

The Quest for Father Figure in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*

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Abstract

It's a bare truth that man cannot live in isolation. And this evolves from the fact that he is a social being, living in a society. According to the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, "Man is by nature a social animal..." In the light of this pronouncement, it is seen that human relationship plays a remarkable role in the society and in the lives of people. The state of an individual's mind largely depends upon the relationship he upholds with his family, relatives and friends. If the relationship he maintains with others is congenial, he will lead a contented life. And if he is not able to sustain an agreeable human bond, he will have a miserable life which can eventually push him into an imbalanced mental state. This paper aims at the study of human relationship, especially the element of father obsession or the father fixation, in the novel, *Cry the Peacock*, by Anita Desai.

Key words: Human relationship, mental state, father fixation, family, life.

As an Indian novelist and short story writer, Desai is noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. The focus of the novelist is mainly on the issues of women. Most of Desai's novels explore tensions between members of the family and alienation of middle class women. Anita Desai relates herself to the high aesthetic values of literature. Most vital among these is her artistic power of applying the basic values of life to her novels successfully, making her achievement unique. Desai initiates in her novels a neo-psychological component and projects a sensibility, which does not occur in other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. She mainly

lays stress on the art of characterization and has a masterful understanding in the analysis of her characters. Besides the way in which she narrates the anecdotes are significant, as they reflect the obsessions and suppressions of her characters bringing out their inner selves in a very successful manner.

Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are usually highly intelligent and sensitive women who end up exhausted and are on the verge of mental crisis in their attempt to manage a home and children and find emotional fulfillment. They usually resort to drastic steps when their predicament reaches a climax. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is a highly sensitive, caring woman bound in marriage to the practical, down-to-earth lawyer Gautama, who remains totally oblivious to his wife's emotional needs. Physically and emotionally, her body and mind crave for attention, the denial of which leads to dire consequences where she pushes Gautama to his death. The novel is all about the disagreeable relationship between the protagonist Maya and her husband Gautama. Almost the whole story is the recollection of the past events by Maya herself.

Maya, the protagonist, is a motherless child who is brought up by her affluent father. In a motherless home, the father's role is likely to extend beyond the limits of a father-parent that is he assumes the role of a mother substitute too. Often, a father becomes a role model to his child and the role he assumes is an intricate one as it shapes her mind and character. A father in a motherless home may find less difficulty in rearing up boy, but he has to be more careful and thoughtful in bringing up a girl. As a male, the father may not be accustomed to the nature and behavior of a girl. In the words of Maureen Green:

Traditionally father has been the one to emphasize sex differences in the family, to encourage his son to keep his cool and maintain 'a stiff upper lip', while permitting his daughter to have a good cry; to make his son work hard and look forward to years of achievement while letting his daughter feel that being good and sweet is enough.

So, Maya's father gives her abundant care and love, which facilitates her to lead a very happy and shielded life under his wings. This way she develops in herself 'father fixation'. The APA dictionary of psychology defines it as "an abnormally strong emotional attachment to the father". There is no hint in the novel where Maya is seen grieving the loss of her mother. It is because her father has always tried to maintain the relationship of a father and a daughter in its complete meaning, fruitfully. On the other hand, he forgets that his daughter ought to be brought up emotionally strong as well, which will help her to lead an independent and a confident life. She remembers her life in her father's house –

As a child, I enjoyed, princess like, a sumptuous fare as fantasies as the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian of Indian mythology...and being my father's daughter... But when I play battledore-and shuttlecock, using the small bright oranges as

shuttlecocks that shoot, bird-like through the air and are broken, egglike, on the grass, he only laughs to see me leap and fly, leap and fly. (CTP 41-42)

Maya feels quite proud thinking about her good old days when her father took much interest in her cheerfulness. She also loves her father, his gestures and features.

