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## Element of Fantasy in *Cry a Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*

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Literature is a sweet blend of reality and imaginative flights of fancy. An adept writer juxtaposes the real with the fantastic where willing suspension of disbelief is a dominant feature. Life with all its complexities finds its true reflection in literature that can transcend all boundaries and elevate the world of reality to mysteriously powerful fantastic realm. Aristotle opines that fantasy connects itself with “*probable impossible*” and thus deals with the unreal, the unreasonable or irrational but it has its foundation deeply rooted in reality. In the postmodern era novelists delve into the inner reality and the conscious and the unconscious minds of men.

Anita Desai avoids the lifeless reflection of real life and creatively reproduces the picture of life relating it to fantasy. Commenting on the use of fantasy in Anita Desais’ novels Jasbir Jain remarks that in almost all of her novels, there is a constant interaction between the real and the fantastic. Anita Desai introduces fantasy as an innate quality of her characters and as part of their mental makeup. By using the language of their interior she fathoms the private world of her characters. Her women characters opt for the illusion rather than reality which is unbearable for them. She reveals their various desires, moods and conflicting choices prompting them to look for alternate ways to survive in desperation.

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Reader’s Digest: Universal Dictionary defines fantasy as –

1. The realm of vivid imagination, reverie, depiction, illusion and the like, the natural. Conjurings of mental invention and association, the visionary world of make belief.
- 2) A mental image, especially disordered, a weird image, an illusion.
3. A capricious or whimsical idea, a conceit.

Katheryn Hume views fantasy “as the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal.”<sup>1</sup>

(Katheryn Hume, *Fantasy and Nimesis: Response to Reality in Western Literature*. (New York: Methuan, 1984) pg XII

Random House dictionary explains fantasy as “conceived or appearing as if conceived by unrestrained imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

(Random House dictionary of the English Language, unabridged edition. (New York, 1966) pg 16.

Eric Rabkin is of the view that fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing: its opposite is reality. He defines reality as a collection of views and expectation that we learn is order to survive here and now. Fantasy records the dilemma and the trauma faced by man in this modern world by focusing on the inner climate of senses and sensibilities. The themes of the novels of Anita Desai rest on the problems of an alienated soul and an estranged mind. Women in her novels are in constant search of a sense of fulfillment. There are ties between friends, siblings, parents, children and partners but she realizes that they only form an incomplete whole. The protagonists in her novels are lost “in an age of lost values, lost men and lost gods.”<sup>3</sup>(B Ramchandra Rao, *The Age of Alienation* (New York, 1971, quoted by R K Dhawan, *Indian Women Novelists* New Delhi: Prestige, 1991) Vol. 2 pg 12. Her women characters suffer because of uncertainty, unsettlement and disillusionment. Because of emotional upheavals at times every human being may experience panic attacks, phobias, meltdowns, anxiety, mood swings and obsessive compulsive behaviors of various intensity but in her protagonists these upheavals are compounded and they suffer much more because of their communication difficulties and social inadequacies. This leads to aggression, social isolation and depression.

Norman Holland mentions “*People have dreams and day dreams in which they gratify wishes and impulses, experiences or allay fears, people have had and will have such fantasy all their lives. They must, in order to act, for one must imagine an action to perform it. Fantasies, moreover, occupy a special, prior and primitive place in our mental life and therefore, a psychoanalytic reading of a literary work in terms of fantasy also has a special status.*”<sup>4</sup>(Norman N Holland, *The Dynamics of lit. Response: A Dictionary of Fantasy* (New York, Landon: Norton and Company, 1968) pg 31.

Fantasy can appear more concrete rather than abstract through one’s heightened sense of perception of the world around. Fantasy ceases to be abstract through one’s sensuous awareness and intense imaginative involvement. Anita Desai herself supports this view, clarifying it in an interview-- *Shrivastava* : Do you believe that a writer must have suffered a good deal in order to write?

*Desai* : “It is sensitivity to suffering that counts not the amount of suffering”.<sup>5</sup>

(Anita Desai at work : An interview Ramesh K Shrivastava. *Perspectives on Anita Desai* ed. Ramesh and Vinod Parkashar, Ghaziabad 1984) pg 209.

