

Psychoanalytic Study of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* through Freud's Electra Complex

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Abstract

Anita Desai is a prolific Anglo-Indian writer. In her *Cry the Peacock*, her protagonist Maya is incapable to lead a peaceful marital life with her husband Gautama, as she is obsessed with the image of her father. *Cry the Peacock* explores the life of Maya through the light of Freud's Electra complex. The inner turmoil and the complexities of her ever fluctuating psyche are portrayed through the course of her story. Anita Desai brilliantly sketches the character of Maya bringing in the psychological realms of a "father fixation" through in *Cry the Peacock*.

Key Words- Psychoanalysis, Electra complex, Neurosis, Psychosexual development, Marital discord, Sexual repression

Introduction

Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic theory formulated that, learning to identify themselves with the same-sex parent plays a significant role during the evolution process of an individual. In Freud's theory of psychosexual development, the "libidinal energy" is focused on distinct "erogenous zones" in the child's body during different stages of their development. An erroneous development stage, causes an interference in the proper culmination of their psychosexual development, resulting in a sort of 'fixation'. Freud affirmed that such fixations, that hinders the primal stages of an individual's psychosexual development, often leads to certain apprehensions, eventually leading to neurosis and abnormal behaviors as an adult. According to Freud, a male child's excessive longing for the physical proximity of his mother is what constitutes an Oedipus complex. He competes with his father, mimicking the demeanor of his male begetter to gain his mother's unrivalled affection. The child identifies his pater as his sexual competitor and attempts to replace him. Carl Gustav Jung coined the term 'Electra complex' in 1913 though the term is often associated with Freud. Freud denounced this expression as "psychologically inaccurate" and described it as an attempt "to emphasize the analogy between the attitudes of the two sexes." Freud applied the term, "Feminine Oedipus attitude" or "the negative Oedipus complex"; to deduce what we now term the Electra complex. The Electra Complex as suggested by Carl Jung expatiates the psychosexual drive of a female child wherein she competes with her mother to "possess" her father. In the course of an infant's psychosexual development, this maladaptive complex occurs during the girl's phallic stage akin to the Oedipus complex experienced by a boy child. . Amongst the five stages of psychosexual development that involves the Oral, the Anal, the Phallic, the Latent, and the Genital, the Electra complex materializes during the third phallic stage, that is in between ages 3-5 in different erogenous zones of the child's body. In psychoanalytic theory, the psychodynamics of a child's identification with its same-sex parent is a successful appeasement for such maladaptive and dysfunctional complexes. This assists them in developing a mature psychosexual identity. Therefore, Sigmund Freud proposes that men and women who are fixated during the phallic stages of their psychosexual evolution become either father- fixated or mother- fixated, in accordance to their sexuality. The psychoanalytic term Electra complex had its origin from the Greek character Electra, the progeny of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. She conspires a brutal matricide and murders Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, with her brother Orestes in order to retaliate the death of her father. Sigmund Freud was addressing this very psychological flaw in a female child where she visualizes her mother as a potential sexual competitor and perceives her as a hindrance to her own bond with her pater.

Subject

Anita Desai is an illustrious writer among the Indo Anglican novelists and is noted for her divergence in tone. Her works include *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011), *The Zigzag Way* (2004), *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *In Custody* (1984), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *Games at Twilight* (1978), *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *the Peacock Garden* (1974), *Bye-bye Blackbird* (1971), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Cry the Peacock* (1963). Her ability in using the powerful search light of observation in her woman characters and scrutinizing

deep into the consciousness of her is remarkable. Anita Desai's writing clearly corresponds to the words of Virginia Woolf who said:

