

NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Illusions of Maya: Feminine Consciousness in *Cry, the Peacock*

Anita Desai, a member of a "second generation" of Indian novelists writing in English, possesses an unusual but appealing talent. From her earliest novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), to her latest, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), she has dealt frequently with female protagonists—young and old, rich and poor, single, married, or widowed. I have chosen her first fully developed female character, Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*,¹ for analysis here. Maya is an unusual woman, introverted and childlike, totally lacking the virtues of grace and self-possession. But because she exemplifies Desai's concern with "thought, emotion, and sensation,"² she is worth examining both as a female character, and as an Indian woman in a novel intended for a worldwide English-speaking audience.

Cry, the Peacock is restricted, but at the same time wide-ranging, in scope. Maya leads the life of a pampered recluse. She and her husband, Gautama, live alone, and even he requires little interaction with his wife. The major action of the novel, therefore, takes place in the protagonist's mind.

One of them will die in the fourth year of their marriage: this, foretold by the astrologer but ignored by Maya's father, is a statement which comes back to torment Maya during that ominous fourth year. For months she lives in fear of her own certain death. As time passes, she comes to reflect more and more intensely on the meaning of life—to appreciate it, to further develop her already extreme awareness of her world's sights, sounds, smells.

But as Maya desperately tries to imprint life's experiences on her memory, thinking her days are numbered, she comes to savor life all the more. Instead of being content to live her remaining days to the fullest, she begins to demand more time. How to get it? In order to fulfill the demand of Fate, there is only one way: assume that Gautama is to die, and Maya, to live.

At first her realization of this alternative is not conscious. She gradually notices ever-widening disparities between her attitudes and his, until a particular lack of perception on Gautama's part (regarding a dust storm) "only underlined an unawareness, a half-deadness to the living world, which helped and strengthened me by justifying my unspoken decision" (p. 168). That decision: that Gautama, not Maya, will be sacrificed. Time (of the full moon) and place (on the rooftop) combine to facilitate his death.

Only four significant events occur beforehand: the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto; the visit to the Lal's home and the ensuing trip to the cabaret; a visit from Gautama's mother and sister, and a shopping trip on which Maya accompanies

¹Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (London: Peter Owen, 1963). Subsequent page number citations appear in parentheses in the text.

²"Whereas a man is concerned with action, experience, and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion, and sensation." Atma Ram, "An Interview with Anita Desai," *WLWE: Word Literature Written in English* (Spring, 1977), 102.

them; and the arrival of a letter from her brother Arjuna. These are events which, in the lives of other people, would not be earthshaking. For instance, a pet and longtime companion would be mourned, but not all readers would agree with the childless Maya's statement that a relationship with a dog "is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child" (p. 9). Only the letter from a long-lost brother might deeply affect a more normal person. The fact that Maya reacts so strongly to all four of these events shows how heightened her general level of perception has become.

Except for these outstanding events, Maya's daily life is outwardly routine. 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 tightrope of sanity. A lack of physical activity and social interaction is essentially 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" (p. 139); 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-centered. Her isolation and introversion are essential to the development of her character; for this reason the author has eliminated all but the bare essentials of plot and setting.

The first-person method of narration is crucial to the novel—indeed, one might almost say that it constitutes the novel. Since Maya's private thoughts form the core of her experience, it is necessary for the author to convey them to readers so that they, in turn, can develop some insights into Maya. We know the reasons for her behavior, at least to the extent that Maya herself can communicate them; this is more than can be said for poor Gautama. He sees only the outward manifestations of her thoughts, and those visible aspects are so fragmentary that he cannot piece together the total picture of Maya's disturbance. Indeed, she has withheld from him the most vital piece of the puzzle, concerning the foretold death of one of them. This makes it impossible for him to act to avert his own end.

The variety of characters portrayed in *Cry, the Peacock* is not great. Maya, Gautama, and their relatives are all well-to-do, educated people, except for the rebellious brother Arjuna. The only other people mentioned (the Lals, the cabaret-goers, etc.) seem unrefined or even tawdry; they serve to indicate a type of external world for which Maya has distaste. While the reasons for Maya's insanity lie in her own nature, they might not have overcome her saner side were it not for her milieu of wealth and leisure.

Maya's own name has obvious significance: she is a form of illusion (*maya*) personified, or gone awry. The dog Toto has an even more famous literary predecessor: the Toto who accompanied Dorothy on her visit to the Land of Oz.³ Dorothy's canine companion offered her companionship on what could have been a very lonely and terrifying adventure; perhaps his namesake offered something just as vital to the older but still childlike Maya.

The introductory and concluding sections of the novel, narrated in the third-person, give the reader a more objective view of the situation, though (unfortunately) the style is not so different from that used by Maya herself in the rest of the book. It seems that Anita Desai is unable to restrain herself, and that

³L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* (New York: George M. Hill Company, 1900).

Maya's idiom is perhaps more the author's own idiom than we would imagine. A greater contrast between the central section and the two bracketing it might have better displayed Maya's consciousness, and the author's ability to convey it.

