wishes to live. Yet her awareness of death disintegrates her thought process. She struggles between past, present and future. As Mrinalini Solanki says, her "withdrawal from the present and her retreat into the past in search of happiness fulfilment and peace turns out to be a nightmare.⁸ The prediction of the astrologer becomes an active and tormenting presence in her consciousness. The psychic and reminiscental confrontation with the albino generates the feelings of alienation in her. The funny Sikh's palmistry and astrology remind her of the albino astrologer. As Jasbir Jain points out "For her the demon of Kathakali ballets merges into the figure of the albino-astrologer and finally, into the figure of Shiva dancing his dance of destruction'.⁹ Maya is mainly sad and alienated because of the lack of warmth, sympathy and love of Gautama. He is her obsession as 'on his part understanding was scant and love was meagre' (p. 104). He knows nothing that concerns her and never tries to satisfy her or pacify her in any way. In moments of loneliness at night Maya desires for comfort and communion with Gautama but he is not particularly interested in the game of love. According to Rajeswar, "Sex is not only intensely and intrinsically pleasurable experience but it can act as a revitalizing force in an otherwise sterile life.¹⁰ Freud, in fact, views sex, "as prototype of all pleasurable experiences of life.¹¹ But Gautama never gives scope to love and hear Maya talk of love or reveal herself as he fails to understand that "Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence"¹² as observed by Erich Fromm.

Maya always desires for communion with Gautama in their loneliness. But he seldom gives her his company and she is "a young wife left alone the whole day, ignored in the evenings and worse, not even allowed to speak herself and reveal her agony of alienation and isolation - all this leaves Maya agitated, disturbed and alienated"¹³ as said by Sunaina Singh. In communion with her husband Maya realizes herself, "of the peace that comes from companion life alone from brother flesh, contact, relationship communion' (p. 18). To Maya love is

great and splendid ideal of the young. Whenever Gautama cares for her presence and caresses her, she is overloaded with tenderness and gratitude. At such times Maya clings to her life with a passion born of love and affection and has no desire to abandon it. According to Som P. Sharma “She is not seeking a fulfillment of mundane love but of archetypal love. She is longing, for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is a communion that she seeks - the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite - the sort which peacock seeks when it shrieks out its inside in its shrill, intense mating calls.¹⁴ Maya tries to extricate herself from the fatal web of circumstances. “She wants to circumvent and negate the catastrophe of impending death by the power of love”¹⁵ pointed out by Sunaina Singh. She knows that her relationship with Gautama and the adult world is not strong enough. A slight touch of his fingers brings out spontaneous reaction of joy. When her husband does not respond in the expected manner her neurotic pride is hurt and she feels the insult of rejection.

Maya knows pretty well that her husband is quite indifferent to her emotional life. But when she hears him recite a couplet of Urdu, she remarks : ‘...my heart stretched, stretched painfully, agonizingly, expanding and swelling with the vastness of a single moment of absolute happiness, and my body followed its long, sweet curve, arching with the searing annihilating torture of it’ (p.23). Perhaps this climax of her miserable condition is the state of destruction and perfection of her emotional world. The flow of love, admiration and sympathy is suddenly interrupted when Gautama shows an aversion to too much physical contact. Describing the importance of love for a self-effacing person, Hprney emphatically maintains that this type can’t stand being alone. At such moments they are tortured by self-accusation and are stricken by an unnamed terror. Maya is frightened to be without company because she has no rapprochement with the real-self.

In Gautama’s company and communion, Maya feels that the world is made for her in different rainbow colors. She thinks that love of Gautama will definitely save her from imaginary clutches of the astrologer’s prediction. But there is no love in Gautama for Maya and hence her alienation. Even emotionally exciting sight of cabaret dancers does not have any effect on Gautama. After returning from the dub one night he feels sleepy and smiles helplessly at Maya. Then Maya feels sorry for her fate and reflects; ‘... were I to force him to follow me, he would follow unseeingly... the revelation with the caress of a familiar hand, tender, heart torn and the speechlessness that goes with it... and ripe age’ (p.91). Now, it is clear, how passive, unresponsive, unemotional and insensitive Gautama is, to the emotional feelings of Maya. Shanta Krishna Murthy is right in commenting about the relationship between Maya and Gautama when she says “Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of husbanding her in his traditional masculine role”¹⁶ There are moments when she shows an almost aggressive urge for Sexual union with Gautama. But ‘asleep or awake, Gautama is a far off figure’ who can’t be done with her in her world of senses. She expresses her sadness with the help of the imagery of withered flowers. The lifeless roses and carnations on her dressing table” belonging to yesterday, corps of today” are very much like her desires. Had Gautama succeeded in gratifying her sexual desires, she would not have alienated herself or become insane.