Life is not a series of big lamps symmetrically arranged; Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelops surrounding us from beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 177) Her novels reverberate the agonizing cries of women, particularly Indian women. Anita Desai began her literary career initially by publishing a few short stories and later ventured as a novelist through *Cry, the peacock*. Her works stood apart from her contemporaries by the way they rendered the various psychological conflicts, the inner tumults, and the repressed self of an individual. The way she represented the feminine psyche is what made her writing peculiar. The uncommonness of their sensibility is compared with their practical male counterparts. Desai's women were the epitomes of physical and emotional repression. In her first novel, Desai brings in the image of a hypersensitive woman set against an insensitive husband. Desai's protagonists feature the innermost complexities of a human mind. They characterize the darkest, deepest recesses of a human psyche, often unacknowledged and repressed. Psychoanalytic theory gained momentum during the late twentieth centuries with the formulations of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Published in the year 1963, *Cry, the peacock* is the trend setter in the field of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. The work attempted in bringing out the disparities between the worlds of a men and women; his vulnerability of a wife to the detached and practical stance of an unresponsive husband. The dance of a peacock bears a sinister semblance to the course of the story. Maya is a highly sensuous and sensitive individual who nurtures an obsessive love for her father. She is the daughter of an affluent barrister in Lucknow. The early death of her mother and the gradual estrangement of her brother who sought his own fortune made her a lonesome child. Maya's sole comfort being her father who wove his world around her. She relates "...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 it was a pretty one." Maya even goes to an extend where she says, "No one, no one else, loves me as my father does". This excessive, unrivalled love from her father alienates her from the realities of a grotesque world, a world unlikely the one in which her father fostered her in. She says, "...as a child, I enjoyed princess like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian-nights..." Her oblivion to the practical, sensible world is what results in her neurotic behavior. Her world of fairytales and fantasies gave her a lop-sided view of life. She admires her father to a point that she fondly remembers his light features. But what peaks our interest is the depth of her detailed descriptions and the fine adjectives she attributes him as she says,

"He is like a silver oak himself, with his fine, silver white hair brushed smoothly across his bronzed scalp"(Page no:37).

The above lines resonates Maya's father-fixation. The Electra complex manifests in Maya in such a way that it transforms her in to a neurotic. But unlike the mythological character Electra Maya here luckily do not have a competitor and does not lead to a matricide. Rather it is her husband Gautama who falls prey to her psychological trauma. Married to her father's friend, Maya attempts to transfix the image of her father to Gautama in which she miserably fails. Maya says about her father:

his thoughts, his life, his attitude, his learning and his career assume a similar pattern formal as a Mogul garden, gracious and exact, where breeding, culture, leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art, where no single weed is allowed to flower, no

single flower to die and remain on the stalk, no single stalk to grow out of its pruned shape. As the streams in a Mogul garden flow musically through channels of carved marble and sandstone, so his thoughts, his life flow, broken into Small, exquisite patterns by the carving, played upon by altering nuances of light and shade, but never overstepping their limitations, never breaking their bounds, always moving onwards with the same graceful cadence. (CP 45)

It was Maya's father who found in his friend Gautama, a man several years senior to Maya, a compatible suitor for his young daughter. Gautama, a cold, practical, businessman falls short of Maya's expectations in every possible way. His relative passivity and disinterested nature in contrast to Maya's sensuous and sensitive temperament make them emotionally and sexually incompatible with each other.

...he did not give another thought to me, to either soft willing body or the lonely waiting mind that waited near the bed... (Page no: 9)

Gautama is well aware of Maya's dissatisfaction and associates their marital disharmony to his mate's excessive adoration for her father. He rightly says,

If you know your Freud it would all be very straight forward and then appear as merely inevitable to you taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious father obsession- which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that you mature rapidly; you will not be able to deal with, to destroy. (Desai 146) "(CP 146)

The cacophonous prediction of an Albino astrologer triggers Maya's apprehensive psyche. She is terrorized by the reality of death, a time when she ceases to exist since the world her father brought her up does not comprise the dark shadows of death. She is haunted by "a black and evil shadow". Clutching on to the roots of life and she turns hysteric when Gautama seems unaware of her misery. Maya is emotionally and sexually dissatisfied in her marriage. Gautama being twice her age considers her wailing childish. His regard for her is founded on his years of experience, maturity and practicality. Maya struggles against her emotional trauma as she is incapable to channel the tumultuous passion inside her.

"Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me. . . ."

Ironically her father who dictated every aspect of Maya's life here fails to save his daughter's marriage. From Maya's own accounts her marriage to Gautama was a failure. They were a pair of contrastive temperaments, where one held on to the finer sensualities of life whereas the other on rationality. Their perspectives on love and marriage held contradicting views. Owing to this discord Maya's psychological maladaptive behavior triggered even more. Her disappointment in Gautama on whom she had affixed her father had an analogous effect than what she had wanted. Consistently fed by her father that she was a very special Child Maya expects of the same kind of engrossment from her husband. Desperate for love and sexual satisfaction she thrives on the memories of her father. Her obsession soon transforms her to a neurotic. As Maya herself states, "There were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much." (Desai 173)

