

Maya in Desai's Cry, the Peacock: A Mediation in Impersonal Reality & Subjective Desires

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Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is a highly sensitive and solitary woman, suffering from neurotic fears largely caused by the albino astrologer's prediction about her possible death. She is an embodiment of such a complex mystery that she invites a probe into the untrodden path of her mind for a total picture of "the net of inescapable wherein she is helplessly caught and from where there is no chance of her escape. The generally accepted view that Anita Desai "sees social realities from a psychic or psychological perspective and captures the atmosphere of the mind in her novels comes true in the delineation of the emotional world of her neurotic protagonist Maya who suffers from an acute sense of alienation, stemming from her marital discord, and reaches to the verge of insanity.

Maya is "a solitary being alienated from her father, from her husband.

The most appealing point in her portrayal is not her visible action emanating from her sense of alienation but the psychological effects of her loneliness on her life and behaviour skillfully portrayed through carefully selected symbols and images. Anita Desai seems to be going deeper and deeper into the inner recesses of Maya's sufferings hidden somewhere in the inescapable den of marital disharmony. The inner functioning of Maya's mind is also reflected in her unconscious use of the defense mechanism of Repression to defend her ego in different problematic situations.

The term 'Repression' refers to an unconscious act of forgetting those impulses and memories which are socially and personally unacceptable in order to relieve a person from constant harassment and irritation which their presence causes. It is a process of excluding from consciousness a thought or a feeling that causes pain, shame or guilt. Charles C. Morris defines Repression as "the inability to remember things that we do not want to remember. It is a method of defending ourselves from remembering things that are painful. Only those memories and thoughts which are in harmony with our personal and social demands are acceptable to us; the conflicting ones are unconsciously blotted out from the conscious mind.

For Sigmund Freud, "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious. Accepting Repression as one of the important mechanisms of defense, Freud asserted "those memories, images and impulses which tend to arouse unmanageable anxiety are excluded from consciousness." Repression can thus be described as a primitive mental manoeuvre for avoiding anxiety. Danger inviting-impulses are excluded from awareness and thus from overt behaviour.

It is so basic that Freud wrote, "the theory of repression is the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests." In psychoanalytic model, the repression process is a means by which all material usually gets into unconscious; usually the material relates to childhood experiences that are too painful to think about. Events that are severely threatening and painful could lead to total amnesia.

Repression is not the act of forgetting. Quite a few daily experiences are easily forgotten because they are of no use and hence are never reviewed. There must have been a number of trivial and insignificant things in Maya's life falling in this category but which were of no use to her and hence are not being discussed here. On the other hand, Repression is selective, serving to protect the individual from the pain of certain thoughts and memories. With ordinary act of forgetting, a person who cannot directly recall the forgotten material, can easily recognize it or relearn it rapidly. But Repression is often so complete that the person can neither recognize nor relearn the material even when it is brought to his attention, that is, he actively, though unconsciously, keeps himself away from responding to any stimulus that might cause him to remember certain painful things. When the repressed material is brought back to consciousness with the help of some device, the recall is complete and fresh.

Repression is an unconscious process and not subject to conscious evaluation and control. It differs from Suppression, in which expression of a feeling, acting on a desire, or thinking about a disturbing event are checked. Suppression is a healthy process necessary for mature functioning in social context; Repression is a pain-softening process. A thorough analysis of *Cry, the Peacock* brings to light the fact that a few examples of Repression found in the novel contain the element of complete Repression, temporary recalling of the repressed thought but repressed again, and complete recalling of repressed painful impulse and memory through some incident.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai portrays Maya as a pampered child of her father who fails to establish warm relationship and proximity with her constantly busy but prosperous husband Gautama. Gautama is a somewhat insensitive and pragmatic advocate who happens to be twice his wife's age and who fails to understand her sensitive nature. Preoccupied with his professional duties, he fails, too, to respond warmly to his wife's intense longing for love and life. Such an indifferent attitude of Gautama towards Maya leaves her "to the solitude and silence of the house which prey upon her." Often, she muses over her husband's lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight on his face. "Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing. Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me" (p. 112). Maya has a romantic love for everything colorful, beautiful and sensuous. She is a woman of instincts and has a wayward and sensitive nature. But Gautama is realistic and rational and has a philosophical detachment towards life as preached in *Bhagwad Geeta*. Such irreconcilably different temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony. Thinking of her unhappy marriage, Maya reflects with deep concern:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part (p. 40).