Maya feels that Gautam taught her pain. She complains. ‘.....there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much’(P.201). Whenever Maya has emotional feelings of love she suppresses them and says in a most desperate manner; ‘.....the things we have unsaid would fill great volumes, what we do say only the first few pages of introduction.....’ (P.105). Maya is almost always tortured, humiliated, ignored and disappointed by the indifference of Gautama, whenever she desired for union and communion with him at night. Losing all hopes of communion with him at night, she calms down herself like a Sanyasini or Yogini.’ “In spite of her total frustration Maya’s moral scrupulosity does not allow her to cross the bounds of marital morality”¹⁷ according to M. Rajeswar. Maya’s alienation leads her to utter desolation. Then she feels that all order is gone out of my life... no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar... Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered and disappear. Past, present and future. Truth and untruth. They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade... this pattern for an order of lines and designs, a symmetry... has deserted my own life... strangers around me.’ (pp.179-80). As Ignace observes, “Self-alienation is apparent in many instances in which an individual is unable or unwilling to consider some of his thoughts, feelings, dreams and words are coming from his true self and describes them to some known or unknown outside powers.” This is the typical condition of an unfortunate person who is alienated through and through. She is self-divided between the past and the present, between security and terror. As the novel unfolds, the borderline between reality and dream, between sanity and insanity is gradually obliterated.

When Maya is left alone and uncared for and whenever she feels insecure she recalls the tender love of her father. She has a father obsession. It is quite clear when Gautama says that she has a very father obsession which is also the reason why she has married him, a man much older than herself. It is a fact that Maya marries Gautama only because he is so much older and a friend of her father. She identifies him with her father and she also “fixes her

libido on her father's image¹⁸ as has rightly been said by Madhusudhan Prasad. She has failed to achieve a satisfactory relationship with her father. So now she equally fails in her relationship with her husband. Her neurosis stems from her love wish which she transfers from her father to her husband. But unfortunately it remains unfulfilled in both the cases as Maya's alienation from her husband was inherent in her affinity with her father.

Maya's neurotic life is linked with her father's undivided attention. It is a matter of filial attention showered on the only daughter. Her marriage with Gautama only serves to highlight her total involvement with her father. She constantly thinks of him and unconsciously searches him in her husband. Critics relate father - daughter love to "Freudian Libido or Lawrentian Oedepus complex and interpret her love for others. Her neurosis has existential dimensions, her sickness being almost Keirkegardian"¹⁹ as Usha Bande says. Since her father does not allow her freedom to grow into an independent individual her natural growth is stunted. The tragedy of her situation displays the effect of her father's possessiveness.

Gautama shrinks from contact because he is afraid of emotions. He is aware of his fear and weakness in the face of Maya's superiority at emotional level. The novelist highlights Maya's sexual demands with the help of two powerful symbols. The peacock's voluptuous dance and the mating calls of the pigeons. The title of the novel also symbolizes the agony of the unfulfilled desire. Maya reminds herself of the cry of the peacocks as it is referred to her by albino-astrologer. The image of the fighting and mating peacocks underlines her sexual frustration. The peacocks and their cries are highly symbolic. The peacock is supposed to be the only bird which knows about its death before hand. It is used as the symbol of Maya who also knows about her impending death before hand as it has already been predicted to her by the astrologer. Like the peacock, she is more in love with life. The peacocks knew that death is the ultimate reality. They gaze at the sky to see the approaching death in the form of dark clouds and thus they are never free from the fear of presence of death throughout their lives. Believing strongly the prophecy of the albino astrologer, Maya knows that her death is close at hand. When the peacocks see the clouds loaded with rain water, they cry out as if in pain.

