
Symbolism in Anita Desai's *Cry The Peacock*

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Abstract :

Anita Desai is a class by herself for her intensely individual and rich lyrical style and the felicitous use of imagery. She uses imagery as a vehicle to probe the innermost self of her characters.

Keywords : Bird Imagery, Loneliness, Isolation and Peacock Image

Symbolism is an integral part of human expression more so the literary expression. From times immemorial humans have been communicating among themselves through different symbols comprehended and understood by the members within the community. As Arthur Symons asserts: Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them in Heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what symbolism in literature really is, a form of expression at the best but approximately, essentially, but arbitrary, until it has obtained a force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed not even language. What are the words themselves nothing but symbols almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters?¹

Anita Desai is a great analyst of psychological insights and inner concerns. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art with keen observation of emotions and feelings adding greater depths to her themes. A fine blend of Indian and European sensibilities, her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts through a psychological perspective but not as a social reformer.

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She is a literary artist of high order, who has a rare gift of an opulent vocabulary. According to Darshan Singh Maine “words appear to have sensuous appeal for her, and she exults in the reach and power of her rhetoric”². In her novels we find a compactly woven fabric of her vision through an artistic treatment of complex themes conveyed through her evocative symbolism and imagery. Madhusudan Prasad says that “in Anita Desai’s novels imagery lends a poetic and lyrical colouring to the problems of the estranged self and project reality through artistic parallels more powerful and eloquent than common collocation of words”³. Her technique is an instinctive outcome of her preoccupation with individual psyche seen with a painter’s eye. Her awareness of the external world, her keen power of observation, above all her remarkable command over the language she uses lend depth and musicality to her narration. Meenakshi Mukherji comments that “Anita Desai’s distinctive use of language is characterized by sensuous richness, a high stung sensitiveness, and love for the sound of words”⁴. Anita Desai’s cry the peacock is rich in use of symbols. Let’s first discuss the outline story of the novel.

Maya is a daughter of a wealthy artistic father and is brought up in an atmosphere of luxury. Though Gautama is confident husband who takes care of Maya and loves her in his own way yet Maya is not satisfied and happy. She thinks that Gautama never presents an impression of the martial incoherence and encountered conjugal life. The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. This makes the situation worse and it becomes serious and unforgotten incident to her. This event upsets Maya and she loses her mental balance. Being childless, she is very much attached to the dog and it appears that the dog was a child substitute. Maya is highly emotional and hysterical due to the death of Toto. Maya cannot bear the sight of the corpse: she is shown "rushing to the tap to wash the vision from her eyes". "She thought she saw the glint of a blue-bottle and grew hysterical, the evening sun appears to be 'swelling visibly like - she thought'- a purulent boil until it ripe to drop".

Gautama a practical man takes this event easy and tries to adjust for its burial. He consoles his wife, Maya, in his own way and says that he would bring another dog for her. His disinterested tendency hurts Maya. The death of Toto may be trivial for Gautama, a rational and professionally busy man, but it matters a lot to Maya. Though they live together yet, as a matter of fact, Gautama knows very little about her. In order to console her he offers a cup of tea without realizing Maya's agonies. Here we see that without any ill-intention on the part of either

Gautama or Maya tragedy takes its place. Gautama, in his own way, loved Maya. "Maya, he said, patiently, Do sit down. You look so hot and worn out you need a cup of tea". "Lying here in the dark? he said, and drew a finger down my cheek". "Come, come, he said, and took out the handkerchief again, more stained than ever. Do get up, he said, 'The servants are coming to take the beds out for the night, and, really, it is much pleasanter outside. Wipe your face, and we'll go out, Maya' ". Her heart soared with that ecstatic agony of all-consuming love. Maya as the representative of 'feminine principle' is hurt to the core when Gautama dismisses her grief at Toto's death with a mere "it is all over". The worlds of Maya and Gautama are sharply contrasted in that both represent the extremities of feminine and masculine principles. Maya is seething in agitation manifested in her multidimensional projections of companionship, maternity, of Keatsian sensuousness, of her identification with petunias. Gautama on the other hand is an Apollonian; he is into form, order, discipline, career and logic machines. Maya is not so much into aberration and insanity as she is into her longing for love "of the peace that comes from companion life from brother flesh". She wants to bathe in the fickleness of contact, relationship and communion. Gautama has no sensation—he cannot distinguish the smell of petunia from the smell of lemons he is into abstract thought

