

# A Study of Anita Desai's Protagonists-Maya and Sita with reference to her novels "Cry the Peacock" and "Where Shall We Go This Summer?"

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**Abstract:** Anita Desai is a celebrated novelist who is known for representing the psychological actualities of her characters very minutely. Her intention of writing is to discover herself and then aesthetically portray the truth. She has attempted to underseek into the depths of a woman's psyche and showing its relative association with the society. And this concern can be pointed out through the portrayal of the neurotics like Maya and Sita. Both these protagonists present sensitive individuals in their moments of intense struggle and their efforts to seek neurotic solutions. Anita Desai is widely recognized as the pioneer of psychological novel in modern Indian English literature. The prominent feature of her works is her art of the portrayal of characters. She examines the psychological inner workings of women and present their reactions. Anita Desai's novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the woman's inner world, frustration and storm raging inside her mind intensify her predicament. Desai's concern with the emancipation of womanish reflected on each leaf of her novel.

**Index Terms**—Aesthetically, Maya, Sita and Protagonists..

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims at studying about the predicament faced by the leading female characters of Anita Desai's novels, Cry the Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer? Desai discusses about the traumatic experiences and mental tensions that Maya and Sita undergo. Desai explores the emotional world of neurotic Maya, who is by a presentiment of her husband's death on account of her belief in astrological prognosis, while in Sita she presents the theme of repressed childhood neurosis. The repressed impulse and memories lie buried in the oblivious of the protagonist Sita but return later in a form of a full-blown neurotic picture during her fifth pregnancy. The theme of both the novels is disharmony and discord confined to the family and at times to the mal-adjusted or ill adjusted self. Loneliness and reciprocated love drives Maya to the jaws of death and violence, while Sita suffers from Oedipus complex. Both Maya and Sita are representatives of Indian society and culture. They both represent the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multi layered.

During psychoanalytical study one is able to realize Maya and Sita likely to be the representatives of repressed levels. Maya unable to deal with neurosis goes for violence

while Sita compromising and adjusting with it returns home peacefully.

Anita Desai is widely recognized as the pioneer of psychological novel in modern Indian English literature. The prominent feature of her works is her art of the portrayal of characters. She examines the psychological inner workings of women and present their reactions. Her two novels Cry the Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer? present the traumatic experiences and mental tensions that Maya and Sita undergo. Desai explores the emotional world of neurotic Maya, who is haunted by a presentiment of her husband's death on account of her belief in astrological prediction; while in Sita she presents the theme of repressed childhood neurosis. The repressed impulse and memories lie buried in the unconscious of the protagonist Sita but return later in a form of a full blown neurotic picture during her fifth pregnancy.

In Cry the Peacock, Anita Desai portrays the psychic tumult of a young sensitive married girl Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. When one reads the novel through psychoanalytical point of view the question that arises in the mind is that, Does Maya's father, Rai sahib unconsciously contribute to the ruination of her psyche? Rai sahib is a man groomed in Victorian lifestyle and progressively inclined in many respects but he is still a thorough Brahmin inside his mind. He has unshakeable belief in fatalism and he also exhorts Maya to accept bitter facts of life. His prederminism explains his exaggerated relation to the Albino's prophecy which predicted that in the fourth year of her marriage either Maya or her husband would die. Apart from his wife's premature death and Maya's submissive nature Rai Sahib's philosophy of life and psychic complexes have to be closely considered to understand his special attachment to Maya. She is submissive and remains happily "Daddy's girl" always rather than appearing mature and independent.

When Maya reaches marriageable age he creates ideal circumstances for her to develop tender feeling towards Gautama. He is the only person whom she meets and she surely finds some qualities intelligence and understanding that her father has, apart from the similarity in age. Maya marries Gautama because she does not have her own choice to make. Maya hopes to extend the relation with her father

through Gautama. She longs for him whenever she needs reassurance and love.

At the conscious level she is conditioned to think only on similar lines. But what the ego consciously denies or desires need not be acceptable to the unconscious. One cannot deceive the id, the pleasure principle. The depiction of drama between the ill-coordinated psychic agencies in Maya is the most interesting aspect of the novel. At unconscious level she has every reason to nurse a grouse against the father for having been instrumental in denying her adventuresomeness, choice making and self-determination and ultimately throwing her into the fetters of marriages with a passionless cold intellectual and neglecting her love ever after. She looks upon her father as liberator on seeing caged monkeys at the railway station Maya's reaction is typical:

*"My father might have come! I announced Look for him, help me look for him, Gautama He'; open the cages and let them out. Hurry"*

It is strange that Maya should so regard a person whose role in encaging herself has been crucial.

Desai had shown Maya, being obsessed with the gloomy prophecy of the albino astrologer. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the fourth year of their marriage. Her belief in the prophecy takes the shape of an obsessional neurosis and keeps growing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on a tender leaf. In the beginning of her neurotic affection she frequently tells herself that it was she herself who was going to die. But she had ardent love for life and so she starts wondering whether it was Gautama whose life was threatened. She is almost confirmed that Gautama certainly fated to die and the thought makes her more and more secretive In the novel Desai has suggested that Maya is obsessed with the prophecy because of the romance involved in it. Freud attributes superstitious beliefs to suppressed hostility. To all appearances Maya is absolutely submissive and obedient daughter, sister and wife. But in the deep unconscious there is immense suppressed hostility against her husband and to an extent against her father. She is extremely faithful to her instincts which crave for un-qualified and wild satisfaction. According Freud normal people in her circumstances would have effected withdrawal by influencing the instinctual urge at the psychic level. She expects some emotional and physical satisfaction but both are denied to her due to Gateman cold intellectuality and old age. She longs for sensuous enjoyment but is dampened by spiritual doses of Gita.