The peacocks always cry for their mates in the wilds to fulfill their sexual desires, "Pia1, 'pia', they cry, 'Lover', lover', Mio, Mio -I die, I die"...Living, they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life. Lover, lover,... I die.. I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt their thirst., their passion as they hunted for their mates.. Now that I understood their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine' (pp.95-97). They want to have fullness of the life in the limited life left. Same is the case with Maya. She knows that she is going to die soon and so she is deeply in love with life. She worries because of her deep desire to live a full life. The peacocks first fight, then they mate and in the end they die. This process of their death is symbolic of the end of Maya and Gautama. The peacock with all its joys and pains symbolizes Maya's life. Maya identifies herself with peacocks. Maya also in her hour of need wishes to cry for her stone-hearted husband for communion in vain and hence she is alienated. She also hopelessly expects her husband should call and cry for her love. The title of the novel indicates her need for love. It sensitively relates to the spiritual agony of Maya. As she is romantic by nature she identifies herself with the peacocks both in agony and ecstasy of their fatal love experience. What Maya experiences here seems to be symbolic gratification of the sexual desire which remains unfulfilled in actual life.

The fast withering self and the receding contact with the outer world leaves the core of integrity impaired in Maya's case. She feels intensely isolated and separated. "The deepest need of man... is the need to overcome his separateness to leave the prison of his loneliness. The absolute failure to achieve this aim means insanity..."²⁰ according to Erich Fromm. Maya lost all hopes of getting support for her husband, father, brother, her friends and her in-laws to overcome her loneliness and resultant alienation. The bitter lack of communication between the wife and husband adds to her suffering and she becomes habituated to brooding over her miserable condition. In such moments of lucidity she reflects. "And I know I should never again live in peace... my memories came to life.....I knew them to be real, too real or is it madness? Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! 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... There is no rest any more - only death and waiting' (p.98). Now the fear of insecurity and the urge for protection are dominant in Maya. She is overwhelmed by "the terror of facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence."²¹ as said by the novelist in one of her interviews. She is quite aware that she is moving farther and farther from all wisdom and all calm. Perhaps it is under the impact of madness that she is haunted by the horoscope and meeting with the albino, his predictions, her fate etc. Everything around her reminds her of death. The ordinary sights of nature are not the same anymore because of her mental state. The beautiful sky studded with stars does not attract her anymore and 'Death lurked in those spaces the darkness spoke of distance, separation, loneliness-loneliness of such proportion... and went spilling and spreading out and about, lapping the stars, each one isolated from the other by so much' (p.22).

First of all Maya's problem is to battle against her fate. Realizing that she is not strong morally, Maya looks about her for a savior to whom she must cling to, one who will help her to face the reality of fate. Everyone fails to help her. Her father is no longer the anchor he used to be, Gautama momentarily a rock, is too engrossed in his own world, her brother Arjuna escapes the responsibility by running away from home, her friends offer no refuge either. Hence Maya says, 'there was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor any more and whosoever, I turned for assurance betrayed me now' (p.73). Maya's enthusiasm for life is symbolically revealed through the moon. "But there was a moon .A great moon... like a bloody human organ, a great, full bodied woman who had mounted the skies in passion' (p.51). The moon is the symbol of passion for life. It is full of life and enthusiasm like Maya, and does not care for the silly stars just as she does not bother about her husband's family members.

Maya loses her balance of mind almost completely and becomes aggressive. Maya no doubt debates over murder but at the same time flinches from it. The thoughts of murder make her feel dejected and helpless. A turbulence arises in her mind. The dust storm in the last part of the novel denotes not only fierce storm raging in Maya's subconscious mind, but also her desire for release from bondage, fate, death and dreariness and unwanted dreams and liberty. Maya welcomes the storm with the pleasure of a dancer and notices in it the source of both agony and ecstasy. Her transition from neurosis to psychosis is powerfully underscored in the scene of the dust storm in which she is shown running," on and on from room to room laughing as maniacs laugh, once the world gives them up and surrenders them to their freedom' (p.190). The dust storm reminds Maya of final annihilation to one of them according to the prediction of the astrologer. She feels that the dust storm is the symbol of the end of life. But soon she realizes that it is not death, but it suggests life. The storm symbolizes her inner mental condition. Her conscious mind wants to enjoy life with all its pleasures. The pleasures of life fills her with such a strong desire to live. So, she is prepared to murder her husband without feeling the pricks of the conscience.

Maya's act of aggression against her husband soon turns into an act of self-destruction filled with guilt and unable to bear the pangs of the conscience she also commits suicide. Erich Fromm aptly observes. "Man seeks for drama and excitement, when he can not get satisfaction on a higher level he creates for himself the drama of destruction"²² Maya's life follows the course outlined in the quotation from the Bhagwad Gita;" 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 ruin of discrimination, he perishes'(p.112). Gautama is not only father substitute but also a lover to Maya. But he miserably fails to feel the intensity of her innermost cravings as well as to listen to the pathetic cry of her agonized soul hence her alienation and insanity. When she commits suicide in the end, she very symbolically substantiates the very agonized cry of the peacocks. Thus the husband-wife alienation proves to be a major factor of their death.

