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Marital Dream and Unrest as experienced by Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*

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Abstract

In the Indian scenario marriage as an institution, has remained a thing of *sanctum sanctorum*. Defiance of any kind, in this regard is considered sacrilegious. But such defiant outbreaks do occur and is becoming the new normative. The present paper, entitled, "Marital Dream and Unrest as experienced by Maya in Anita Desai and Shobha De" attempts to have a glimpse of the unrest caused by the shattering of dreams, the female protagonists had about their marital life. The novels taken for study Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* and Shobha De's *Second Thoughts* provide a slice of what married life has to offer for Maya, the protagonists of both the authors. The tremor caused by the deviance take them to different paths and whether they reconcile with their lot is the question to be pondered over.

Keywords: Marital dream, unrest, defiance, reconciliation

Introduction

Every woman has dreams about her nuptial life and has the abundance of wish list in their minds and their lives are all about the fulfillment of these wishes and how their dreams are made reality. If it is otherwise, their marital lives become a sham and it becomes really tough for them to get out of this entanglement called Marriage, at least for the new millennial. The present paper throws light on two different Indian authors Anita Desai and Shobha De, whose women find their marital dreams shattered and they met out different paths to handle the issue. The role of women in society has been changing with each decade of a century, always with a good deal of social conflict and ideological struggle. These have left influence on sexual mores and social codes of the prevalent society which in turn is well embodied by Shobha De in her character portrayals. She voices against the malist culture and strongly chastises the marginalization of women. She does not believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere helpmates at home. Men in her novels, seem very passive in response to women, they are either indifferent or insensitive, unwilling or unable to take action or to accept responsibility for the way things turn out. Desai's novels on the other hand reveal inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. Each of her novels tries to tackle the central aesthetic problem of the modern writer - the problem of rendering a complete human personality. Desai portrays her women in varied roles starting from the role of house wives to that of enlightened professionals in educational institution. In each and every situation they react sometimes violently and sometimes silently as unheard, unknown by others. The restricted surrounding has treated them as helpless birds in cage. She depicts with great sensitivity the dissolution of a feminine sensibility under the stress of marriage that finally destroys her being.

Maya, the Protagonists of both the novels Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*, and Shobha De's, *Second Thoughts* have their own desires in her life, when it comes to their married life. In Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*, Maya, an attractive young girl from Calcutta who comes to Bombay to meet her future in-law Mrs. Malik and her son Ranjan Malik along with her mother Chitra. At first Maya says, "An arranged marriage? For me? Don't be ridiculous. Besides, I have one more year to go before I finish college..." (ST 3). Maya's mother is very keen on meeting the Maliks. Ranjan is quite a catch; so Chitra has a fear and thinks that they may be at a loss if they miss the alliance: Who knows, by the time we get to Bombay, some other lucky girl might have grabbed him. Don't think there are no pretty Bengali girls in that city. Bombay is full of them, I'm told there are thousands and thousands of good Bengali families there, (ST 4). Chitra is very much worried about her daughter's colour for which Ranjan might reject her. Maya on the other hand, likes her skin-tone and her appearance. Her skin-tone is "a warm, rich golden brown, like sunlight dancing on the Hooghly that offset her gleaming jet black hair and large, dark eyes to advantage. Maya straightened up, threw back her head and concluded that by any standards" she is beautiful (ST 5). She is an attractive young lady-and never minds about the complexion. Maya has inherited her father's tall, lithe frame, long, tapered fingers and a full generous mouth. From her mother she has acquired her thick, glossy hair and luminous dark eyes. She is perfectly happy at the manner in which the maker had so evenly disturbed the physical assets of her parents. Her nose could have been less flat and her cheekbones slightly more prominent, but the total picture was that of a high-spirited, and energetic. A bouncy young girl Maya is ready to meet life's several challenges head-on, including Ranjan. Maya had never seen her mother more nervous. Looking at Maya she says, Oh God, your kaajal, quick, give me a handkerchief, it's looking terrible.