There are many instances in the novel where Maya finds herself neglected and miserable in her husband's house. Gautama remains busy in his official duties without caring for the alleviation of his wife's sense of isolation in a large house with none to share her joys and sorrows. He intentionally keeps distance and finds excuses to go away from her even when she takes initiative in holding his arm lovingly. If the silence between husband and wife is broken by Maya Gautama gets annoyed for breaking the chain of his thoughts, "You go chatting like a monkey, and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking" (p.

16). Maya loves Gautama so much that a simple gift of a flower from him leads her to wish to die at that very moment with the overwhelming thought of being loved by her husband. But Maya's desire of proximity to him is spurned by him. Even when she proclaims, "I live my life for you" (p. 114), Gautama remains untouched. He makes her realize that she is neurotic, and a spoiled child of her rich father, whose wants and cares are "childish, tiresome and even distasteful" (p.142). And, above all, Gautama's careless dismissal of the incident of Maya's pet dog Toto's death with a mere "It is all over" (p.8) pains her too much, for she is grieved by it as would anyone be by the death of a near and dear one. Instead of comforting her in her grief on Toto's death, Gautama is concerned with a cup of tea considering a pet dog insignificant and replacable, unable to comprehend the value of emotional attachment, a symbol of Maya's desirable companion, infact representing "everything that Gautama is not, also "a as child substitute" in the absence of any child even after four years of Maya's marriage. A barren lady, Maya accepts, develops "fanatic attachments to their pets" (p. 10) but pets are insignificant for Gautama. He does not mind Toto's dead body being taken dishonoural unical truck. After Toto's death, her sense of loneliness haunts her like a nightmare for the elimination of which she looks for "contact, relatedness and communication" with Gautama but her need remains unfulfilled most of the time. R.S. Sharma believes that "the death of Toto stands symbolically for her own psychic death-a fact, of which Gautama is always oblivious." Such an apathetic, even indifferent, attitude of stops yearning her sense of isolation in her husband's home, the more pain she is likely to for close Gautama might have painfully led Maya to realize that the more she thinks about her sense of isolation in her husband's home, the more pain she is likely to experience. Consequently, she chooses to repress, though unconsciously, the teasing idea of Gautama's cold attitude towards her and s contacts with him.

When Maya's warm welcome to her husband at his arrival from court fails to bring even a small flicker of smile on his face, her ego gets hurt and mortified for the defense of which she changes her own behaviour, stops making efforts to amuse him and herself, represses the thought of developing a bond of oneness between herself and her husband. At times, finding Gautama very tired, she wants to "touch his temples and soothe the pain, and caresses with words. But, of course, did not do so, could not dream of doing so. And yet the alienation, the strain of remaining aloof, did not hurt" (p. 194). And it happens so merely because, as stated by Freud, when those images and impulses which arouse unmanagable anxiety are excluded from our conscious mind, the individual is relieved from constant harassment caused by those unacceptable impulses; Maya's unconscious repression of the hope of getting better treatment from her husband and developing love bonds with him saves her from constant inner tortures.

In the middle of the novel, there is a temporary recalling of the repressed thought of Maya's barrenness which, along with her strained relationship with Gautama, is one of the most important causes which ultimately leads her to complete insanity. Maya remains childless even after four years of her marriage but the novelist gives no details of Maya's sufferings due to her barrenness. If her suffering is analysed according to Jereme Kagan's theory of repression that "we push many of our unpleasant memories into our unconscious mind as a way of getting rid of them and do not respond to any stimulus that might cause us to remember those thoughts, Maya must have unconsciously repressed this painful thought to save herself from anxiety and depression. It is only after Maya's meeting with her old friend Pom and particularly the information regarding the latter's pregnancy which reminds her of her own barrenness and disturbs her so much that she starts crying after disclosing the news of her friend's pregnancy to Gautama. Instead of consoling Maya, Gautama reacts harshly on her act of crying and calls her insane without understanding her miserable plight whom fate

has denied even the bliss of a child which could have brought her some relief. "Frankly," he said, "if a man were to react to the sight of pregnancy by bursting into tears, Maya, no court of law would consider him sane or sober" (p. 65). Maya finds herself in danger of being troubled by the disagreeable feeling of her barrenness, and to repress it she decides never to go to Pom again.