Sex is not only an intensely and intrinsically pleasurable experience but it can act as a revitalizing force in an otherwise sterile life. If Maya were married to a younger man and has been satisfied sexually, her psyche would have been different. But because of Gautama's age and attitude to sex she remains a disappointed woman. As her disappointment becomes a routine experience she sexualizes hallucinatory visions of lizards, of lizards, and breeds copulating in weird positions. Being childless adds to her problem because the birth of a child would have given her a sense of achievement and her creative urge would have got focused on a helplessly dependent human being instead of getting diffused over nature

and spread outside human interest. She secretly wishes that Gautama will die according to the prophecy. The neurotic defence mechanisms like hallucinatory visions and nightmares (where her secret longing comes alive to her) experience of split personality, adverse somatic symptoms and religious avoidance of violence woefully fail to blunt the edge of her unconscious wish. Her transition from neurosis to psychosis is powerfully reflected in the scene of the dust storm (P-190). This is the exact point of her plunging into the abysmal depths of psychosis resulting in the act of violence. Maya's pushing Gautama off the parapet of their house is not an accident but behind the act there has been a prolonged psychic struggle which she has not known herself. Maya is faithful to herself and the social and moral consequences of her actions do not matter to her any more after she embraced psychosis what prophecy said years ago has become truth to her.

Anita Desai studies the inner life of her characters but she never allows them to forget their social and familial ties. Maya looks at her brother, father and husband to save her from the psychological predicament and cries ...

*"Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying."*

In *When Shall We Go This Summer?* Desai once again presents the theme of repressed childhood neurosis. The repressed impulses and memories lie buried in the unconscious of Sita but return to her later in a form of a full blown neurotic picture during her fifth pregnancy. Sita succeeds partially in outgrowing her neurosis which originated in the fantasies centering around the father and later in her married life precipitated by certain important experiences. She reverts to her earlier neurotic state although in slightly modified manner. Her neurosis assumes shape of her irrational belief in her dead father's powers to keep her child inborn forever. During its spell she seeks the physical proximity of her father by shifting to Manori, her father's island. But contrary to actualizing her neurotic wish she returns home sobered, tempered and chastened by the recognition of the imperatives of life.

Sita's father was a freedom fighter and she was surrounded by his friends. She felt she was living among selfless people fighting for noble cause and so she thought hers is not the age for games but for sacrifice and prayers. This strange background made her withdrew into the protective chrysalis of child-hood for longer. After independence her father moved to island Manori to put his social theories into practice but as his chelas left he ended up in practicing a variety of black magic on the gullible people of the island. Sita's Psychic maturation began to curtail by parental negligence and consequent narcissistic injury. She gets fixated at the oedipal stage when, according to Freud little girls entertain fantasies of bearing the father's baby (5).

In view of the injurious psychological and physical atmosphere obtaining, among other things as a result of the absence of the mother (with whom she identified herself at the end of the neurotic phase) Sita does not totally succeed in her attempt to overcome this neurosis. The father's image and the fantasies surrounding it set up a strong neurotic configuration in her psyche. It is significant that on their

father's death Rekha is not at all disturbed while Sita remains uncertain. Later she is compelled to move to mainland and marry Raman.

Her life in Bombay appears dull to her as she tries to compare it to her father's ideals. She compares her in-laws with her father and finds a contract to his high ideals she responds this situation by indulging in various acts of defiance such as smoking and speaking provocatively. Sita continuously tries to find safer outlet for neurotic anxiety.

The Hanging Garden's episode, which takes place at a crucial point of her married life, present an objective correlative to her neurotic need for the father's sensual attention. In the garden she sights a Muslim couple a young woman lying in the lap of an old man. She figures them as inhuman and divine. This incident makes impression on her and her efforts of adjusting with life are shattered. The Muslim couple has touched a sensitive cord in her neurotic need for father's love. Her fifth pregnancy provides an occasion for the "return" of her repressed neurotic craving for the father's baby. At conscious level she tries remain calm but at the unconscious level the pregnancy yields a substitute satisfaction for her original wish for the father's baby. She tries every means to protect the unborn child and for that she tries to seek medication to prevent its birth, she ever smokes strong tobacco. Symbolically her unborn child becomes a fruit of her un-conscious sensual feelings towards her father.

When she moves to island against everyone's advice she is aware that she is in pursuit of an illusion. Yet she is driven by the compulsion over which she had no power. She tries to revitalize her favourite childhood but fails to recapture earlier sensation. Her childish games with Karan invariably turn to be a pathetic pale imitation of the once she played with her brother Jeevan. Above all that she feels that the uncanny powers of her father have lost their efficacy. The passage of twenty years makes his image appear grotesque and ugly she fails to hold him to her this time like in her childhood and realizes this failure.

The Island thus brings to her the world of hard facts and awakens her to the realities of life. As she fails to revive the earlier magic on the island. She once again find Raman likeable for all that he does for the family at the cost of his personal happiness. The journey towards home becomes a symbolic re-enactment of the scene twenty years ago when she followed Raman pitying herself for her helplessness. But this time it is her own free will that she follows him like a "*feed sea-bird at evening*".

## II. CONCLUSION

The theme of both the novels is disharmony and discord confined to the family and at times to the mal-adjusted or ill adjusted self. Loneliness and unreciprocated love drives Maya to the jaws of death and violence, while Sita suffers from Oedipus complex. Both Maya and Sita are representatives of Indian society and culture. They both represent the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multi-layered. During psychoanalytical study one is able to realize Maya and Sita likely to be the representatives of re-pressed levels. Maya unable to deal with neurosis goes for violence while Sita compromising and adjusting with it returns home peacefully.

The novelist has thus highlighted the female predicament in various aspects. Anita Desai has excelled in elaborating the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by negligence and loneliness.

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