So black and thick. As if you have not slept peacefully for ten years. dark, dark rings. What will they think?’ And she wet a corner of Maya’s brand new kerchief with her spit to wipe off a small speck of smeared kaajal while Maya winced.(ST 6)

At first Maya is surprised and disappointed by Ranjan’s lack of common courtesy and commented on it to her mother, but starts liking Ranjan very much and she has noticed his solicitous attitude towards his mother-the way he sprang to his feet. She watches each and everything in the cosmopolitan city. She enjoys Bombay and dreams about her future life with Bombay. Ranjan’s lecture on economy reminds her father’s attitude. Maya likes her father who asks her talkative mother to keep a stop-watch near the phone and time her calls. He also says that “Five minutes are sufficient to convey anything to anyone” (ST 73). He is a keen observer and not a participant. He would tell her quietly that, his family is philosophical and poetic and they are all thinkers. But her mother’s family is not at like that. In her parent’s house, her mother only made all the decisions whether it is big or small. Maya’s father’s participation is marginal in her wedding also. If her mother had not initiated, she would not have married Ranjan. Life with Ranjan in Bombay, turns to be otherwise, contrary to her dreams. She is not even allowed to breathe the air outside. He treats her like a princess in a castle, locked up from the outside world. Women do not seek fulfillment through challenging careers but seek it within, sustaining meaningful human relationships. The lack of care and attention from her husband Ranjan makes her vulnerable and fall a prey to the charismatic Nikil, who always showers her with comments of appreciation and lively talk. She thinks: ...the look of genuine interest in his eyes when he interacted with just about anybody. He was good-looking too but not especially so. Average height, athletic build, tanned skin, nice hands, nice eyes, nice smile. That made him sound like a college girl’s dreamboat, and perhaps that’s exactly what he was. And perhaps I was regressing and carrying on like a lovestruck teenager. (ST 67). The very fact of his existence makes even a marginal difference to her monotonous life. Her entire being is sensitized to the sound of his impatient footsteps on the staircase outside her closed doors. Maya inquiries herself “How did I know it belonged to his feet and nobody else’s? I just did.” (ST 67). Nikil doesn’t keep to schedule and yet, even as she lay down on bed for the daily afternoon siesta, her drowsiness would disappear temporarily at the unmistakable thud-thud of his heavy boots charging past her entrance. At that she arises and rushes to the window to watch him and the quick kick of his motorbike. She is attracted towards Nikil day by day. Maya in Anita Desai’s novel is another failure of a marital dream. *Cry, the Peacock* is the tragedy of a father’s child Maya, young beautiful, intelligent and very sensitive as well as sensuous, fails to grow out of childhood. She is incapable of leading an independent existence. Virtually, whole of her neurotic life is imperceptibly linked with her father’s undivided attention. The novel deals with the mind of Maya who comes from an aristocratic who is deeply into order and discipline. Maya has been brought up in this atmosphere along with her brother Arjuna. The children enjoyed all the indulgences of a rich father. Maya’s own name has obvious significance; she is a form of illusion (maya) personified, or gone awry. Maya’s character has two pronounced traits helplessness, which is almost childlike, and an intense longing for love that is nearly morbid and the root-cause of her trouble. As per Horneyan tenets, she is a compliant person for whom love holds the key to all the problems of life. This love makes neurotic claims on others: if he loves the other person so well, he must be loved equally well. Lack of response from the other party is interpreted as rejection. Maya’s basic needs to grow into an independent individual will enable us to understand why her attitude becomes one of clinging. The fact that Maya is a motherless child; delicate and sensitive, goes a long way in shaping her tragedy. Her father is a benevolent despot under whose shadow she grows. He focuses all his attention on her life, and instead of giving freedom to grow as an individual, he offers her a life of protection and consequently of submission.

Maya compares his meticulousness to a Moghul Garden. She remembers fondly how everything with him has grace and dignity. It is “... gracious and exact, where breeding, culture, leisure and comfort have been brought into 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 Moghul 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 over stepping their limitation, never breaking their bounds, always moving onwards with the same graceful cadence”. (CP 42-43). Maya is brought up in the orderly world of her father. She discerns, with the acute insight natural to a child, that he has special affection for her. Later in her married life, whenever she is upset, her ardent wish is to run to her father for assurance, and to hear his mesmerizing words in his deep tones. In her childhood, he used to take her in his arms, wipe her tears and pacify her, irrespective of the gravity or triviality of her fears. Maya grows up physically, but the irony is that her father has not given her a chance to get out of her childhood stage. Maya cannot arrive at a correct self-evaluation. Father’s over-protective and sickly love, dealt out to her with unconcealed partiality, does not allow her any independence to think and grow as an individual entity. Maya’s prominent wish is never to displease her father. She is scared of losing his affection because on it rests her security and sense of belonging. She has seen the fate of her rebel-brother Arjuna. He has lost his father’s affection by wriggling out the perfectionist regime. Father’s tight-lipped coldness towards him is too ill-concealed to escape Maya’s notice. She recollects that father was terse, cold and grim with Arjuna, “with me he never was, no matter what I did-even I noted the difference, and felt uncomfortable” (CP 113). Two forces work on Maya’s psyche- the strict and orderly world of father and his blind adoration; she cannot disregard either. Consequently, Maya’s basic needs for love and belongingness are not gratified in the real sense. Healthy development of her personality is blocked; she remains as a light-headed child all through her life. Maya’s childhood world of fantasies and adult world of realities clash, producing more imbalances in her life. She wants to perpetuate the fairy-tale atmosphere; at the same time, she is aware of the demands of a grown-up, mature world of a married life. However, these urges to experience the realities of life are too feeble to last longer.