As one neat crisp white square settle upon the other, one long crease straightens and flows into the next, so do his thoughts, his life, his attitude, his learning and his career assume a similar pattern – formal as a Moghul garden, gracious and exact, where breeding, culture leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art... (CTP 42)

Unfortunately, her life takes a sad turn after she marries Gautama, a lawyer, twenty years senior to her. He is her father's good friend and also a person of rationalistic opinions, engaged in his work throughout the day, finding little time to spend with his wife. "Telling me to go sleep while he worked at his papers..." (CTP 14)

Maya is an emotional and an over sensitive person. She is receptive to the smells and colors of nature. She is concerned about each and everything that happens around her and this is clearly depicted in the beginning of the novel when she finds it quite difficult to come out of her grief upon the death of her pet. In contrast, Gautama takes the incident in a very composed manner. His character reveals that he is person devoid of emotional attachment for worldly things. Maya is pained at the way her husband behaves. It is to be remembered that they have been married for three years and she does not have a child. "Childless woman do develop fanatic attachments to their pets they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance." (CTP 15) Toto, the pet was too dear to Maya that its loss comes as a great shock to her. She wishes to see a similar emotional person in him as she is but to her dismay and surprise, he neither takes part in her sorrow nor comforts her. He remains very cool, unaffected by the death of the pet and his indifference is an indication that he is unaware of Maya's feelings. And, as soon as he receives a visitor, he forgets her totally. "Just then the servant...Gautama rose immediately, ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether." (CTP 9)

Maya brings in a neat comparison between her father and her husband; how her father would have reacted when she was in an anguish mood. Unlike Gautama, her father would comfort her with soothing words.

...but for my gentle father who would have said to me, with that assured and reassuring calm, 'It will all be well, it will all be well soon, Maya.' He had often had to hold me in his arms, or, when I was smaller, wash the tears from my face, and repeat those mesmerizing words to me in his deep tones. As I grew older, the charm was expanded,

new phrases were enveloped to give me more room for thought. ‘It is best to accept Maya. What does it do to cry?’ ‘Why must you get so upset? Surely it is all for the best.’”

So this tenderness is exactly what Maya expects from her husband. On the contrary, Gautama does not like Maya holding his arm for solace. “...and I took his arm, even though I knew he detested me to do so. He tolerated my hold for a moment in consideration of my bereavement...” (CTP 16)

The congenial bond between her and Gautama is absolutely missing. Not even the other members in the house care for her or speak of love. They keep themselves busy in their own world, discussing politics, cases of bribery and other subjects. Maya feels very lonely and her mind often flashes with old memories. Her mind is overflowed with the thoughts of her affectionate and caring father and thereby she tries to seek a father figure in her husband. She expects him to bestow the same love and attention upon her as her father did.

When he touched my hair... I was flooded with tenderness and gratitude, thought of him as my guardian, my protector...His tenderness was the cathartic I desired... (CTP 15)

But sadly and quite unluckily, she is lovelorn after marriage. Maya yearns for Gautama’s support and love desperately. “Contact, relationship, communion...I let these...bathe me in their lambency... (CTP 21) Though she craves for his company, she does not explicitly reveal it to him and this is witnessed in these lines.

Gautama – I should have liked to call out to him...I turned to the light in his study, a small bright oblong in the silent house. It would be long before he shut his books and came to me. Dared I go in? Beg for comfort? Confess to my loneliness and terror of my loneliness? Useless. Hopeless.” (CTP 28)

Once when she expresses her desire to go away for the summer, Gautama says in a ‘cold, astringent tone’ that her father can take her wherever she wants. Maya already predicts that this will be Gautama’s reaction. Obviously, she is forced to think about her father and his unconditional love for her. She remembers:

Since my ayah left...he has looked me alone, and his beam is especially tender, his attention is especially loving...To me, it is a sign of warm-heartedness, and reminds me, always, of this man’s open love for me. (CTP 38)

For Maya, the spring season upsets her violently in her marital home but the same season was captivating at her house with her father. She recollects that the world was like a toy especially made for her, painted in her favorite colors, set moving to her favorite tunes. One can easily gauge from these words that her happiness knew no bounds when she was with her father. She

sobs saying, “No one, no one else’, I sobbed into my pillow as Gautama went into the bathroom, ‘loves me as my father does.’” (CTP 43)

Maya’s grief is further worsened by the prophecy of the albino astrologer who had predicted that during the fourth year of their marriage either the husband or the wife will die and that’s an inevitable destiny. So, unable to seek a father figure in her husband and the failure in establishing an emotional attachment with him, Maya is blown apart mentally. The quest for a father figure ends up in a disaster. Subsequently, she admits defeat and later in a fit of madness, she pushes Gautama to his death.

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