Not only Maya and Gautama but all the other couples in the novel are victims of the poignant existential problem of maladjustment in marriage. The novel does not portray even a single contented marriage in the real sense. Maya is shocked at the apathy by hypocrisy and hatred revealed through their marriage around her. Her mother is consciously absent from memory. She does not mention a photograph even, a keep sake or any conversation with her father about her mother. Gautama's parents lived an unnatural married life, each is too busy with his or her vocation to bother about the other. They maintained semblance of normality. Maya's friend Leela bears a cross of her own. Married to a tubercular patient for love, she saves at the mockery of marriage yet forbears all the childish vagaries of her dependent husband while traveling swiftly on the agonized course of nervous breakdown. Mr. and Mrs. Lall are pen portraits of hypocrisy personified. The Sikh wife publicly denounces her husband as a charlatan and opportunist revealing the deep seated apathy of maladjusted marriage. Nila, a divorcee declares: After ten years with that rabbit she married, she has learnt to do everything herself. Even plump, pampered Pom complains petulantly against Kailash who is not prepared to have a separate establishment. Mrs. Sapru pleads tearfully with Maya's lawyer father only to earn his disdain. Taken in totally all these marriages present a queerly disturbing fact that far from being singular occurrences, maladjusted conjugal lives are the normal even inevitable ingredients of modern life. Marriage is a union of two souls. It is to be woven very carefully and thoughtfully. General situations in society are such that no proper time or thought is given to these affairs. Its results are the clashes, desperation, separation and loneliness and alienation. Women, who are treated casually, become victims of their clashes. Their dependabilities and traditional approach to them cause alienation in their lives. Anita Desai skillfully explores an, 'enduring existentialist predicament' with her profound understanding of human psychology.

Voices in the City

Cry, the Peacock (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) are the two novels of Desai that depict the emotional worlds of her ultra-sensitive heroines: They fail to find solace in their closest 'other(s)' (i.e., their husbands), turn mad due to alienation, and consequently end their lives. Radha Chakravarty opines that they are

“trapped respectively in their chosen spaces of the public/rational and the private/emotional” (Chakravarty, 2004, p. 27). She goes on to say that her narrative is an attempt to displace “some conventional discursive dualisms, such as public/private, empire/nation, popular/elite and male/female. Her texts expose the constructed nature of such polarities” (p. 27). The narrative of the novel highlights the theme of urban alienation in post-independence India. Monisha, the central character of the novel, is a victim of psychic disintegration resulting from husband-wife alienation and temperamental incompatibility. Their relationship is not of complementation but of opposition. The relational gulf is a result of structuration of dualism present in the narrative which includes the dialectics of illusion and reality, lack and desire, to quote a few. Ramandeep Singh feels that she “can be seen as Trishanku who gets caught and suspended in two opposing and equally strong forces (Vishwamitra and Indra in the myth)” (Singh, 2002, p. 891).

In *Voices in the City*, temperamental incompatibility again leads to dissonance and disharmony in human relationships. While *Cry, the peacock* portrays the emotionally turbulent world of only one character, Maya. Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City* is devoted to the analysis of the dark domains of the psyche of three characters, Nirode Ray and his sisters Monisha and Amla. Maya's unresolved father-fixation and her unhappy relationship with Gautama is the major concern in *Cry, The Peacock*. In *Voices in the City* the novelist dwells upon the *ci'egeneratio'n'c'aliseo by an un-resolved oedipal complex in the case of the main protagonist, Nirode. Even Monisha and Amla are not free from the disease which, when coupled with the morbid temperament of Monisha, drives her to self-immolation.

