

## Cry for Self-Esteem: A Psychological Study of Anita Desai's Maya in Cry, the Peacock

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### Abstract:

*Literature and Psychology have been inseparable associations since centuries. The knowledge of the streams of Literature and Psychology mutually complement the understanding of each other. Many approaches are being used to explore the comprehension of the inner psychic processes of the literary characters and their resultant behavior. Apart from Freud's Psychoanalytic theory, there are many other theories which could aid the understanding of human behaviour. One such theory is Abraham. H Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which has been found as a viable tool to understand human behaviour.*

*Anita Desai's novels focus on the arena of inner sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial junctures of their lives. This paper intends to investigate the behaviour of the character Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's book Cry, the Peacock in the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Need. Maya psychically disintegrates while combating the stress generated due to the ungratified needs in the Need Hierarchy. This paper would explore the detrimental impact of her unsated need of Self Esteem on her psyche. Such an analysis would provide a new dimension and further add on to the psychological studies done so far.*

*Key Words:*

*Self-Esteem, Hierarchy of Needs, Psychoanalytic Theory, Psychic-Disintegration.*

The word *self-esteem* includes a person's general emotional valuation of his / her own value. It is one's own judgment and attitude towards the self. In other words, self-esteem is a temperament that people have that represents the judgement of their own worthiness. It could be a sum of self-confidence and self-respect. It exists as a consequence of the implicit judgments that every person has of his ability to face life's challenges, to understand and solve problems and his right to achieve happiness and right to be given respect. Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*, being deprived of the need of self-esteem, consequently struggles to maintain her mental composure and succumbs to her fragile entity.

The father of humanistic psychology, Maslow proposed the *Hierarchy of Human Needs* as the first theory of behaviour motivation. Within his model, there are at least five sets of needs viz. *physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization*. These basic needs are organized in an order according to relative prepotency. As the basic needs are met, higher needs emerge as primary motivators of behaviour. The most salient need dominates the organism and motivates behaviour. These needs should not be considered singular or exclusive; when a prepotent need dominates behaviour other needs may continue to influence the person, but certain needs emerge as primary motivating factors that underlie human behaviour. When the *Needs* are not fulfilled they have a detrimental effect on the organism as they generate severe stress and anxiety. Frustration and depression eventually gets accumulated in the process of adapting to the vacuum created due to the deprived needs. Unmanageable and prolonged stress interferes with the mental harmony and if the situation remains unchecked may lead to psychic degeneration.

Maslow describes two different forms of esteem: the need for respect from others, and the need for self-respect or inner self-esteem. Respect from others entails recognition, acceptance, status and appreciation and is believed to be more fragile and easily lost than inner self esteem. According to Maslow, in the absence of the fulfilment of the need for self-esteem, individuals will be driven to seek it, being unable to grow and obtain self-actualization. Maslow states that:

Above the lowest level of physical needs are the different gradations of psychological needs. Following the safety needs i.e. security, dependency, freedom from fear, is the level of what Maslow terms "belongingness needs" the longing for love and affection which if unfulfilled leaves the individual feeling sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness, of rootlessness" (*Motivation and personality* 43).

Maslow believed that in contemporary society, the thwarting of this group of needs is "the most commonly found core in maladjustments and more severe pathological disorders" (44). This paper would analyze the status of the 'Esteem needs of the character Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and its adverse effect on her psyche, At the highest level of the Psychological needs, Maslow placed the esteem needs which encompasses the desire for independence and freedom to grow, for self-actualization, for status, recognition, appreciation and respect. According to Maslow, in the absence of the fulfilment of the need for self-esteem, individuals will be driven to seek it, being unable to grow and obtain self-actualization. Maslow states that:

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Maya experiences a lowered self-esteem throughout her life.as she experiences an acute deprivation of high esteem for herself, both in her childhood and in her adulthood. These two phases of her life could be divided in two parts, firstly her life before her marriage

followed by her life after her marriage to Gautama. This paper shall highlight the deprivation of this need in her childhood and its consequences on her state of mind.