Their difference in temperaments is highlighted on the episode of Toto's death. Maya is devastated and grieves in agony for her lost pet whereas Gautama is composed and

practical. Death seems natural for him and the bereavement of Toto bears no exception. The only comfort he could offer his grieving wife is that she requires “a cup of tea”. This is exactly what relieves him of his own anxiety and stress. Gautama here fails to acknowledge the hypersensitivity of his mate against his own. His insensitive nature becomes further clear from the following lines when Maya says:

“...he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me...”(page no:9)

Maya's highly intense accounts on the flowers and fruits, colors and forms also symbolize her sexual repression. Her hypersensitivity gradually turns in to insanity. The fear of death predominates in her along with her psychological trauma. In a fit of insanity she murders her husband thus making her transformation as a neurotic complete. Here unlike the persistent episodes of matricide Maya rages on her husband Gautama as it is he who failed to satisfy her like her father. The image of her father transfixed in her mind thus owes to her falling a victim to her grave fate. Her Electra complex is what led to her dilapidation as an individual who had an inability to rise from her father- fixation.

Conclusion

In Desai's own words “Reality is merely the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean-art is the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below the surface. That is why; it is more near truth than reality itself. Art does not merely reflect reality- it enlarges it.” By the end of the novel we see Maya losing her mental stability and collapsing. Anita Desai's protagonist Maya is a representative of multitudes, who silently thrive with their innermost psychological instabilities. The paper is an attempt at unraveling how Maya's father-fixation culminated in insanity. The protagonist Maya as her name symbolizes is driven by the thoughts instilled by her father resulting in her vague vision of reality. Her fixations for her father, her excessive adoration for him as a child constrained her from perceiving the insensitive temperaments of her husband. She was taught that the world sways to her own fantasies which proves to be an antithesis in the case of Gautama. This inability in her to accept the reality triggered her psychological disorder to an extremity where murdering Gautama became the palpable resolution. Yet another thing that concerned her was that Gautama never became her father. He could not have possibly been the man who wove his world around her. The inadequacy of Gautama to satisfy her obsession for her father turns her hysteric as she relishes the memories with her father. Maya is a dissonant, despondent character who is isolated within the labyrinth of her psyche. Her sterility and incessant pain demarcates her vengeance for her husband. She associates all that haunts her with Gautama's inefficiency to protect her. Gautama repetitively warns her that she is a prey to her illusions by each passing day. Correspondingly *Cry, the peacock* becomes a tale that represents the issues people dealing with neurosis encounter in their lives and how the unfortunate turn of events affect themselves and the people around them. Maya, a character who had been brought up pampered by her father had viewed the world through a lens of imagination fabricated by her whims and fancies. From her early age, she had grown up seeing her dad as a perfect example. But, as she was growing up the lens through which she viewed the world never changed. The expectations about how her husband should be, was shaped from her ardent love to her father or because of her father fixation. She had admired him and wanted her husband to be like her.

A number of instances from the novel reveals that the main reason for her neurosis is her father fixation. Added on, her husband was insensitive to her. Maya's expectations coupled on with her neurosis and the treatment of her from her emotionally insensitive husband made her grow more stressful by each passing day. The perfect world she had dreamt of in the past had started crumbling to parts which she could not even try picking up. There were numerous instances when she attempts to converse with Gautama where she reveals that she is growing mentally weaker and had been experiencing insomnia, which he turned a deaf ear to. Maya portrays a woman who found solace in being emotionally dependent on her mate or her father. She sought her family as a necessity to revive herself from her mental perturbations. But Gautama in contrast expected her to be more mature and deal with her problems on her own. Had Gautama been a bit more considerate about her age, this situation could have been effectively tackled though not necessarily cured since Maya's self is consistently in search of her father in Gautama. Unless she realizes the improbability of this situation, her life with Gautama would not acquire significance. All these problems along with the prediction of the albino astrologer that with the end of the fourth year of marriage either she or her husband would die torments her. Maya discusses this catastrophic premonition with her dad who waves off her concern calling it utter nonsense, not realizing the magnitude to which this particular thought distressed her. Here both her father and husband fails to pay heed to Maya's persistent pleas. She initially felt that she had to die, but later with each passing day, she figures out that she should rather kill Gautama. The paper unveils the life of Maya and the complexities of her psyche as she gradually withers from existence. The neurosis, acquired a more sinister outcome as a psychosis where a person loses contact from reality and sabotages the relationships that she deals with. This results in distortions and hallucinations which are dangerous to the health of the patient and the people closely associated with the patient.

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