

Marginalization of Self-Image: A Narrative of Maya and Monisha in Anita Desai's Novels

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Abstract

In a social system ensnared by patriarchy, women are oppressed to the extent it not only damages their self-image but also hampers the process of their self-actualisation. The psychic trauma faced by women as a result of social influences is depicted by Anita Desai in her novels. The female protagonists Maya in Cry, The Peacock encounters suppression and humiliation in the hands of the male members of her family. Being unable to accept subjugation, she asserts her individuality instead of passively accepting it. Men's attitude to belittle and undermine the talents of women gives rise to feelings of antagonism and self-hatred in Maya. This frustration ingrains criminal tendencies in her mind resulting in vengeance against the source of the psychic unrest. The impact of marginalization sinks deep down into her mind corroding her self-esteem and also devouring her sense of identity and self-hood.

This paper would explore in depth the psyche of Maya to depict the impact of living a marginalized life as per her perception. It aims to expose the conflict arising in her mind, that of maintaining her dignity and compromising with the demands of the patriarchal society. The paper would also unravel her psychic journey from composure to psychopathology as a result of which she resorts to violence to cope with the anxiety and frustration generated by her bruised and battered entity.

Key Words: Self Actualization, Self Esteem, Psychopathology, Patriarchy, Marginalization

Anita Desai undoubtedly, occupies a supreme position among the contemporary Indian writers in English. She is recognized as the pioneer of psychological novels in modern Indian English literature. The major attribute of her fiction is her art of aesthetically portraying the psychic struggle of her characters. Her fiction probes into the depths of women's psyche and in displaying it accord with the society. This concern is distinctly evident in the portrayal of the neurotic female protagonist Maya in her well acclaimed novel Cry, The Peacock. She explores the emotional world of neurotic Maya, who is haunted by a forewarning of her husband's death on account of her fatalistic orientation. She is presented as a sensitive female in her moments of intense struggle and efforts to seek neurotic solutions. One of the major themes of the novel is disharmony and discord due to the deprivation of certain crucial needs as mentioned in Maslow's *Hierarchy of needs* viz. Physiological Needs, Need for Security, Love and Belongness. Self- Esteem followed by Need for Self- Actualization. According to

the Humanistic Psychologist, Abraham. H 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 (*Motivation and personality*)). At the highest level of the Psychological needs, Maslow placed the esteem needs – the desire for independence and freedom to grow, for self-actualization, for status, recognition, appreciation and respect.

Maya is married in a sophisticated upper middle class where economic deprivations or physical brutalization is totally absent. What is fore grounded is the psychological repression created through a generation gap and difference of ideologies which consumes any possibility of mutual love and concern. Such conditions not only corrode Maya's self-esteem but also devour her sense of identity and self-hood. The temperamental differences between the couple i.e. Maya and Gautama build a gap between them and in this process of living life together, without mutual respect; Maya's self-esteem gets tainted repeatedly. This generates a mental imbalance in her, as she struggles to maintain her identity. The polarities of the atmosphere in her father's house and in her aged husband's house develop a clash between her expected image as a daughter and as a wife respectively. Gautama serves as a cruel force on his wife's hyper sensitive temperament. Behind the façade of care and concern, there is a dismissal and scorn for her behaviour which fails to measure up to his standards of normal and the acceptable. Maya's maimed personality by her dominating father, further suffers when her self-esteem undergoes severe battering. This is because Gautama sees nothing in her to esteem or respect, but merely a childlike beauty and charm to enjoy and fondly indulge from the elevated height of superiority. Maya mourns:

The superior plane he always managed to elevate himself onto when I tried to involve him in my matters, my wants and cares which to him were childish, tiresome, and even distasteful (96).

Gautama at various instances scorns Maya's behaviour, her principles, her, ideologies including her father's and brother's. He scornfully mocks Maya's sentimental insistence on the significance of funeral ceremonies through telling words like "bogus" childish trimmings which is clear in the following lines:

Why do I? Why do I choose to think of you as one of those mysterious people who find such comfort in hocus-pocus, in the bogus ceremonies and childish trimmings with which we bury our dead?

Morbidity, you might say but it is not reality that. It is a *belief* in these frivolities (18).

Gautama does not understand Maya's nature and suppresses her views by criticizing them in an effort to maintain his own ideologies guided by pragmatics and intellect. This attitude nauseates Maya's ego which gets damaged repetitively thereby leading to a breakdown of her self-respect. Gautama is seen demeaning Maya's ideologies in the following excerpt:

‘Burial and cremation are facts, Gautama.’

He shook his head vigorously in contempt as though he wished to drive me away from his side. "Facts that *matter*, I mean, naturally', he said in extreme irritation. (19)

You go chattering like a monkey and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking. But being a creature of instinct, you do every now and then, stumble purely by accident. I am sure- upon the salient point of the problem, the very solution of this case (20).

An unsurpassable barrier between the couple is created due to Gautama's belief in his own philosophy. He establishes his superiority of having a prudent understanding of life thereby censuring Maya's views. This hinders the development of positive self-esteem which is one of the significant constituents of positivity, better adjustments, and better rapport.