“*Voices in the City* presents a touching account of the unhappy, loveless life of Monisha, the married sister of Nirode. Like Maya, she is an introvert with excessive sensitivity. Her relationship with Jiban, Jier husband, is marked by loneliness and in communication. Her tragedy is very grim as her existential hollowness is within as well as without, internally, she suffers because of “claustrophobe and oppressive hack of privacy, her incapacity to bear a child, her total in communication with her non-challenge husband and the absence of love in her life” (Prasad, 1981, p.27) Living in a big family teeming with in-laws, she finds her life meaningless. Her inability to bear a child, lack of intimacy with her husband, suspicion of her in-laws and lack of privacy drive her to commit suicide. Monisha has no harmonious relationship with her husband, Jiban, who is financially well off and decently placed. There is no reference to any intimate conversation between Monisha and Jiban. She is not garrulous by nature. She is usually reserved in the company of Nirode and Amla also. “Monisha lacks love for her husband and is unable to establish any life-giving rapport with him” (Bhandari, 2008, p.178). However, soon after her arrival in Calcutta, she loves talking to Nirode. But in her diary she does not record any conversation with Jiban. “Jiban remains setting with us, but Jiban is never with us at all” (Desai, 1982, p.111). Once she comes to visit Amla and aunt Lila along with Jiban and his niece. When they drive away, Amla “wondered if one single word would be spoken by any of the occupants”.

The thread of communication between Monisha and Jibafdoes not break, it actually never existed. It is not that in the over-populated and suffocating household in Bow Bazar she does not get time to be near Jiban, or pines for an opportunity to share her joys and sorrows with him. She feels nostalgic about Jiban's last posting out in a district, away from the city and the family, not because there she enjoyed the affable company of her husband, but because of the solitude there which she, like her psychic brother, Nirode, regards her sole natural condition : The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves ... Jiban away on tour, I alone with myself, no visitors at all. Our house which we had to ourselves, its room almost bare of furniture, its squares of empty space and silence—friends to me, and I've had to leave them behind. (C P, p.116).

Monisha is in sharp contrast with Maya. Maya craves for contact, relatedness, communication which, when remain unfulfilled, lead her to psychic imbalance. Monisha being secretive by nature, considers any contact or communication dangerous. She suggests to Nirode: “Of course, I know, keep it all to yourself, a secret, quite private, all your own, to keep and gloat over. It will hurt so much to show” (VC, p. 115). Maya's longing for relatedness is a direct consequence of her father's excessive involvement and interest in her affairs. Monisha's parents do not display any strong involvement with each other or with their children. Monisha, too, has no deep sense of involvement either with Jiban or with other members of his family. The non-balanced relationship between Monisha and Jiban is, indeed, an offshoot of the lack-lustre, cold and detached pattern of relationships in her parents' home.

Monisha is largely miserable because she does not have any privacy. Maya's unhappiness (In *Cry, The Peacock*) results from Gautama's

pre-occupation with his work while she all alone waits for him to come to her. Monisha, on the other hand, loves privacy and “aloneness”. In Jiban's crowded household she, feels tormented as she is often surrounded by those

whose company she does not like. No woman in Jiban's family has anything in common with Monisha. They are preoccupied with cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. These tasks are assigned to Monisha also. She does not mind doing all this, but longs for something which can be done alone in privacy: Alone, I could work better and I should feel more-whole. But less and less there is privacy. Even my own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal, now no longer is so But I wish they would leave me alone, sometime, to read. (VC, p. 113-116).

Monisha, like her brother Nirode, is destitute of the vital element of love. She has no intimate relationship with her mother. Her equation with Jiban is also devoid of genuine love. She writes in her diary: "It is not there in my relationship with Jiban which is filled only by loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed, and one plunged me into the most calamitous pleasures and pains, fears and regrets, and never again will it possess me" (V C, p. 135). As A.V. Krishna Rao observes: "The absence of the element of love makes her feel lonely, lost and bitter....She defines love as 'an awake condition of the conscience' but fears and avoids it because love then implies a sense of duty. Leave aside loving, she is even incapable of being friendly and cordial. Jiban requests her: "Be a little friendly to them. That is all they ask of you—a little friendliness". But contact, attachment, friendliness are the things -she fears and suspects. Even her sister, Amla, feels that "Monisha was as hard as she was mysterious, as unresilient as she was sensitive and as sarcastic as she was wounded" (V C, p. 194).

One can easily 'discern temperamental incompatibility between Jiban and Monisha. Monisha's peculiar temperament and her morbid inclinations are no secret to her parents. Her father feels that she "ought not be encouraged in her morbid inclinations." He gets her married in a respectable middle class family thinking "that it would be good thing for her to be settled into such a solid, unimaginative family as that just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance". Monisha common between herself and Jiban and is unable to establish any life-giving rapport with him. Monisha's husband, as Amla discovers, is a tiresome non entity a petty bureaucrat who complacently quotes from Burke and Wordsworth, Gandhi and Tagore, but fails to relate himself to Momsha. As is the case with Maya temperamental incompatibility aggravates the psychological malady of Monisha also. She feels alienated from her husband and ponders over the problems of attachment and detachment. Monisha is fond of the Gita – "My book" she calls it. The Gita inspires her to be detached because. "from attachment arises longing. If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, then-but there is no such love" (V C, p. 135).

