

Tormented Souls - A Study on Margaret Laurence's *The Jest of God* and Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract: Canada and India are two different countries replete with cultural pluralism, multiplicity of languages, religion, caste, creed, sect, races and colour ethnic patterns. Despite this cultural diversities the two nation allocate their post – colonial status in their male – dominated societies. Women suffer a loss of dignity and self – respect in both the countries. It is quite obvious that feminism procured an optimum place in the contemporary literary debate. This article attempts to analyse the self tormented with unfulfilled desires and dreams caught into a psychic trauma. The soul tormented towards a quest for wholeness is the perennial theme in all the feminist literature as every woman whether Indian, Canadian, Australian or American aspire for a complete wholeness. Margaret Laurence the celebrated Canadian feminist writer and Anita Desai a well established Indian novelist are conscious of the marginalization and discrimination meted out by woman in their patriarchal societies.

Keywords: Feminism, Psycho-analytic, Self – identity.

Canada and India have been colonies of the British Empire and now members of the Commonwealth. Both the countries are stuffed with cultural diversities, array of languages, religion so on. Women suffer a loss of honour and self-esteem in both the countries. It is quite apparent that Feminism received a supreme status in the contemporary literary debate. Feminism is a profound attempt to contrive the issues and find solutions to gender problems. There is a conscious biological difference and their inference valuing women's experience through the precepts of text, discourse and language. Modern Feminist movement gets a sharp focus in the writings of women. Women writers approach the problems of women in social, cultural, economic, linguistic and other areas. Feminism thus turned its attention by exploring the female experience. Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai two representative novelists of these two countries not only show signs of a prominent and deep response of the social, economic and cultural realities around them, but they also succeed in effectively transforming them into their literary experiences. It is impossible to speak of Margaret Laurence's fiction without focusing on her woman. Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai in their novels represent notable woman characters that subsist, activate and progress while they react to the erratic times.

This article seeks to evaluate the psychological and social problems of modern life. Margaret Laurence the distinguished Canadian feminist writer and Anita Desai a well established Indian novelist are conscious of the negligence and inequity meted out by woman in their patriarchal societies. The novels of Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai mark a vital part in the growth of fiction in Canada and India because of the constant move from the peripheral world to the inner world of the individual as they arrest the mood of the mind and straightly engage the reader in the gush of a particular consciousness. They surpass in the art of exploring the female psyche, which is more intricate than the male. Their understanding of the female psyche is highly typical and remarkable. The aspirations as well as the frustrations of the female are well represented by these novelists. Both Laurence and Desai portray distinct woman characters that grow, develop and upsurge as they react to the changing times. Laurence's *A Jest of God* focuses on the central character Rachel Cameron as a subjugated individual, tormented by her fears and self - consciousness. The bond of responsibility to her mother detaches her from the most human acquaintances. Her friendship with her co - worker Calla, closeness for the student James, relationship with Lennox Cates and an affair with her schoolmate Nick are her attempts to break the chain that tie her to her widowed mother. To her shock, everything ends in anguish and she sees no stateliness in the kind of life she is proceeding with. Calla's peculiar behaviour and religious principles keep Rachel on watch. Lennox gets married and departs Rachel. James gets promoted to the next class. The believed pregnancy due to her sexual relationship with Nick ends in a tumour. Thus, being determined with a feeling of failure in life, she develops a negative self esteem that prevents her from having a pleasant human relationship. So she carries out an interior journey that serves her a protection from the inner solitude. It is not Rachel alone but all the characters, young, old and middle generations in the novel are isolated. Though they try to escape from the holds of solitude, the sense of segregation brings an unsafe escape from the present. Rachel is not developing life but death.

On the surface level *A Jest of God* is a love story with an unhappy ending. Rachel adores her mother as most children yet she wishes her dead. She desires for a child yet she wavers. She seeks out for lasting relationships with her father, lover and child to escape from her sense of seclusion. Yet, a separation brings an invincible escape from the present. Rachel's craving for physical love, though it seems vital to the novel, is another aspect of her desire to escape herself into another's self. The amalgamation of love and death occurs not only in the trance but also in the real while death separates the love attempts to cross the barriers of isolation. Isolation may involve not only segregation from other human beings but also separation from God. Rachel's relationship with God is also unsure. Then Rachel at last faces her own seclusion. Finally, even God cannot solve her problems. She has confessed earlier that she envisaged horrors, amplified them to make factual ones appear lesser.

For now there is no dreadfulness, for she no more needs them. She has feared to be a fool, so she has no fears, for she actually is one. Laurence's central figures are sturdy and strongly maternal. Rachel is the central character who is an epitome of the best character sketch from Laurence. Her desire to establish her motherhood and feminine identity speaks for her kind heart and loving nature. She considers her school children as her own children and one of her students James is her favourite. She finds satisfaction in showing unique affection for James which is symbolic of her yearning for motherhood. Her discontinuing of university education and acceptance of the monotonous job of a teacher for the sake of her family welfare implies her responsibility as a fatherless daughter. Even though she hates her mother her unwillingness to go against her wish is an instant of her respect for elders. Rachel the unmarried schoolteacher is still unmarried and continues to care for her mother till the end. In her fiction Laurence explores the constricting definitions of women and dramatizes the ways in which a woman's voice becomes a means to her self – realization. Thus Laurence has depicted her female heroes in their real apparel, for she is a woman writer writing from woman's point of view. If frenzy has to do with the mind's inner splitting, self – alienation, self – estrangement and a splitting of consciousness then Rachel exhibits many of these characteristics.

