

“YIN-YANG” BINARIES OF DUALITY IN ANITA DESAI’S CRY THE PEACOCK

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma,
Assistant Professor of English, SNGGPG College, Bhopal

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Abstract

Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* is among the early novels that herald the development of psychological fiction in India. The work reveals the inner-world of Maya and revolves around events and experiences that ultimately lead her to murder her husband, Gautama. Maya has been severely scrutinised as a neurotic in a psychoanalytic light. This research paper attempts to associate “Maya and Gautama” as an inseparable union of “Yin-Yang”.

Keywords: Anita Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, Yin-Yang, Chinese philosophy.

Introduction

“Yin-Yang” or the Chinese philosophical concept of cosmic duality, asserts that the universe comprises of two opposing and complementing principles or cosmic energies that can be observed in nature. The binaries of “Yin-Yang” are the elementary aspects behind every phenomenon of creation.

The Yin signifies the feminine aspects of duality associated with the “earth, darkness, and passivity”. The Yang is associated with male aspects and with the idea of “heaven, light, and activity. The two aspects emanate from the Supreme Truth, or Taiji. The interplay of the two cosmic forces results in manifestation of different forms of existence. They exist together, like the light and dark halves of a circle. When they are in harmony, they balance each other in a static unison. While in a state of dynamic unrest, as one increases, the other diminishes. Together, they explain the rising and falling wholeness of life.

Anita Desai’s critically acclaimed novel *Cry the Peacock* metaphorically resonates the intense tale of duality which is both gratifying yet nullifying; tragic yet redeeming. The protagonist Maya who suffers from neurosis can be appreciated in a better light with respect to her representation as the Yin aspect of duality.

Cry the Peacock reveals the inner psychology of Maya and her imaginative, passionate, sensitive, emotionally unstable illusionary world of desires. The plot departs from the conventions of the traditional novel to present a picture of Maya’s mental sequence of thoughts, perceptions, repressed memories, and preconscious associations. Maya’s sensitive inner-scape grapples against the insensitive externalities of imposing rationality until she steps out of the liminal threshold of sanity. Ironically, she seems at rest after losing complete control over her mind.

The plot reveals Maya’s childhood suffering after her mother passes away. In spite of the affection showered by her father, Maya deeply yearns for her mother. To overcome the trauma of losing her mother, she finds solace in a make-believe world of imagination that acts as a balm for her loss. She is psychologically affected by a rather superstitious prophecy of a fortune-teller who foretells that Maya’s marriage would result in the death of her spouse. The prophecy begins to plague Maya’s mind as she grows into an insecure young woman. Maya gets married to Gautama, a matured lawyer, much older than her. Their marriage initiates on the infirm foundation of the prophecy and progresses towards an increasingly futile note.

While Maya represents the Yin aspect of duality, Gautam represents the complementary half of the opposing aspects of order, rationality, and law. By their very nature, Maya and Gautama embody opposing yet

complementary polarities. Their marriage stirs a disequilibrium that ushers them towards a conflict that begins to escalate with every passing moment, as evident from the lines from the text that describe their marriage:

It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up
and put together again, as of sacred iron with which out of the prettiest
superstition, we could not bear to part.(Desai, 40)

The plot opens with Gautama, the symbol of Yang energy, placed in a more dominant role in the relationship. The plot showcases him as a cold and indifferent husband whose wife suffers emotionally due to his lack of warmth and rigidity. It is apparent that just as Gautama fails to understand Maya, she fails to understand him. The track of their marriage indeed seems heading towards a dystopian conclusion due to their utter inability to coexist in a state of balance and sustain the harmonious union from which manifestation takes place in different forms. Their bond is completely devoid of warmth and they stay together as a child-less couple for four years. Maya's desire to receive Gautama's love remains completely unquenched, and she thrives on her affection for her pet dog, Toto. The plot reaches its climax with Toto's death. Gautama fails to understand what Toto's loss means to Maya. Toto's death is a symbol of the end of attachment for Maya. Her dreams of love, affection, and innocent passion are shattered by Toto's death. Maya's feelings arouse no emotion in Gautama, and he disposes of the dog's dead body without showing any sentiment. For him, Toto's death is a trivial event, and she simply thinks Maya should be alright after having "a cup of tea". He can barely relate to the mental anguish Maya undergoes and does not know how to comfort her.

Maya becomes mentally unstable after Toto's death. She feels that the world, ordered by cold logic, rationality and law is a shackle thrust upon her. She is determined to free herself from the chains that reign over her thoughts, body and being. Toto's death can be seen as the point in the story (which in fact is the point from where the plot moves back in flashes) where the Yin-Yang harmony is disrupted and the union is bound to move towards the culmination of an end in the form of foreshadowing of the prophecy of "un-being".

Maya's heaven could exist only till the point where she slavishly supported the illusion in her tender earthen heart. With Maya's illusions shattered, her own heaven, was bound to fall. Yang cannot 'Be' without Yin. Gautama could not 'be' without Maya.

The story of Maya and Gautama begins when Maya decides to disrupt the sense of order she supports and complies. Through the flashback, it becomes apparent that Maya has been withholding her thoughts for a long time. Her assertion of her ideals and entity also spells the end of norms and dictates she abided by, more as a matter of duty than liking. Maya, who until now had been suppressing her own inner-nature is ready to manifest her presence with force, power and splendour:

"All order is gone out of my life, all formality, there is no plan, no
peace nothing to keep me with the pattern of familiar, everything
living and doing." (Desai, 195)

The plot unravels that Maya murders her husband by pushing him off from the terrace. It is apparent that Maya's neurosis ends in a tragedy that ends her husband's life and fulfills the prophecy. On a more subtle note, it reveals a deeper reality of life, for just as darkness lessens and light grows, after mid-night; light lessens and darkness grows after mid-noon. Yin and Yang transform each other with the promise that a new day is re-born after the death of each night.

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