The diametrically opposed cultural backgrounds of the couple also come in the way of mutual understanding and mental affinity. Jiban is the product of a conventional culture in which a woman has, besides child-bearing, some other important roles-cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Jiban has seen women spending their lives like birds In the cages without any trace of aggressiveness or sense identity: "Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding Waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in the old houses in the old city" (F C, p.120). The Bleeding Heart Dove like existence is not something for which Monisha has bargained in her marriage with Jiban. She feels like a trapped bird and can live eat work, sing, bleeding through life.

No wonder Monisha feels completely alienated from him. When she is accused of theft by her mother-in-law Jiban does not defend her right on his money. He in fact, thus, quietly, becomes a party to their collective allegations.

"Money has been stolen, you know Jiban's money." I (turned to look at Jiban standing disconsolately down in the courtyard below, and he did not look at me... From the other end of the balcony, his mother shouted, "...I will not have a thief in my house, I say, I will not have a thief in my house". (V C, p. 137).

This callous behaviour on Jiban's part clearly betrays a lack of trust and understanding between the spouses. He shows no consideration for Monisha's needs and in a way, denies her the basic rights of a wife. When Monisha wants to talk about, the incident he does not say, "Why did you not tell them at once?" He rather says: "Why didn't you tell me before took it?" Monisha naturally feels terribly hurt and humiliated. She does not feel at home in her husband's home. She finds herself living among strangers. Expressing her sense of anguish and disillusionment after the unfortunate incident, she writes in diary:

I am accused of theft. These pettiest of people... They think me a thief. To be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth. I find that I am alone here. (VC, 136).

Like Maya andURaUtama (in Cry, The Peacock), Monisha and Jiban are also an issueless couple. Birth of a child could have rescued her from morbid inclinations. The innocent face of a child would have filled her uninvolved existence with love. Unfortunately, this is not so. A.V. Krishna Rao rightly observes that

Monisha's predicament is rendered more tragic by the fact of her inability to bear children. Being childless, she suffers from total in communication. Elana to Kalinnikana says "physical, inferiority brings about spiritual breakdown" (Kalinnikana, 1982, p.175) society does not want to accept childless, barren, lading, Monisha has to bear the pangs of criticism from her aunts, cousins and views when they discuss her womb, tubes and ovaries, she says: "I think that what separates me from this family is the fact that not one of them ever steps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and darkles. Mine is dark now". The blessing it is (V.C, p.139). indiraNityadaraw states, "from this stage of isolation and alienation, Desai presents the desire the totally withdraw as the next obvious step".

Under such peculiar circumstances, her despair deepens, her whole existence becomes purposeless. She finds no props which can support and save her from this shattering confusion. She does not contemplate going back to her mother because she is awed by her accomplishment and self-control and, like Nirode, feels alienated from her. Nor she has a religious faith to divert her attention from her despair and alienation. Monisha prefers nonexistence to a meaningless existence. R.S. Sharma has pointed out that in the tension between "active involvement and passive withdrawal, the individual does not seem to have much choice. He can act and become part of the corruption, both physical and moral, that attends all human activity or he can withdraw prepare himself for a gradual dissolution. In both situations, the characters are like trapped birds who either accept their trap situations as a natural condition". She feels utterly helpless to realize that a life without faith or dedication is meaningless. Death is better than such a hollow existence. She muses "such a life cannot be lived—a life dedicated to nothing—that this husk is a protection from death. Ah Yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely, is not a difficult choice". (V.C, p.122).

In Jiban's house, Monisha's congenital hypersensitivity is combined with an atmosphere of distrust, ignorance, monotonous drudgery and lack of privacy). Moniah's total seclusion from the members of the family and her aloofness from her husband make her life. "a barred enclosure" (p.241) Ywala Patel Comments: "Peace is not found in external circumstances, but within oneself, and the discovery of peace within oneself is possible only when one lives a life of self conscious awareness of one's being, an awareness that stimulates the growth of inner resources and inner strength" (Patil, 1987, p.64).

A loveless relationship with Jiban and others in the family and absence of any creative activity reduces her to a pathetic state where life becomes, "only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution. Only a conundrum—is that, then, life?" (V C, p. 125). In such an unwholesome environment she gradually gets alienated from everybody even her sister Amla, and advises her also not to make any friends.