Maya, the heroine, a secondary character unfolds the mystery of the feminine psyche in several ways and she has her own individual personality. Maya is born of a traditional God-fearing Brahmin family whose father is a Rai Sahib, a patron of old culture and values. She is brought up in a protected atmosphere and is unaware of unpleasant realities of life. She tells in these words, "my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But was a pretty one". Finding pagan pleasure in nature and world; she has lust for life and 'sensual pleasure in living.' Her husband, Gautama, blames her father for her immaturity and inability to cope with realities of life which is more often than not unpleasant.

Anita Desai's novels at times, minor objects seem to attain symbolical overtones and effectively outlaw a particular shade of the mind. 'Tea' is linked with, day to day life and get-togetherness is associated with Gautam and not with Maya in the novel 'Cry, The Peacock' after the death of the dog no doubt Gautam makes arrangement for its burial: When the task is over for him he consoles Maya and says: "come and drink your tea and stop crying". Gautam's readiness

to have tea is clearly symbolical of his getting over Toto's death which becomes an obsession for Maya.

If symbols generally through their extra semantic impositions help Mrs. Desai to objectify the nuances of a character's subjective world, it enables the novelist to delineate the psychological depth of her characters. For example in *Cry, The Peacock* Mrs. Desai suggests the subconscious decision of Maya to murder her husband through the dust symbol "such storms had blown since the time when the earth was desert". This decision never comes to the surface of Maya's consciousness through the employment of the 'dust storm' novelist suggest the preceding psychic turmoil and the following peace. The subconscious decision remains only as something vaguely and dimly felt-never denied.

A few traditional symbols have been reinterpreted by Mrs. Desai to express the individualized psyches. The repeated references to a peacock as "brain fever bird", "a reminder of death and "ill-fated lover" are contrary to the traditionally popular image of the peacock. Its dancing image in the rainy season has been associated with love, romance, and beauty and not with fighting, mating and dying. By presenting the peacock in her arbitrary symbolical colors, Mrs. Desai is making an attempt to depict Maya's mental predicament – a deep love for life with a sure knowledge of death to follow. But it is true that this identification of the peacock with Maya's psyche gives the impression of being an unsatisfactory contrivance too many readers 5.

The statue of Shiva is also used as an important symbol. B.Rama Chandra Rao finds Natraj a symbol of liberation and observe. "The Natraj reinforces Maya's love of life. She feels that she has a great justification to live" (Rao19). In Maya's memory the image of Shiva invokes in her a shloka about Natraj:

"The bronze Shiva, dancing, just a shade outside the ring of lamp-light, fixed. Calling by the beat of drum all persons engrossed in worldly affairs the kind hearted. One who destroys all fear of the meek and gives them reassurance and points by his hand to his upraised lotus foot as the fire and who dances in the universe, let that lord of the dance protect us. As Wimsalt and Brooks suggest "every colour, sound, odor, emotion and every visual image has its correspondence in traits of human self" 6.

In Anita Desai's fictional universe even actual events connected with animals and animal-like behaviour of people become extended images because they hold symbolic import beyond the level of actuality. The Cabaret dance Maya witnesses with Gautama and his friends is a frightening experience to her. The exploitation of Cabaret women brings to her memory the bear dance, which she witnessed as a child.

Colour symbolism is equated with isolation, madness, desperation and death. The positive and negative attitude of bird, plant and animal imagery are reinforced by a colour symbolism of white and dark. Black incorporated into animal imagery depicting negative emotion, and the white colour is incorporated into bird and flower imagery. There are references of various flower images like Bougainvillea, Night Queen etc. These blooming flowers instead of attracting her through their beauty seem to portend only their impending end by the evening.

To Conclude we can say that The novelist interweaves the key images of imprisonment and insanity in presenting the predicament of the protagonist. It is this imagery that lends richness and beauty to the narrative of Cry, The Peacock through the story line.

References :

1. Symons, Arthur. 1952: 6
2. Maini, 1973: 223
3. Prasad, 1981: 142
4. Mukherji, Meenakshi.1971:22
5. Bhatnagar 254-259
6. Wimsatt & Brook 135