Fantasy can play upon various moods. Dreams can seem to come true and our suppressed terrors can turn into nightmares. Nirja Mishra comments “*In twentieth century the monsters and ghosts of fairy tales and horror stories are interiorized and become the fears and terror residing in the psyche. It is a move from supernatural explanation to psychological explanation of the struggle between self and the other.*”<sup>6</sup>

(Nirja Mishra, Nature and Role of Fantasy in the Plays of Edward Albee, pg 120)

Freudian Psychology seeks to highlight the serious type of modern fantasy lying hidden beneath the surface of life as found in surrealist literature and art. The psychic characters in these modern fantasies find their roots in the drives of their sub-conscious and unconscious urges. *"The Dream itself is a model of hallucinations, of delirium as mourning was to become the model of melancholia."*<sup>7</sup>

(David Stafford Clark, ed. What Freud Really ---? The Theory of Unconsciousness (Great Britain: Penguin 1987) pg 57.

Like Freud, Jung also interpreted dreams as revealing the secrets of ones' inner life and immediate experiences often making the dreams realize certain hidden facts about his own personality. Jung clarifies that a modern mans' psyche can be configured in terms of his spiritual death, inner hollowness and mental sufferings.

Anita Desai avoids the lifeless reflection of real life and creatively reproduces the picture of life relating it to fantasy. Commenting on the use of fantasy in Anita Desais' novels Jasbir Jain remarks that in almost all of her novels, there is a constant interaction between the real and the fantastic. Anita Desai introduces fantasy as an innate quality of her characters and as part of their mental makeup. By using the language of their interior she fathoms the private world of her characters. Her women characters opt for the illusion rather than reality which is unbearable for them. She reveals their various desires, moods and conflicting choices prompting them to look for alternate ways to survive in desperation.

In Cry, The Peacock Maya's psychic fears, a sort of mental illness-- are explored through fantasy. Mental illness is a psychological phenomenon a hostility felt towards something that concerns a person directly or indirectly. Maya suffers from depression and an intense fear about the very idea of death. She is haunted by the shadow of a prophecy. Her loneliness and boredom only aggravate her psychic imbalance. Her oversensitive nature creates hallucinations which seem real to her. These hallucinations urge the fantastic elements in her mind leading her towards a tragic end. The novel opens with the death of her pet dog – Toto. Maya herself admits that it was not only his death that she mourned but something unremembered filled her with despair. Maya is sensible, sensitive, emotional and dreamy while Gautama her husband is insensitive, rational and materialistic. Both belong to a separated world hers is more warm and vibrant and his much colder and slower.

Maya yearns "for the contact that goes deeper than flesh – that of thought". The feeling of neglect and loneliness add to her hysteria. "His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cup of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking, reveal myself. I whimpered, it is that I am alone, and then gave myself upto a fit of furious pillow – beating, kicking everything but crying"( Pg 18)

Maya has a brooding nature, she yearns for 'contact, relationship and communication' with Gautama who fails to understand her emotional needs .Maya is sentimental, dreamy and poetic whereas Gautama is insensitive, rational and detached. She is full of warmth and tenderness but he is hard and cold. To escape this emotional vacuity, she drifts into the scenes and events of her past life. This fruitless indulgence is nothing but fantasy carrying her away from the crude

realities. "I soon turned to remembrance of lullaby that was crooned to me as a child, a gentle poignant lullaby that I murmured to myself so as I could turn my face to him without anger." This indulgence in fantasy is a sort of escape as Eric Rabkin believes "Boredom is one of the prisons of the mind. The fantastic offers escape from this prison."<sup>8</sup> (Eric S Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1976) pg 42.

Freud studied a number of cases and concluded –

Some childhood memories are inhabited because they involve painful incidents. On recollecting them they could lead to intense excitement and moral conflict. These childhood experiences are very vivid and have the power to influence the development of psychoneurosis. Likewise Maya's palpable mind makes her uneasy with indefinable shadows. Her broodings and nervous imaginations increase her fears manifold. Even insignificant incidents and insubstantial things leave an indelible impression on her mind. Any negligible situation is capable of invoking neurotic responses through association of ideas. The Rangoon creepers appear to her as nocturnal snakes. She imagines them to be coiling and uncoiling about her as evil descending from above. The flowers of yesterday morbidly turn to "corpses of today." She goes out like a spent candle into sheer nothingness under the scary impact of hallucinations. Even the moon is not a moon of love ballads and fairy tales but a demoniac creature. Her world is a fantastic "toy world" of which she is reluctant to come out. Her world of fantasy is her world of psychic reality. Maya's folding her burning soul in her hands and her staring upon the mirror with cool distance in another instance of the fantasy. W R Irwin opines that fantasy establishes and develops an artifact, "plays the game of impossible.... based on an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility."<sup>9</sup> (W R Irwin, *The Game of Impossible: A Rhetoric Of Fantasy* {Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976} pg IX. The departure from reality draws her towards insanity. In the view of both Jung and Freud "Madness represents a flight directly away from some apprehended reality that the individual finds intolerable. Madness is an interior escape."<sup>10</sup> (Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic* pg 194)