She is free to sit in her room and live a totally mental life. It is this inward type of existence which Anita Desai intends to portray-in particular, the thought processes of someone walking the tight rope of sanity. A lack of physical activity and social interaction is essential to this end; Maya herself realizes this when Nila and her mother come to visit. These two “had not the time for thinking and imagining” (CP 135); shopping and knitting and painting and cooking and caring for

orphans give their lives outward direction and structure. Maya, with no outside concerns or social contacts, lives a life which is by its very nature self-centred. Her isolation and introversion are essential to the development of her character.

Maya is a sensitive girl who is married to Gautama, a friend of her father who is twice her age. This is an outright evidence of her suffering from father-fixation. Her longingness to be with her father always, that propels her to make a wrong choice of a life-partner in an aged man like Gautama. For her, Gautama is not a loving husband but a father substitute. Gautama is detached, a scholar, industrious and a leading lawyer. Maya and Gautama are entirely opposite to each other in their emotional responses and temperaments. The novel opens with Maya's morbid obsession with death. She wishes to have nothing in her marital life excluding that Gautama should be reactive enough to her perceptive and sentimental longings for him.

Her husband, a man full of activity of fluent coherence and a middle aged lawyer finds himself too much gripped in his affairs to respond to her demands. Their marital life therefore suffers due to his aloofness from her. The message of loneliness and the spell of darkness separate her from him. She feels as an alien and even the sky cannot tell her the truth of life. She seeks meaning in the dark universe. Gautama tries to heal up her internal wounds by quoting an Urdu couplet which runs "Even if the star in the sky were a heart, what of it? Give to me a heart which is capable of sorrow" (CP 25). This does not redeem her from loneliness. It simply underlines the irony of her position still longing for something. Gautama touches without feeling but Maya feels even without touching. Gautama's detachment is contrasted with Maya's attachment to life. Her whim to go to South to visit the kathakali dancer is dismissed by Gautama, that they can enjoy it while the party will be visiting Delhi, their own town. He is efficient like a surgeon's knife at work. Maya and her husband Gautama react differently to Toto's death, One emotionally, the other intellectually. While Maya sheds tears, Gautama sips tea. "No she cried and fled to the bathroom to fling herself on to the bed and lie there, thinking of the small, still body stiffened into the panic-stricken posture of the moment of death" (CP 9).

Maya looks for the uncanny and the romantic, Gautama for the pragmatic and the practical in life. The fate of Maya is indeed the fate of the anguished self craving for companionship and harmony in an emotionally chaotic milieu. It is the fate of the hysterical mind of an Indian housewife. Maya's marriage with Gautama was imposed from the outside. Gautama said Maya that, she was very far away from any world of time. And between them is the unpassable desert that isolates them. Maya lives incommunicado "No one, no one else," I sobbed into my pillow, 'loves me as my father does'" (CP 43). Maya's memory of the happy days with her father serves as a foil to the unfulfilled loveless life with her husband. Drowned in silent bitterness, her marital world had pushed her into extreme state of fragility often labeled as madness. Maya is the very incarnation of illusion, finds herself at odds with the world of reality. Maya of Anita Desai signifies illusion, whereas Maya of De, implies the world of marital dreams; but both their dreams get shattered by the harsh realities of the life. The dreams and illusions lead them on towards a search for meaning and bliss and the lessons they learn in the process of their quest makes for the rest of their lives. When Nikil's marriage is arranged, Maya of De comes to the realization that he can be hers anymore and prepares her mind to accept what she is given already. Anita Desai's Maya gets to the edge of mental breakdown after pushing Gautama over the parapet wall when he comes in between her and the moon, that is again a symbol of her dream and illusory world.

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