That Voice! Chattering, crying... the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the Grieving – Not Calla's voice. Mine. Oh, my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel.
(36)

Thus Rachel ultimately faces her own isolation. Even God cannot solve her problems. She has admitted earlier that she imagined horrors, exaggerated them to make real ones seem lesser. Now there are no more horrors, for she no longer needs them. She has feared to be a fool but now she has no fears for she really is one. Desai's novels on the other hand shows psychosomatic impulses through perception, self – analysis through introspection, in protests and in negotiations. Desai's characters have firm basis of convictions and faiths. She has presented a shadowy view of life. None of her characters live a joyful life, nor is there anyone that lives an epicurean living. All of them fight against the odds, some of whom suffer because they are not happily married. For them marriages are not made in heaven. They are affected with the sense of loneliness, estrangement and cynical views due to displacement in life and morose of temperament. She looks deep into the social conditions which are the ultimate causes of the anguish of man. According to her, the social conditions are the chief causes following disposition. *Cry the Peacock* is the story of a woman whose fantasy world clashes with her husband's sensible world thus making her disheartened, lonesome and dispirited. Desai as the novelist of the era integrates reality with illusion. Psychological growths of character are the basic essence which governs nearly all the works of Desai to build her characters stand apart. Indispensably idealistic, vivacious and effectively realistic, Desai is

certainly one of the Indian writers who attempted to change the clichéd canons of the contemporary Indian society. The novel initiates with the death of the dog Toto and ends with Gautama's murder and Maya's psychosis. The trepidation of the threatened death, though initially submerges, surfaces periodically to trouble, frighten and terrify Maya: And four years it was now, we had been married four years....I knew the time had come. It was now to be Gautama, or I. (33)

Maya realizes in the fourth year that her days are counted and becomes hysteric over the oncoming death. The predicted death hazardously rocking from the ceiling slowly descends and terrifies to fall over her head any moment. Desai has dexterously given a detailed description of Maya's escalating distress which makes the novel a captivating psychological learning of the central character's neurotic fears and pulsating fretfulness. Maya's anxious thoughts amplify the whole lot out of proportion a trifling situation, an irrelevant thing or an unimportant incident. This induces in her a neurotic retort in association with the ideas of her impending death. The pink ragoon creeper, powerfully perfumed, star – like flowers emerges to her as nocturnal snakes. The titanic shadows of trees progress towards her with shocking swiftness, giving her “a sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist lengths” and “of an insane death”. The flowers of the recent past become “corpses of today”. The increasing fear of death loosens Maya's clutch over herself, pulling her closer to insanity. She begins to have visions of various strange creatures of the dead ants that get drowned in trying to drink the sweet oil of doves. The dark space between the stars signifies separation for her. The moon becomes a “demoniac creature” and the dancer represents death. Desai gives a first-rate portrayal of gliding gradually away from reality and dissimulation of Maya's sanity, wisdom, peace and her approaching the stage of madness. Thus she shifts the prediction of death to him, unknowing of the idea existing in her unconscious repressed state. Before Maya was wedded her father provided her a princely life of comfort and love and kept her away from all harsh and unpleasant realities of life. He offered her full freedom to keep herself cheerful and gay. Such a girl married to Gautama a man of cold intellect, an advocate bereft of sentiments and emotions is shocked to find that love that has no place in the family of Gautama. Maya's husband symbolizes the modern educated, emancipated Indian, extremely reasonable, dutiful and balanced. His self control is understood to the point of insensitivity. He maintains a life of non – involvement and expects the same from her. Gautama gives a philosophical remark referring Gita. "From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born". (112) She compares her life in her husband's house with that of her father's and is greatly distressed. Gautama is no company for Maya. They are mismatched. Maya like other women craves for sex and a child. She is left motherless and prolongs childless all her life. She has numerous representations of man-woman relationship in her mind. Unpleasant incidents after incidents

occur to astonish the tender receptivity of Maya. The conditions of life turns maya a neurotic. All the situations troubles her so much that she starts feeling the force of circumstances in her mind. "Innocence turning to guilt. Lilac to Purple. Ochre to ugliness. Step by step. All Silently. In utter, persistent silence." (184)

Maya's helplessness to cope with her 'horror' is her tragedy. Maya's mind has thus lost the divisions between reality and fantasy. The focus is not only with the theme, cataloging of characters and in presenting the ambiance of mind but also in the use of narrative mode, signs, icons and the perturbed time sequence that Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* deserves to be called a great novel gripped with tormented feelings. Laurence and Desai as an eminent artist captivate upon the deficient and perceptibly meaningless mass of reality around them and try to discover its implication by sinking below. As a psychological novel often they bestow a disturbed chronology and present everything in a mystified manner. Since the entire life is not structured, the authors try to confer an authentic picture of life by presenting it in an interchangeable style.

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