

# MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *CRY, THE PEACOCK* AND *VOICES IN THE CITY*

Dr Geeta Gupta\*

Associate Professor, H.K.M.V. Jind, Haryana, India

*Email ID: mangalgeet@gmail.com*

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## Abstract

*Literature is mirror of society. Novelists have depicted since yore the complexity of human relationship. They have brought to the fore the subtleties innate in them especially man-woman relationship. A number of Indian women writers have been projecting the need for self awareness and identification of oneself. Anita Desai is unique among the Indian writers for her acute awareness of female sensibility and the complex problems of women. Her area of interest is the female psyche, and the working of the woman's mind. Her women characters strive not for better materialistic life but for individual recognition. Her women characters make effort to break stereotypes imposed by the society and escape from suffocating existence. They are aesthetic beings who are unable to compromise with dull drudgery of common place existence. They want to identify their roles in society and live a full existence. The women in her novels are in search of the truth and meaning of their actions and of their relationships in the society. The man-woman relationships depicted in the novels are not fulfilling relationships having happiness of married life but embittered stories of frustrated existence. The present research paper is an attempt to portray man-woman relationships in the novel of Anita Desai with special reference to Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the city.*

## Paper Identification



*\*Corresponding Author*

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In her novel, *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai describes the loveless marriage between Maya and Gautam. Gautam is much older than her. He is not able to understand the sensuous nature of his wife who enjoys subtler nuances of nature and life. He and his family have typical ideology about women. They are entirely opposed to each other in temperament and emotional responses. She needs physical and emotional gratification from her husband but he coldly rejects her and preaches detachment. She does not enjoy togetherness even when she casually walks with him. “ And so we strolled up and down the lawn, talking desultorily, not really listening to each other, being intent, on our own paths...”<sup>1</sup>.(18) Being very emotional she seems to hold Gautama responsible for her unfulfilled sexuality in the marital relationship. Maya craves for luscious colorful life which is discouraged by Gautam’s philosophy non attachment. She has to continuously contend with unreciprocated feelings. Gautam doesn’t take her seriously and considers her a light headed woman who is not worthy of his confidence.

Maya has deep love for nature, birds and animals. She is amenable to unconscious and instinctive responses. Her sensibility is quickly wounded at the remotest touch of non fulfillment of her desires. The atmosphere in Maya’s father’s house was of security and satisfaction, which she craved for in Gautam’s house. She was like a princess delving in a fairy world and was over indulged in her father’s house. She loves to hear Urdu poetry spoken in chaste Urdu. She is romantic where as Gautam is pragmatic. While Gautama lives on the level of conscious ideas, Maya responds to her unconscious will. The death of Maya’s dog Toto aggravates Maya’s neurosis. While Maya mourns her dog’s death, Gautama thinks of his cup of tea. Maya feels anguished at the death and expects a decent burial. She shows reverence for death but Gautama in the midst of all this, is completely indifferent towards Maya’s mental status. The gap of communication between husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. Their marriage is unsuccessful and forced. They are temperamentally opposite to each other and walk on their paths without meaningfully communicating with each other.

Maya feels lonely and neglected. Telling her to go to sleep, he works at his papers, not giving another thought to her. And add to her woes, she is not able to give birth to a child. Toto is her child substitute and her attachment to him is an emotional need for her. Maya has morbid fear of death. The idea of death has been planted in her mind by the albino astrologer which is never excluded from her consciousness. The utter lack of communication between husband and

the wife adds to her suffering and she becomes habituated to brooding over her miserable condition. She turns hysteric and has a subtle fear of death looming over her. Gautama is unable to gauge her fear of death and fails to play role of a husband. Maya's resolution to get rid of her father substitute and retain her husband in Gautama results in her throwing Gautama from the terrace.

Thus in *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai portrays typical stereo-typical marriage where women have no recourse to come out of a dead end that their marriage becomes. Her love and desires remain unreciprocated, moreover, in conventional arranged marriages no thought is given to emotional needs of a woman as against child bearing and other materialistic aspects. Many women suffer from mental illness when their physical and mental needs are not taken care off. Gautama does not make any effort to delve into her problems. In traditional marriages, sometimes people having different temperaments come together, but trying to understand each other can make a huge difference. Maya, a hyper sensitive lady, is unable to cope up with alienation and loneliness. Her feminine self is not able to cope with the tension and ultimately succumbs to mental trauma and crumbles in the process.

*Voices in the City* also presents disintegrating female psyche of Monisha. Monisha like Maya is childless, sensitive and victim of ill matched marriage. An intellectual, an avid reader of Kafka and Camu, she finds herself married in a Philistine family which has no use of her intellectual embellishments, rather they talk of her fallopian tubes and other trivial things. The overcrowded members of the house suffocate her. She is not even allowed to remain alone in her room. She feels stifled in the joint family with loss of privacy and intellectual freedom. The novelist portrays a moving account of marital discord. Married to a insensitive husband, she finds no solace in a big joint family. She is mocked by her In-laws for her inability to their children. She is shocked to find that her underclothes and sarees are examined by these elderly ladies in the most indecent manner. There is total lack of communication with her husband and eventually she finds herself totally alienated.

Monisha finds no love in her marriage. She finds her existence meaningless. Her detachment takes her to the extent of committing suicide. Her submissive nature aggravates the problem. The alienation she feels is also felt by her siblings. Nirode and Amla also rebel against hypocritical society. May be the seeds of loneliness are embedded in the unsuccessful marriage of their parents. Renu Juneja aptly says

These women find themselves trapped in marriages where they are temperamentally incompatible with husbands and in-laws. They have refined, inward-looking, nervous



sensibilities while the men are invariably insular, complacent, or even vulgar. Indian society may regard marriage as rite confirming secure identity of the woman, but for these women it only offers annihilation of their truest self.<sup>2</sup>(78)

Man-woman relationship has always been a delicate area of study. Anita Desai depicts complexities and intricacies in this relationship. She doesn't entirely put blame on man for disintegration of relationship but points out how sensitive feminine consciousness can be smothered in mesh of insensitive conventions. Maya and Monisha are both educated, intelligent and want to lead a vibrant life having meaning but they are not able to communicate their desires to their husbands. Moreover, their husbands are either so mediocre or engulfed in their own lives with their limited vision that no good can come of that bond. Both Maya and Monisha take recourse to extremist means. They are not weak but the suffocating environment in which they live makes them choose a way that results in annihilation. Finally we can appreciate them for showing courage to choose. Marcia Westkott rightly says that a woman "is required to attempt constantly and fatalistically to achieve the internalized ideal femininity. The goal is already established; she has only to try to merge with it and judge herself accordingly"<sup>3</sup>(149). Feminist want women to reject choicelessness and affirm her freedom to create herself and her future. Anita Desai's heroines make an attempt to affirm their freedom and reject choicelessness. Here in lies their triumph.

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