Faced with a diminished worth, Maya withdraws further into a subjective world puzzled by fantasies and dreams. It is the non-fulfilment of esteem needs that exert the greatest psychological pressure, for it denies Maya that self-respect essential for the growth of healthy personality. An acute sense of loneliness, an absence of communication and lack of self-esteem act powerfully on Maya's sensibilities. Unable to cope with the pressures she retreats into a self-enclosed mental world. R.D. Laing has also pointed out that when an acute isolation passes into a psychotic alienation, the person is particularly vulnerable to a flight into fantasy. Maya's fantasy world is one of nightmarish fears, filled with horrifying images and deafening noises portraying her chaotic state of mind. The kind of treatment which Gautama gives to Maya by putting her along with the monkeys in the cage is an instance of insult to Maya. The sight of caged monkeys on railway platform triggers sympathy in Maya's heart. On insistence of Maya on Gautama to help the monkeys, Gautama gets annoyed. Outraged by such behaviour Gautama puts Maya into the cage. This kind of disrespectful behaviour of Gautama once again questions her real identity. It was a heavy blow on her self-respect. The following passage shows Maya's agony when she is in the cage pleading Gautama to allow her to live with respect as given in the following passage:

There I was amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in an infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh and rattled them, shook them, crying over and over again, "Let me out" I want to live, Gautama, I want to live (131).

This single image brings out the ideas of an intolerable sense of suffocating confinement as well as the refusal to accept it with stoic resignation. Such tormenting and humiliating instances batter Maya's self-esteem. The repressions of humiliation and insult develop many a times a stir of revolt in her. It obstructs her process of self-actualization as she is obsessed with the fulfilment of her esteem needs. Unable to adapt to her damaged self-image, slowly she slips towards neurosis which is visible utmost vividly during the dust storm sequence. In Maya's psycho-narration she explicitly suggests the despair which she experiences when she feels insulted due to the behaviour of Gautama's family. The lines are:

They spoke to me the synocete, only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping marriages for I was their toy, their indulgence not be taken seriously, and the world I came from was less than that it was a luxury they considered it a crime to suffer and so damaged it with dismissal (45).

Whether it was Maya's father or her husband, both of them treat Maya as subordinate. In addition; her brother Arjuna, also mocks at her from miles away, when he sends her a letter from New York in the following lines:

It disturbs me to think of you living still as you did when you were ten years old in father's world of drinks at the club, parties on the lawn, badminton, flowers and poetry... Here I work with my hands in a canning factory. I am not paid much yet and it is sometimes a problem to make ends meet, but I find it exhilarating and it is clearer than ever to me that life, no matter how elegantly lived, is meaningless when it is lived for nothing, is meaningless when it is lived for nothing but one's own pleasure.... (115).

The self-hate which develops in Maya as a result of her diminished self-esteem, converts her innocence to guilt, giving rise to criminal tendencies. Maya grows secretive and vengeful against Gautama and stops sharing her secrets. This ultimately suffocates her as she is unable to vent out her feelings and emotions. She blames Gautama for her suffocating life. As she is unable to fructify her talents. She develops disgust and hatred which eases her of the decision to kill him. To hide the guilt of murdering Gautama she rationalizes in the following way to justify his death:

He was a tired man, worn out by a day's hard and concentrated work. Age surrounded him, weariness steeped his limbs. Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama who lived so narrowly, so shallowly, and I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for this slow harmless, guileless being who walked the fresh grass did not know he touched it (163).

Maya associates Gautama with pain and sorrow. Her relationship with Gautama is seen as her relationship with boredom, detachment, melancholy and death. Maya finds a way to compensate for the causal contempt with which she is treated by Gautama in her own acute responses to her. Her sick mind, looking for a reason why his death is preferable to hers, finds it in his indifference to the vibrant beauty of life. She feels so about him. "Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly so shallowly. And I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him (163). On the fateful night, when Maya and Gautama take a stroll on the roof under the moonlit sky, his only thoughts are of a case he had been pursuing. Maya listens to him with an indifferent amusement, because it does not evoke any interest in her. She muses the following lines:

How useless his words and opinions sounded in that palpitating night air, how petty and expendable under the gorgeous stars. Poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama, who was so intense and yet had never lived and never would (172).

As Gautama by accident steps in between the worshipped moon, she hurls him down from the terrace pushing him towards death and herself into the abyss of insanity. After killing Gautama, Maya soon after is seen in her father's house in Lucknow, pathetically retrogressed to a state of her childhood. The murderous clarity of her own distorted and perverted logic to a demented mind is powerfully conveyed. In a way, it could be said that Maya compensates her damaged self-respect by making herself, feel superior to Gautama by deciding the fate of Gautama. Though the path chosen by Maya, to redeem her from contemptuous self-respect, is an extreme one but it is a tragic possibility in a society impervious to a sensitive woman's need for respect and self-esteem. 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).

The conflict between maintaining her dignity and compromising with the demands of her family develop in her symptoms of frustration and drive her towards insanity. Ultimately Dwindling between the conflict of existence and non-entity, Maya's marginalized self-esteem pushes her to a suicidal situation.

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