In the early years of a child's life, parents have the most significant influence on self-esteem and the main source of it is the positive and negative experiences a child encounters. The emphasis of unconditional love in parenting represents the importance of a child developing a stable sense of being, when he/she is cared for and is respected. These feelings translate into later effects of self-esteem as the child grows older.

Maslow postulates that:

Thwarting of these needs (self-esteem) produces feeling of inferiority, of weakness and of helplessness. These feelings in turn give rise to either basic discouragement or else compensatory or neurotic trends. An appreciation of the necessity of basic self-confidence and an understanding of how helpless people are without it can be easily gained from a study of severe traumatic neurosis (*Motivation & personality* 45).

In his book "Sanity, Madness and the family" the psychologist R.D. Laing holds the family responsible for the sanity of its members. According to him *It is not simply an individual's bad luck in the genetic card game that leads to his madness, but the tricks of the other players that drive him crazy* (36). In particular, psychologists are unanimous in stressing the importance of childhood experiences and environment in determining the evolution of a neurotic personality. Usha Bande, in her study of Anita Desai's characters, offers an interesting application of third force psychology to Desai's characters in terms of Karen Horney's theory of basic-anxiety and Abraham Maslow's theory of basic needs. Horney ascribes 'Basic anxiety' to *the feelings of being isolated and helpless in the world conceived as potentially hostile* (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 18) and traces its origin to childhood deprivation of an unconditional love which will enable a child to grow healthily. According to Usha Bande:

Dominating, over-protective, intimidating, irritable, over indulgent, partial, indifferent hypocritical elders endanger a child's free use of his energies, dampen his sense of self-esteem and self-reliance (*A Study of Character and Conflict* 26).

The compassionate autocracy of Maya's father who apparently seems to be cosseting and indulging his only daughter ultimately could be held responsible for suppressing Maya's individuality and obstructs the flowering of her personality. Maya's tragedy is in a major way the tragedy of a father's daughter. Maya is not destroyed by physical, or any overt mental cruelty. What is even more significant is that, she is destroyed by the apparently caring father, brother and husband. The repressive force of her father's love, the ego centric male desire to dominate the daughter, underlying the caressing tone and protective gestures are evident through Maya's reminiscences rather than the narrations in the book. The narrative in the major section of the text in first person, is suggestive about the narrator- protagonist Maya's insights being limited by a strong emotional attachment to her father. Maya emotionally banks over her father even after her marriage which projects her incapability to adjust to life. These lines make it clear:

...the truth that it was not for them that I longed with fiercest desire, not even for Gautama, but for my gentle father who would have said to me with that assured and reassuring calm, It will be well, it will all be well soon, Maya' (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 48).

Through tone, language and images, the author guides us to a truer understanding of the father's behaviour than given consciously by Maya. Maya's attitude to these reminiscences has a certain duality: at most times she is filled with nostalgic longing for the love and security he represented; only occasionally are there, realizations that the benevolent despot had stifled her growth as a healthy individual hampering the development of her self-esteem. She remembers herself as: "As I had been a wayward and high strung child" (48).

Maya has every urge pampered, every mood tenderly handled. An irrational crying fit produces a ruby for the child with assurance that one day it would belong to her (36). He creates a fairy tale world for her which psychologically disunites her from real world. "The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours set moving to my favourite tunes (36). Her emotional dependence on her father hampers her individual entity. It makes her weak and develops an inability in her to adjust to life after marriage as seen in the following extract:

I raised my arms over my head, waiting for the memory of those worlds that voice, to bring about the desired lull. But it did not come, and I cried" I should like so much to see him, oh! I should like to see father again. It has been so long. (48).