Two separate incidents of the novel contain the element of Maya's complete recalling of the repressed painful material. Coleman states that when the repressed material is brought back to consciousness by some device, "the recalled material turns out to be so complete and fresh that the person wonders how he could ever have forgotten it." Maya is astonished as to why had it been so easy for her to forget two incidents first, the prediction of an albino astrologer regarding her or her husband's death after four years of her marriage and, second, the receipt of a letter from Maya's brother Arjuna who had left home years ago and which revives her memories of him.

Larry T. Brown believes that "Repression helps a person not to remember the unpleasant events of his life. Thus, the individual is safe enough for he unknowingly eliminates the unacceptable impulses from his conscious mind. That's why, though the albino astrologer had made the prediction before Maya's marriage and though, for sometime, it had perturbed Maya and her father, both had repressed it and forgotten it, leading Maya to marry Gautama in the prime of her youth without having the slightest fear of the horrible prediction on her mind. But the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog, not only brings back the idea of death into her mind, but she is also reminded of the fatal prediction which starts haunting her like a nightmare. Maya starts trembling with fear since it happened to be the fourth year of her marriage which might mean someone's death according to the prediction. While commenting upon an important cause of Maya's complete recalling of repressed thought of albino's prediction, R.S. Sharma asserts, "Since her identification with Gautama is only partial, the prediction causes a failure of repression leading to her traumas. Had Gautama shown some consideration of Maya and been attentive to her, she might have completely repressed, though unconsciously, the haunting fear of the albino astrologer's prediction and the tragedy might have been averted. But Gautama's indifferent and callous attitude towards her fails to repress the fearful thought from her conscious mind. "The failure of repression, also leads to a reversion of infantile wishes and stirrings which are out of accord with her adult and ethical self and transforms her wish energy into anxiety and compulsive fear. Thus her desire for life is turned into a death-wish. In the beginning, she believes that it is she whose days are numbered but later on, an idea hopefully dawns upon her mind that it may be Gautama and not she whose life is threatened. In this way, she transfers the threat of death to Gautama and rationalizes that as "he is detached and indifferent to life, it will not matter for him if he misses life. In her perversity, she is even haunted by the word murder reflecting her total hatred and rejection of Gautama, and even the whole of masculine race for foisting upon "the woman the role of subordination and titillation of the jaded lust. One day, Maya takes Gautama to the roof of the house to enjoy cool air. They walk together towards the terraced end while Maya looks enraptured at the beautiful sight of the rising moon. As Gautama moves in front of her, hiding the moon from her view, she in a fit of frenzy pushes him over the parapet and kills him perhaps to lessen her own misery in the same way as the peacocks grasp the snakes lying on sea-banks and break their bodies to pieces against the stones to ease their pain. The memory of Maya's brother Arjuna is brought back to her conscious mind through his letter. Arjuna had left his father's home years ago because of his father's autocratic behaviour. His disappearance had saddened both Maya and her father but they repressed this painful thought till Arjuna's letter reaches Maya, reminding her of her lost

brother. James C. Coleman points out that when the repressed material is brought back to consciousness by the repetition of some incident, the person wonders how he forgot it so completely. Maya is also astonished as to how she completely forgot her only brother and why did she not talk about him to Gautama! Even Gautama is surprised to know about Arjuna and asks, "Well, well, is this not amazing? And you never heard from him in all these years? or spoke of him to others? Why not to me at least?" (p. 143) But once Maya is reminded of Arjuna through his letter, he remains in her mind till the end of the novel.

The analysis of Maya's character reveals that Maya, in her efforts to get the love and attention of her husband, confronts him with her "flooded feeling in order to persuade him to sink and see in the cauldron of emotions. But she fails to establish a point of contact with Gautama merely because Gautama "harps on the 'basics in life', and yet, remains ignorant of those basic things which make a man-woman relationship possible. He does not change his callous, indifferent and apathetic attitude towards Maya, making her repress, though unconsciously, the painful thoughts and impulses of her life to get rid of anxiety and depression. Through Maya's unconscious repression of her miserable experiences of life, the novelist wants to convey to her readers that her protagonist tries to ward off the onslaught of complete insanity. She tries to "stand against the general current," and to "fight that current and struggle against it which comprises her father, husband, brother, society and even her fate. But unluckily, she fails to win the battle and is lost somewhere in the dark recesses of asylum.

Notes and References

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