Meena Belliappa's observation that the "world of childhood . . . to Maya stood for a state of grace"⁴ gives us a clue to Maya's present disturbed behavior. Her childhood had been carefree—perhaps more so in memory than in reality. She had been free to romp with pets or smell flowers or do what she would; she is almost as free now, years later, except for two constraints: Gautama, and the astrologer's prediction. She cannot deal with them rationally.

At times Maya speaks with the vocabulary and insights of an adult: "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" (p. 35). But she says this only to herself (and to us); when forced to engage in conversation, she has nothing significant to say. It is easy to speak the truth to oneself, but more risky to expose one's "truth" to another.

Perhaps vulnerability is of necessity tied to Maya's extreme sensibility; one who notices, and even sensually experiences, the color of every sunset, the scent and shape of every blossom, attributes to these things a uniqueness and value which others would not observe, much less cherish. If Maya were to express her true feeling about life to Gautama, she might suffer dismissal. It seems much safer to keep her thoughts to herself—but after a point they can no longer be contained, and Gautama dies when they erupt.

Maya has also retained her childlike sensibilities with regard to sexuality. She appears to have no physical attraction to her husband, reflecting that her father gave her a "pulsing heart"; Gautama merely added "pain" and "the will to reflect" (p. 173). Maya has such exhilarating perceptions of every other object or emotion that the author's total omission of sexuality as part of her psyche is significant. Maya's lack of interest in her husband does not necessarily mean that her sexual feelings are nonexistent, though Desai's novels are unusual in their notable lack of this theme.

For an explanation we must return again to Maya's childlike character. The scene in which Gautama dies offers a clue to her attitudes: "I saw the moon's vast, pure surface, touched only faintly with petals of shadow, as though brushed by a luna moth's wings, so that it appeared a great multi-foliate rose, waxen white, virginal, chaste and absolute white, casting a light that was holy in its purity, a soft suffusing glow of its chastity" (p. 179). When Gautama transgresses this "sorrowing chastity," it brings about his demise.

As the novel ends, Maya awaits her assignment to an asylum. Her childlike leanings have, in their bizarre form, triumphed over her adulthood; through her own description of the events leading up to Gautama's death, we have heard how her breakdown has come about. That we do not totally understand Maya should not give us cause for complaint about the author's craftsmanship: how many of us completely understand anyone, even ourselves? Desai has attempted to give us entrée into the mind of a particular woman during one short but critical period. She has chosen a difficult task, and has acquitted herself admirably.

⁴Meena Belliappa, *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971), p. 8.

Anita Desai is not a writer of epics—indeed, few women are. Instead, she works within a narrow range, showing the impact of forces on one individual. In *Cry, the Peacock* she deals with a narrow aspect of Indian culture, setting, etc. Were it not for the fact that Maya accompanies Gautama's visiting relatives on a shopping trip to Delhi, we would not even know where she lives. Though for practical purposes she lives in a house, not a city—and indeed, in the most basic sense she lives not in a house, but in her own mind. Still, although the author has disposed of many of the "essentials" of plot, setting, and characters, this does not mean that *Cry, the Peacock* lacks Indianness. Maya is an Indian, and her thoughts have an Indianness about them, despite their disturbed state. She reflects on Indian weather, Indian flora and fauna, Indian religious and mythical figures (especially Shiva and the dance of death), and traditional folk/religious elements (as personified by the astrologer). She takes for granted a pampered way of life, but she seems not to view it as related to modernity or to the West, even though the amenities have been provided by her father and her husband, both lawyers and therefore men who travel in highly Westernized circles. If we take Maya's attitude toward the cabaret-goers as emblematic of her more general perception of the West, she is not much impressed or influenced by it.

Desai's language is more than uniquely Indian; it is uniquely her own. She uses the normal Indian English vocabulary for weather, food, clothing, etc., but she heightens it by inventing interesting, even shocking, combinations of words. Unusual juxtapositions and arresting metaphors constantly assault the senses of readers, almost demanding that they feel the way Maya herself feels. In no other way could the inner life of such a woman be described or conveyed.

Anita Desai is in the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness. She makes significant contributions to Indian literature, and to world literature in English; at the same time, she gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists.⁵

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Explaining Thomas Pynchon

With the publication in 1973 of his third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon became that enigmatic object in American letters, a "major" author. He had, of course, established a sound reputation among the literary elite, the well-informed, and those looking for cultural heroes, but after *Gravity's Rainbow* (its very size seemed to deem it so), he ascended to that Olympian realm inhabited by, for example, Mann, Joyce, and Nabokov, with whom he is now often mentioned. The popularity and importance of *Gravity's Rainbow* initiated a deluge of reviews, critical articles, bibliographies, and, recently, full-length studies of Pynchon's work. To Joseph Slade's early and perceptive book on Pynchon's first two novels have been added, to my knowledge, two more books on Pynchon and two collections of critical essays, as well as a plethora of