Later Maya likens herself to a peacock crying for a mate. She cannot enjoy the sound sleep as the shrill cries of peacocks pound her ears. Her imagining of the peacocks blood chilling shrieks of pain is another instance of her hallucinations. Anita Desai uses unpleasant animal imagery to depict Maya's neurotic inequilibrium.

"In the shadows, I saw peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing steadfastly unwinkingly upon the final truth--death". It symbolizes her obsession with death and also her passion for life. Like the peacock's knowledge of life and death, Maya is also aware of preciousness of life and the seriousness of impending death. The death wish is a moving force in neurosis. She thinks of nothing else but of death either hers or Gautama's. When he is unruffled by every flutter of her sensation and desire she decides to overcome her fear of death. Maya cannot set the equations right between reality and fantasy. She cannot bring her senses to rest even after murdering her husband who she believes has "an unawareness, a half deadness to living world!" She is sure of Gautama's imperviousness to emotions and feelings. Maya pleads that the very nature of Gautama helped and strengthened her decision. She believed that there was so much more to be done in life that she comes to savour life all the more and it was she who was supposed to live and not Gautama. She is instrumental in deciding her own weird destiny. With Maya fantasy always objectifies itself in hallucination and nightmares. It rises from within and gives shape to the memories, through her life and then death. These

insecurities lead to insanity, murder and suicide. Desai presents reality in *Cry The Peacock* but transcends its limits with a touch of fantasy. The novel not only fuses perpetual experiences with fantasy but goes much beyond it. It is an external representation of the interior of Maya and the novel deals with the psychical rather than the physical aspects of Maya.

Darshan Singh Maini puts it beautifully, “*Cry the Peacock* is a typically ‘feminine novel’ a novel of sensibility rather than of action. It has the quality of an orchid and of a flute about it. Its concern is almost wholly with the tenors of existence, and it achieves its effects through a series of exploding and multiplying metaphors.”<sup>11</sup> (Anita Desai’s *Novels: An Evaluation* Darshan Singh Maini, Perspectives on Anita Desai ed. Ramesh K Srivastava Nirmal Prakashan Ghaziabad 1984) pg 123.

Maya is haunted by her fatal flaw increased manifold by her hidden insecurities because of her incompatible relationships. She seeks asylum in her solitary broodings that only aggravate the morbidity in her life. She is unable to cope up with the pressures and struggles to maintain the meaningfulness of life. *Cry the Peacock* is more about Maya’s bewilderment and incapacity in dealing with her psychic tumult. Every effort at solving the tangles of her life seems elusive.

Maya soon realizes the inward type of life that she leads is structurally opposite to the outward life lead by Nila and her mother. She concentrates on finding her moorings to extricate herself from all the complexities of her inner world. Desai’s characters are very peculiar and eccentric as she portrays their psychological reality. Every character *is wrapped up in a mystery and then it is her task as a novelist to unravel the complexities layer by layer*. Her novels are a study in emotions, sensations, thoughts and consciousness and thus the techniques used by Henry James and Virginia Woolf suit the narrative style aptly. Flashbacks and stream of consciousness techniques are used in some of her novels. Srinivasa Iyengar says: “*Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters.*”<sup>12</sup> K R Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian writing in English* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1973) pg 16 She is more concerned with the characters and their experiences with sights sounds and smells. Her delicately composed stories sparkle with images. Words, symbols and images are her tools instrumental in creating a richly integrated piece of art A .D. steers her stories away from external and physical realities into the recesses of inner realities, a world comprising fantasy and reveries. The stress is on the invisible rather than the visible as she paints the moods, whims, fancies, dreams and inner experiences of her characters. The theme of her novels are never poverty, wars, politics, social evils, post colonial traumas, spiritualism, tradition and modernity etc but relationships and man and woman incompatibilities.