Anuradha Roy states that.:

Her fondness of her father would actually be a shield to cover her insecurities and weakness to exist as an individual. Underlying this display of paternalistic fondness is a subtle and selfish exertion of power, a neurotic urge to possess, to mould her (Maya) into a pre-determined shape (*Patterns of Feminist consciousness in Indian writings in English* 28).

Maya has moments of illumination when she thinks over her childhood suffering from an obvious father fixation in the following lines:

Yes, now that I go over it in my mind, 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 (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 89).

Repeated use of images of a fairy-land or a toy world with a toy princess is an indication of reinforcing the idea of the unnatural upbringing underlying the concern and love. Maya's father's indifference to his son Arjuna contains a subtle warning that any questioning of his authority would not be tolerated. In order to please her father, Maya opts to retain the imposed identity of a dependent child than to develop into mature adult. Gautama, her husband, comments indignantly: "What wickedness to raise a child like that" (98).

Experiences that contribute to low self-esteem include being harshly criticized, being physically, sexually or emotionally abused, being ignored, ridiculed or teased or being expected to be perfect all the time. The most ominous manner in which the shadow of the

father's will and attitudes is cast over the child is the way in which he allows his own killing fatalism to stifle her. According to Anuradha Roy:

Fatalism has always been one of the props holding up patriarchal ideology over centuries, women have been induced to regard their subordinate position as one decreed by fate and therefore irreversible. (*Patterns of Feminist consciousness in Indian writings in English*. 28).

Maya's father's unpardonable mistake of stunting Maya's esteem is by imposing his fatalism over her by pacifying her in her tantrums by assurances in the following excerpts:

Come now, we musn't fret if it must be so, we must learn to accept.

.... you will learn one day, Maya that these things you must put up with, if one can do nothing about them, why not accept them?’

.... we have been taught for generations to believe that the merit of accepting one's limitations and acting within them is greater than that of destroying them and trying to act beyond them. One must and he dropped his voice- ‘accept’ (49, 50).

Maya's father never attempts to act rationally towards the child. He never explains things logically; rather he instils a grain of strong fatalism in her mind leading her to become superstitious and irrational. He insists that she should merely accept fate instead of dismissing her fears which disturb her. He preaches her to accept fate without questioning it and ultimately resign the unavoidable. His handling of a child's terrified reaction to the albino astrologer's prediction of death shadowing her marriage makes it an inevitability, the anticipation of which slowly not only destroys her mental balance but also instils an inferiority complex in her. She holds herself responsible for the ill fate considering herself inauspicious and an ill omen. This becomes clear from the following passage spoken by Maya:

It must be a mark upon my forehead, which had been so clear to the opaque eye of the albino who had detected it, upon which the stars now hurled themselves vengefully, and which prophesied a relentless and fatal competition between myself and Gautama. (91).

Maya's emotional dependence on her father makes her ill-equipped to understand the complexities and realities of her life. This immature development of her personality obstructs her rational thinking and she totally resigns to fatalism. This adversely impacts her relationship with Gautama who repeatedly finds fault with her personality owing sometimes to her father's way of upbringing her and sometimes to herself which again diminishes her self-esteem. The following passage depicts Gautama's condemnation of her father questioning her identity.

I will certainly speak of him. He is the one responsible for this-for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers all the luxuries of the fairy tales you were brought up on. Life is a fairy tale to you still what have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for ordinary man. You won't find in picture books. And that was all you were ever shown picture books (98).

These demeaning words for herself and her father question Maya's identity, drawing a gulf between her ideal and real self. Her image of ideal self, gets shattered repeatedly which gives rise to an identity crisis. Maya's father has been highly responsible for her fragile psyche which does not allow her to build realistic self-esteem. There is an unconscious revelation of Maya about the suppressed knowledge of the gulf between what he did and what he should have. Her power of individual thought and action gets stifled in this manner. Maya grows progressively insecure, losing contact with her real self. This divided self, ultimately suffers loss of identity which dampens her worth and esteem in her own eyes.

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