However, the wisdom of un-involvement, which Monisha "preaches and practices, does not lead her to happiness. She becomes conscious of the passions of love lying dried in her when she fails to respond like other spectators to the song sung by the street singers. Tormented by her inability to respond to these emotions of love, she blames her situation for her losing touch with "this essential instinct of theirs.... They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle (like Beckett's hero in *The Unnamable* Living in a jar) and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth in me" (VC, p.247). As this awareness dawns on her, she feels like a trapped bird and grows restive to seek release from her captivity. She begins her "panicked search for feeling". Like a maniac, she hurries out of the "stale room filled with sounds of other's peoples emotions" (V C, p. 240). While listening to the street singers she feels frustrated, alone and apart because the | notion of uninvolved existence has made her insensitive and ignorant. "I am ignorant and these are symbols of an essential wisdom that has eluded me. And it has been my own fault I chose to stand aside and allow it to pass" (V C, p. 239).

Monisha, in the flash of a moment, is terrified by her emotional vacuum and discovers to her utter dismay that her life has been a tragic waste. Human life's true significance, can be felt and enjoyed only in terms of contact and relatedness, but that blessed existence has been beyond her reach. The futility of her cherished aloneness dawns on her. Her efforts not to touch and communicate with anyone have deprived her of the essential wisdom of life. She sadly reflects: "I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone's shoulder, of my tongue on anyone's damp palate" (VC, p. 240). In a fit of uncontrollable emotional turmoil, she ends her nightmarish, unhappy, loveless existence. For Jasbir Jain' Monisha's suicide is an "attempt to rebel against this meaningless, death-like isolation". She thus tries to give meaning to her death since her life has had none. Her suicide is preceded by self-knowledge and it asserts her freedom, it is an exercise of her choice.

Although in relationships expectations are mutual, the self centered Monisha does not care about the needs and expectations of others. She hates adjustments and friendliness; compromises and reciprocation. She seeks some pat solutions of problems in the way of her equation with Jiban without realizing, what Dharama tells to Amla, "Our relationship is not all straightforward pat, married relationships never are. There is the matter of loyalty, habit,

complicity...” (VC, p. 229). Here the man-woman relationship disintegrates because Monisha fails to synthesize the ideas of personal freedom, domestic duties and social obligations. Sheer lack of creative activity, or what is called, a lack of vocation in Cry, The Peacock, also makes her predicament unbearable, and ultimately forces her to self-annihilation.

In Cry, The Peacock, Maya cannot relate herself to Gautama because of her strong father-fixation. In Voices in the City, Monisha is crippled because of her inability to be independent of her mother. She is painfully aware of the sordid fact that her parents did not get on well together. She does not, of course, elaborate the libidinous properties and conjugal violations of her mother, but she knows that her mother is self centered, proud and domineering. The model of a complex, disturbing and unreal matrimonial relationship presented by her” parents is like as seed of destruction and degeneration sown in her formative years. In their household at Kalimpong, she has: known little pleasure, friendliness or faith. As an adult Monisha cannot acquire these traits, and her inhibitions on this account vitiate her relationship with Jiban.

Voices in the City delineates a non-balanced, unsatisfying and colorless relationship between the parents of Monisha, Nirode and Amla. There exist irreconcilable differences of temperament and personality between the two. The novel opens, when the father of Nirode, Monisha, Amla and Arun is already dead, and the mother lives at Kalimpong in her self-chosen isolation. The action of the novel does not directly concern itself with the dramatization of the marital relationship between the parents. However, it is not difficult to outline this with the help of the bitter outbursts of anger by Nirode against her mother. Greater details, in an objective and analytical manner, are provided by Amla, who, when feels relaxed in the company of Dharama, recreates her childhood and her parents. Amla feels that for her parents marriage was a sort of financial contract arrived at by her father to get economic support. She tells Dharama: “I am afraid the marriage must have been something of a financial settlement and—and I don’t know if my father did not regret it later” (VC, p. 205).