Anita Desai is a sensitive novelist and so are her characters. So the theme of violence does not recur around the independence and partition of India or death is never due to famines and floods. Kamala Markandaya, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Nayantara Sehgal are more concerned with poetry, hunger, contemporary problems, politics, problems of partition, whereas for Anita Desai and her characters “muffled whispers, a leaking tap, creaking shoes, groaning beds, moaning hinges and ticktocking clocks can be more disturbing than ear-splitting blasts, deafening trumpets and earthshaking explosions. Desai’s hypersensitive protagonists are affected by such things”.<sup>13</sup> (Perspectives on Anita Desai ed. Ramesh K Shrivastava, introduction pg 31 Vimal Prakashan Ghaziabad 1984) Every character of hers is above the ordinary battling with

unsolved mysteries within themselves. Their problems are not physical but psychological. She writes:

*"I am interested in characters who are not average but have recreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great No" who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them"* <sup>14</sup> (Yashodhara Dalmia. An interview with Anita Desai, 13)

She probed deeper and deeper into human consciousness. She renders the soul and the flux of sensations and impressions. Her characters are freakish and essentially lonely figures. She plunges into their consciousness to see what sensations and impressions are floating there. The past impinges on the present in not only distinct memories but also in much vaguer and subtler ways--- the flow of life and rhythm of life. Her novels can be seen as a scathing criticism of the glittering façade of contemporary civilization which hides within much that is ugly and wicked. Its spiritual apathy, ignorance and the brute weight of non-awareness that afflicts humanity goes unnoticed and in return it has brought in neurosis, boredom, ennui, inner hollowness, spiritual death, sterility and incapability of any sympathetic understanding. The writer suggests more than she describes or asserts. The conflicts between life and death, hope and despair, love and hate, contemplation and action is the higher under-pattern of the novels. Her novels are also about the psychological antithesis between love and spiritual freedom.

Anita Desai's other novel, *Where shall we go this summer?*, is an intense story of a sensitive middle-aged wife who fights an urge to abandon the boredom of her ostensible comfortable existence. It is also the story of her disillusionment and the compromises made. Sita feels stifled in the posh flat in Mumbai and longs to escape the suffering and turmoil of her urban life. Hers is a fable incipient ego with no means for mastering her own condition. Her only effective defense against this maddening reality lies in flight.

Because of some unusual childhood experiences she grows up into a social misfit and wishes to escape to Manori where her father is believed to have performed several miracles. She is mesmerized by her father and his fabled life showing miracles.

This unusual life situation of an anguished woman presented through a skillful dramatization also creates fantasy. The title itself suggests an inclination towards escapism --something fanciful. Harish Raizada comments, *"The tragic effect in her novels is intensified because the external conditions not only oppress the protagonists in her novels from outside but also flaw their nature from within. They are always haunted by the deadly nightmares of imaginary apprehensions conjured up by their flawed nature and in the process disintegrate themselves gradually."* <sup>15</sup> (Haunted Protagonist of Anita Desai, Harish Raizada. 'Perspectives on Anita Desai' ed Ramesh K. Srivastava, Vimal Prakashan, Ghaziabad, 1984) pg 32. Her heroes and heroines are haunted by fears or inhibitions. Their solitary musings further quicken their disintegration. The horrors and dislocations of living experiences are beyond logic, reason and convention. The boundaries between dreams and reality are blurred. She recognizes that the extremes of human love and suffering could be found in the seemingly most ordinary of lives.

Sita crosses the bounds of absurdity and impossibility when she experiences conflict with the society so full of violence and hypocrisy. By going back to the island and living there under the miraculous spell of her father Sita wishes for the unthinkable. She wants to keep her fifth child unborn, safe from the depression and dread around. She has a strange mental make-up with her 'proclivity for drama, for theatre for emotion.' (Pg 109) and the turmoil in her world "Rose fighting and screaming the boys beating each other for fun horrible things happening on the streets and in the flats around us - - everything so ugly and cruel." (Pg 143) makes her lose grip on the real and indulge in fantasy. The fantastic surges out of her nature and shapes her life-- the desire to keep her child in the womb is really bizarre.

The obscure atmosphere on the island of Manori originates fantasy "the dense darkness pouring onto them from the trees ..... the ghostly rustling and rattling of the palms were torn apart by the strident cackle, rasping and shrill, yowling in a tom cat's voice "(pg 25).The Supernatural powers seem to take control of all the workings in Manori. But the past memories of the island and the present facts clash in her mind. There is a fantastic juxtaposition of Manori of the past and the realistic Manori of the present. Sita travels to her parental house to relive her past. Just as the island of Manori is cut off from the mainland she too wants to isolate herself from the bustle of real life. She tries to recapture all the events and memories of her yesteryears when she was joyous and carefree with her father.

