



Maya's cry for sleep in Anita Desai's cry the peacock

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Abstract

It is a well-accepted fact that the knowledge of psychological theories complements the understanding of Literature. Many psychological theories have been evolved to explain the erratic human behaviour. This paper shall explore the possible reasons for the psychic disintegration of the literary character *Maya* in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* as per the theoretical framework of Abraham H Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. The deprivation of the *need for Sleep* is included in the category of the *physiological needs* in the first level of the *Need Hierarchy*. Apart from the other needs as mentioned in the *Need Hierarchy*, the character *Maya* faces an acute deprivation of the need of *Sleep* and this paper shall focus on the adverse effect over her psyche. The Psychoanalytic theory of Freud is an extensively used theory to lay bare the psyche of the literary characters nevertheless, the Maslovian tenets facilitate one not only to probe the consciousness of literary characters, to study their psychic conflicts, to examine their potentiality for full humanness but also complements the other psychological studies of the literary characters. There could be various reasons for the neurotic behaviour of the above mentioned character, who being unable to cope with the stress generated due to psychic turmoil in her life commits suicide. On keen observation, the major reasons of the degenerating psychic health and unusual behaviour of *Maya*, in a way could be assigned to the non-gratification of certain needs which are crucial for maintaining psychological and emotional equilibrium.

Keywords: *hierarchy* of needs, psychic disintegration, gratification, neurosis, Maslow, behaviour, psyche

Introduction

Maslow's theory of the *hierarchy* of basic needs emphasizes on man's fundamental needs. According to him, all have *psychological- survival* needs which include *need for safety, for love, for belonging, for self-esteem* and finally for *self-actualization*, arranged in an order of *hierarchy*. *Need* is explained as a lack of something which is experienced by the organism. It then tries to perform that activity which culminates in the satisfaction of the need. Thus needs are associated with goals. Among human beings, needs are relatively permanent tendencies which seek their satisfaction in achieving certain specific goals. Needs are general wants or desires. Every human being has to strive for the satisfaction of his/her basic needs, if one has to maintain or improve or fulfil himself in the world

The most basic need which a person requires from his/her very birth in addition to physiological needs is the safety need. Once a child feels safe and secure, he grows into a psychologically healthy child. Thereafter, comes the realization of the need for feelings of belonging and of love. These needs, when attained, lead to the craving for the need for self-esteem. Once the fundamental need is fulfilled, other needs go on arising till the human being reaches the need for self-actualization as Maslow says:

A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet write poetry, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. The need we may call Self- actualization (*Motivation and Personality* 1954, 44).

In 1954, Abraham Maslow proposed that human needs arrange themselves in *hierarchy* of prepotency. In other words, the appearance of one need generally depends on the satisfaction of the others. The need that has been satisfied is no longer a need. It ceases to be a motivating force and therefore the satisfaction of one need leads an individual to try for the satisfaction of other needs. In this way the behaviour of a person is always dominated not by his satisfied needs, wants and desires, but by the ungratified ones, which prompt, compel and energise an individual to act or behave in a particular manner at a particular time for attaining some specific goal or purpose.

In the first category of needs in the *hierarchy*, we have the physiological needs. These needs are most fundamental for survival and existence of any human. Physiological needs include the physical requirements for human survival such as air, water, food, sleep, sex and, homeostasis. Having a restorative power *sleep*, gives rest to our body and mind and is known to maintain physical and mental health. This paper would highlight the adverse impact of the ungratified need for sleep experienced by *Maya* in *Cry, the Peacock*. Evidences show that sleep enhances one's quality of performance and health. It is not an option but an essential. Aldoux Huxley is of the opinion that we are not much sicker and much madder than we are, is due exclusively to that most blessed and blessing of all natural graces- 'sleep'. In the famous drama of Shakespeare, a state of insomnia is experienced by Lady Macbeth whose consciousness and conscience do not allow her to sleep after killing her husband. Her guilt haunts her and disturbs her mental harmony. The same condition is

experienced by Maya though for different reasons.

Decreased and disturbed sleep is directly related to depression which can cause fatigue, decreased libido and decreased productivity. Sleep is a psycho-physiological need. Poor sleep can lead to high stress hormones. Unless a person is relaxed, he cannot sleep and unless a person gets a sound sleep he cannot feel relaxed. Maya unfortunately is deprived of this basic need. She spends sleepless nights due to ungratified needs at all the levels in the *Hierarchy of Needs*, such as the *physiological needs, safety needs, the need for love and belongingness* and the *need for esteem*. She is deprived of sleep because of the stress and tensions caused due to the unsated needs in her life. She is seen craving for sleep both in her childhood and adulthood. At one instance in her childhood, sedatives are administered to her when she is severely disturbed. She remembers her childhood incident in these lines: "The doctors had to be called finally to give me a little morphine so that I might sleep in peace and by my father's orders, no more performing animals are allowed in at our gate" (Desai. Anita, *Cry the Peacock* 78).