Their tastes and temperaments are diverse. “Mother”, tells Amla, is “the most beautiful woman I know, and very accomplished. None of us is like her, so polished and balanced and contained like a well-cut jewel” (VC, p. 209). She is a proficient cook and connoisseur of flowers, music and good food, whereas the father shuns all these things. He does not care for the food she cook and does not enjoy the musical soirees their mother likes so much. Amla describes her father in highly negative terms

She remembers him not only as an idle drunkard, but also as careless about his appearance and dress. He does not care if his coat buttons are always undone and his repulsive flesh peeps from the untidy gaps. His uncouth and unrefined behaviour fills her mother with terrible contempt and resentment. He is portrayed as capable of being violent at times. Amla remembers her mother crying and noise which has something to do with what he said or did. He is not only an idle boozier but has a clear streak of malice also. He suffers from a strong sense of inadequacy in comparison to his talented wife and, therefore, never wants to be in her company. Amla remembers vividly: “When he came up to Kalimpong and saw her wandering about her garden, touching her flowers, he never followed her. He used to lie back against his cushions, idle and contented—contented I think in his malice” (VC, p. 207).

Amla’s portrayal of her parents makes it obvious that they were destined to have an unhappy marital relationship. He is doggedly determined not to share her love and likings howsoever convinced he is of their value and propriety. He derives a vicarious pleasure out of his cynicism and sadism. Once in Kalimpong, walking with Monisha and Amla, he spots a butterfly vibrating upon a huge flower, and he says viciously look at that. Forget yourself in that study. Then you will be fortunate like your mother” (VC, p. 207). He smiles his “diseased unpleasing” smile and walks on. All other members trail behind him, feeling horribly depressed.

This non-balanced marital bond lacks the element of love and feelings of relatedness. The spouses hardly care for each other. They follow different ways of life while living together under the same roof. Amla’s description of her father shows that he behaves in an obnoxious manner just to make his wife feel stung. Elements of sharing, togetherness or understanding do not characterize their relationship adopting and adapting is not in their temperament. Being “polished and balanced and contained like a well-cut jewel”, the mother superficially maintains a semblance of a conjugal relationship between them. After the death of her husband she discards the guise and starts enjoying her life in the company of Major Chadha, her neighbor, whom Nirode despises vehemently.

This enigmatic and disturbing relationship between the parents sows the seeds of destruction and degeneration in the personalities of their children, particularly Nirode and Monisha. The love-hate relationship between mother and son, which is a product of dissonance in husband-wife relationship, does not let Nirode establish a straight, smooth and meaningful relationship with any one including his mother. Monisha cannot overcome the influence of her parents’ negative qualities and tragically fails to relate herself to her husband and his parents. The peculiar nature of her parent’s relationship dries all tender feelings of love and trust and instils in its place the negative feelings of fear and suspicion. Their inability to communicate with anyone renders the children

incapable of emotional warmth, understating, consideration and confidence —the essential elements of a successful human relationship. There is no evidence of a sound homeostasis mechanism in the personality pattern of their parents. They make no efforts to achieve equilibrium in their relationship. Their relationship includes simple action, no interaction. The action, too is negative in the sense that it widens the gulf between the two; it is “individualistic, separating and alienating”. They derive sadistic pleasure in evaluating each other negatively, and gloat over their withdrawal from each other. This influences the mental make-up of the children and exerts far reaching, unwholesome effects upon the development of their capacity to function”, in reciprocal love relationships. In their parents’ household, the principles of give and take, reciprocation and adjustment; mutual admiration and regard have never been followed. Monisha considers it her right to evaluate herself as superior to everybody in Jiban’s household and despise them as well as their way of life. She, in a way, tries to imitate her mother who could very successfully maintain her individuality in relation to her father, Monisha, however, forgets that her mother could bear her life of subdued emotions and thwarted expectations because of her creative involvement in her manifold activities and interests. In the absence of love and creative activity in her life, Monisha commits the blunders of seeking the meaning of her existence in human relationships only. The irony is that she expects fulfillment and genuine joy in the relationships she does not hold sacred.

Manisha’s obsessive sense of alienation, the treatment that she receives from her in-laws, the absence of love between husband and the wife and other are the reasons responsible for her psychic disintegration. The only alternative person who has lost faith in life is death. She commits suicide and her suicide is “an attempt to rebel against this meaningless, death like isolation. It is an attempt to give meaning to her death for her life has not been able to acquire on (Jain, p.33) her hypersensitivity does not help her to establish any life-giving rapport with her husband. She fails as A.V.Krishna Rao says “To synthesize the ideas of personal freedom, domestic duties and social responsibilities” (Rao, 1985) She fails to find a negotiated meaning from the patterns which life wears for her. Her end is suggestive of her failure to understand the complexity of life, wherein an individual always finds himself/herself standing at crossroads offering multiple choices.

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