She respects her father for his heroic and redeeming qualities. But reality soon dawns upon her when she realizes that her father after all is not a true Gandhian and even the sea that she longs for is dangerous and evil. Shubha Tiwari comments, "The father comes very close to being revealed as incestuous as also tricky and manipulating. The island and its people are no innocent, cho chweet dolls. Children are not a source of delight or pride for this dissatisfied woman. She returns to Mumbai in a resigned, tired and defeated way. Mumbai or island, peace or anxiety, father or husband, children or island people, memories or realities everything is unsettling disastrous for Sita. A doomed Desai protagonist, Sita's quest is also doomed to go on forever and ever."<sup>16</sup>

(Dimensions of Anita Desai's Fiction-Shubha Tiwari. Critical Responses to Anita Desai. Atlantic New Delhi pg 9.) This Sita reminds us of the archetypal figure of Sita who is exiled along with Ram. This Sita is exiled from her disillusionment and false societal bondings. She realizes that it is impossible to live a meaningful life with inner contradictions.

Manori island exerts its elemental hold on the impressionable conscious of Sita. She is submerged in the ethos of the island and surfaces to rediscover herself. She finds an order and balance only after descending into her subconscious. This mystical travel is her psychic quest.

She learns about the prosaic nature of life. Suresh Kohli opines that the conclusion of this novel is unexpected because "Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anyone nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny."<sup>17</sup>

{Suresh Kohli "THE Fiction of Anita Desai, "The Statesman 06 Nov 1977 pg 3)Apart from the extraordinarily imaginative universe that Sita creates her situation also needs a deeper understanding of a complex and complicated psyche that allowed such seeming contradictions. Her queer, instinctive and neurotic act finds roots in the drives of her subconscious and unconscious urges.

Disappointed and in despair she feels that the island is no place to give birth to her fifth child. The island soon evaporates into nothingness. Manori is not fairy land for her children – Menaka and Karan. For them the real world is the city life, “right and proper, natural and acceptable.” (pg 102). They consider this “escape” to the island madness. Anita Desai very deftly and subtly paints the gulf between reality and fantasy with a defused dividing line. Fantasy beckons, it allures but then reality becomes frustrating and discouraging. This very frustration and her inner awareness of her inability to give meaning to her thoughts and feelings is the cause of Sita’s psychic imbalance. She admits to Monika. “I wish I had your talent ... I should have known how to put them to use. I should have given my life some shape then some meaning.” (pg 117)

Sita is a victim of crumbling psyche, hungry for love and individuality. Sita embraces reality and willingly prepares to deliver her child. The novel ends establishing the victory of reason over fantasy. The poem by D H Lawrence teaches her that life must be lived with its duties and responsibilities. She passes through various stages of self discovery and individuation when her underground forces of elemental fear coalesce into creating a stable being.

Anita Desai employs fantasy as a technique an internal device, a part of the mental make-up of her characters, an indispensable part of their life enabling her to explore the inner world of her characters. The characters cannot behave otherwise because fantasy is an innate quality of their persona fantasy defines them. Behavioral strangeness is a dominant shaping aspect of their lives. Anita Desai poses an all comprehensive view of human life and its problems. She presents characters like Sita who refuse to cow down in face of trying circumstances and also characters with neurotic indulgences who then turn to compromise and understanding.

The storm within is also reflected as the storm without. Fantasy is fabricated as the mood of the nature without. In “Cry the Peacock” the hot summer with its dry dusty texture provides a suitable background to living forth the fantastic temperament. “The atmosphere was charged with restlessness. Gusts of wind dragged the thorny, paper flowered bougainvillea creepers against the wall with a dry scratching rattle that unnerved me ..... Something similar heaved inside me a longing, a dread, a search for solutions, a despair.” (pg 35)

In ‘Where shall we go this summer? The torrential rain on the island Manori enhances the sultry and piercing climate within and without. Anita Desai uses her fecund sensitivity and exuberant sleight of hand to conjure the miraculous in her fiction. The images are not simply tokens of her artistic vision which recognized the fantastic in the familiar. Desai makes an ample use of imagery to make reality more powerful and eloquent. It enriches her textual density allowing a number of interesting interpretations. The vivifying moods and psychic states of her introvert characters form a tonal chord.

Through a free play of imagination fantasy is meant to amuse but in Desai’s novels fantasy can play upon various moods. Truths beneath the surface of life are highlighted. A disturbed psyche is dissected by employing fantasy revealing many confusing phenomena causing mental mobilization.

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