Maya has been very sensitive female right from her childhood and this condition prevails even after her marriage. This is because she was brought up like a toy princess in toy world, unaware of realities. The symptoms of having a delicate and fragile psyche are prevalent right from her childhood when she had to be administered sedatives to sleep. She remembers how her father dealt with the situation in these lines: "Around this pretty tale he builds for me, he hopes to compose my dreams for the night, for it is the doctor's orders that I must be permitted no anxieties, no excitements" (77). Maya is a motherless child. She grows up in such an atmosphere, which stunts her perception and maturity. If she had her mother in her life, she might have given her a deeper understanding of the practical dealings of life, lying close to her, holding her close to her bosom as is generally observed. The presence of a mother could have given a better sense of security to her daughter, but here, her father controls her fit of anxiety and stress with morphine at such young age. Because of such trainings, she has greater adjustment problems in her later life. She develops a fragile psyche for want of realistic understanding of life. To highlight the formative role a mother plays in child's life, Chandra Singh in her article *Childhood in Anita Desai's Novels* refers to Sudhir Kakkar's psycho-social analysis of the relationship. Kakkar maintains that.

A daughter's best counsellor in the bewildering years of adolescence is the mother and the "unconscious wish for the benevolent presence of mother breeds in a tendency to react with fear to the threat of being left alone (As quoted in Chandra Singh's *Childhood in Anita Desai's Novels*.115).

Maya, being motherless, develops an abnormal father obsession and the father's partiality for the daughter over the son and his single parent nurturing creates a psychological mind that does not allow her to grow out of the patterns of childhood. Maya's whole life revolves around her father who is authoritarian and loving, quirky but mesmerizing and in trying to please him, Maya loses her real personality. Unconsciously, she searches for the father figure in all her

relationships as evident in this passage:

Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget rest. But no I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more only death and waiting (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 84).

The constant sound of prophecy of the astrologer, (whom she had visited when she was a child) that either Gautama or she herself would die in the fourth year of their marriage, haunts her in her waking and sleeping hours. She spends many sleepless nights due to nightmares and constant fears. This anxiety makes her life a hell like experience and her deprivations make an unconscious journey through her dreams to an unknown world which clearly projects her disturbed state of mind in the following dream sequence:

Yet, once I fall asleep, the dream dissolves quickly into a nightmare in which a row of soft shaggy, frail footed bear shamble through a dance. By a grotesque transformation, the bears are rendered into a lonely, hounded herd of gentle, thoughtful visitors from a forgotten mountain-land and the gibbering, cavorting human beings are seen as monsters from some prehistoric age, gabbling and gesticulating, pointing at their genitals, turning their backs and raising their tails, with stark madness in their faces (77-78).

The chaos and confusion of her life is manifested through her dreams. Dreams, according to Freud are close to one's unconscious. In the above passage one wonders to see a world of dreams beyond human imagination. It is a bizarre world. This bizarre world of animals symbolizes sexual obsessions (as per Freud's psychoanalytic theory) of Maya which is yet another unfulfilled need of Maya. Maya's fears of loneliness, unfulfilled womanhood and motherhood, emotional unrest and exaggerated death phobia disturb her inner peace due to which she is unable to sleep. Her insanity grows more and more. Maya is aware that something is grossly wrong with her thought process. Anxiously, she calls her father, brother and husband for helping her. She does not have an entity of her own and like a creeper always yearns for a support from someone, who could help her to come out of the inner turmoil and allow her to sleep, to rest and to forget the pressure. But she confirms herself that she will never be able to sleep again as death was in waiting. This was a threat to her security needs.

Maslow expresses in *Motivation and Personality* (1954) in the chapter 'The Role of Basic Need of Gratification in his psychological theory,

Certainly, we may speak of the needs for rest and sleep, we may therefore also speak of their frustration and its effects (sleepiness, fatigue, lack of energy, loginess, perhaps even lethargy etc.), and gratification (alertness, vigour, zest etc." (36).

In the following passage Maya experiences, and expresses the

effect of loss of sleep:

.....for my heart was so stretched with fear that one small droplet of sound in it would have strained it to bursting. Listened to it poured and twisted on my bed crying the peacock's cry. And I knew I should never again sleep in peace (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 84).

The above passages portray the importance of sleep, deprived of which, Maya eventually becomes sick both physically and mentally. The disturbed dream sequences, the regular nightmares and her disturbed sleep; her yearnings for peaceful sleep indicate the thwarting of her basic need "sleep". The desperate requirement of the need of sleep is experienced by Maya in these lines:

Ah, the thing to do was not to die, neither he nor I, but to live, and living, sleep. "I want to sleep," I whimpered, 'I want to sleep.' But sleep was rent by the frenzied cries of peacocks pacing the rock at night – peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with – agony at the death of love (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 146).

Maya realizes the importance of a deep and rejuvenating sleep and wishes it for her as well as her husband. But she is unable to sleep peacefully due to her ungratified sexual instincts, need for love from her husband, the need for unthreatened and secure life, the need for affiliating to her family and having children, the need for belongingness, need for self-esteem and a craving for self-actualizing. All these needs being deprived produce anxiety and frustration which eventually leads to depression in Maya. This results in the onset of symptoms of psychic degeneration in her.

Maya could have experienced an inner peace and a better rationale which might have helped her to adapt to her life in a better way, if she were blessed with a sound and a rejuvenating sleep. Maslow's need based theory not only ventures to suggest a probable reason for the anxiety faced by Maya but also serves to be a viable tool to understand complex human behaviour as it justifies the reasons for her psychic degeneration.

References

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