Exploring the Indian Female Gothic: Madness and Uncanny as Forms of Resistance in *Cry the Peacock*

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Abstract

The female gothic can be seen as a part of a wider feminist refashioning or reassessing of women's voices through the lens of the gothic where anxieties about their oppression, marginalization and systemic denials find an expression. While representation of the female character has always been a concern in Gothic literature, female gothic forces the readers to perceive the deep seated misogyny by portraying the social, cultural and moral fetters that entrap women in degrading and depriving situations. The ghosts in the female gothic are a manifestation of their rage, exasperation and suffering. This paper traces the idea of the female gothic and tries to read Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* as a narrative of resistance that employs the gothic elements such as madness and uncanny in order to bring out the psychological impact of a century old system of women's oppression.

Keywords: Gothic; Madness; Resistance; Uncanny**.**

The conventional aspects of gothic fiction can be linked to its portrayal of an environment of fear caused either by a supernatural event or by reappearance of the past in the present. The plot usually revolves around a vengeful murder, imprisonment or a haunting recurrence of some ancient curse. However, the most striking aspect of the early gothic novels is undeniably the creation of a female figure caught up in a claustrophobic medieval castle oppressed by a tyrannical villain. The supernatural forces often worked against women by controlling, possessing and haunting them. The early gothic novels such as Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) represented women characters that are young, virtuous and noble often symbolizing beauty and morality. However, from its inception goth-

ic literature has showcased two distinct mode of narration – one that dealt with the actual physical horror of violence and another focused more on the internal terror rising from the psychological conflicts and fears.

The first school of thought followed the works of Matthew Lewis where the attention was given to the external aspects of fear and the second school of thought followed the Radcliffean model of creating the atmosphere of gothic by highlighting the internal aspects of fear. Rictor Norton, in his work *Gothic Readings: The First Wave* pointed out that despite this apparent disparity "both the schools exploit the resources of the subconscious, taboo, trauma and nightmare, sexuality, mental disorientation and madness and both schools portray social injustice, prisons and the brutalizing effect of poverty" (ix). However, Ellen Moers coined the term "Female Gothic" in *Literary Women: the Great Writers* (1976) in order to acknowledge the specific feminist perspective that got reflected in the women's gothic novels. She defined female gothic to be the "work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (90). The term female Gothic, came to be recognized as "a politically subversive genre articulating women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body"(Wallace& Smith 2). Their voices often revealed the hidden and repressed fears and desires unacknowledged and unheard by the society.

Some of the significant works of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which made an impact in the history of Female Gothic are Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777), Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"(1891). Female Gothic also attempted to explore the anxieties and issues of women within the domestic spheres. Some of the significant works of the twentieth century Female Gothic that dealt with such issues include Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Toni Morisson's *Beloved* (1987) etc. Depending of the representation of female characters Moers categorized Female Gothic further into two different branches where in one group women characters were portrayed as victims as well as audacious heroines who can withstand the sufferings (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*); on the other group women characters were seen as monsters representing the psychological trauma after birth (*Frankenstein*). However, in "Unsettling

Feminism: The Savagery of Gothic", Catherine Spooner points out that the gothic as a mode of expression has limited itself to the depiction of "a sado-masochistic dynamic that appears to enjoy the spectacle of violence against women and the reaffirmation of cultural stereotypes projecting women as either victims, monsters or *femmes fatales*"(129). Therefore, female gothic that came to be recognized either as 'travelling heroinism' of Ann Radcliffe's novels (chapter 7) or as the 'birth myth' of Frankenstein', essentially narrowed itself to a reductionist view of women's resistance (129). Rictor Norton also points out that although a feminist perspective helps in exploring the gothic's various crucial dimensions; categorizing it within the bounds of "female gothic" is ultimately a narrow way of exploring women's representation and role in the gothic narratives. Simultaneously, maintaining a strict division between male and female gothic is also not essentially enriching as writers often blur their work by transgressing the lines of terror and horror.

Despite its limitations female gothic continues to be a much debated subgenre of gothic literature. Diane Long Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (1998) makes an attempt to read the female gothic fictions from a fresh perspective in order to locate an idea of resistance in 'victim feminism'. She notes that these heroines pretend to be victims of the patriarchal society while at the same time devising passive-aggressive ways of subverting the system. This ideology, according to Hoeveler can be termed as 'Gothic Feminism' where the female power is exercised through pretended and staged weakness (7). There continues to be a fierce debate over whether the Female Gothic could be read as a subversive or a conservative approach. Suzanne Becker's *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (1999) and Paulina Palmer's *Lesbian Gothic*: *Transgressive Fictions* (1999) are two such remarkable works that refashioned to female gothic to address much neglected issues of femininity such as lesbianism.

E. J. Clery's *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (2000) is another remarkable contribution to the explorations of Female Gothic fiction that focuses more on the historical aspects of these novels. Helene Meyers, in *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (2001) attempts to read the gothic heroines as women who resist being victims. She is of the opinion that sexual politics has played a major role in the frequent "devaluation of the Gothic, a genre which has, from its inception, been seen as feminine and female: it privileges emotion and the domestic sphere, and middle-class women have obsessively written and read it" (25).This growing engagement with the concept of 'Female gothic" has indeed opened

up a nuanced and fertile field of investigating women's issues as represented in gothic literature. Women writers have time and again reused and reinvented the ideas of the Female Gothic either as a mode of criticism or as a vehicle of resistance. However, while understanding the female gothic and its various counterparts one needs to acknowledge Sigmund Freud as Steven Bruhm points out, "Freud may not have invented the Gothic, but he made possible and inescapable the Gothic as we now understand it" (92). His theories of the unconscious have shaped the discussions on reappearance of repressed fears and desires which forms a major part of the gothic narrative's insistence on the haunting presence of the past. Freud's ideas of the *unheimlich*, or uncanny, have further contributed to the understanding of fear.

Umheimlich can be understood in terms of an intrusion of the unfamiliar when the familiar is anticipated. The uncanny in gothic functions as a tool that destabilizes the familiar spaces and allows the expression of the hidden and often unacknowledged side of the human psyche. As Gina Wisker writes, confronting the uncanny is nothing but recognizing that "the objects and subjects of horror are not always what they appear to be and are very often socially, politically and culturally transgressive and challenging" (15). Although, there lacks an explicit category of gothic writing in India; one cannot discard the literary innovations of the gothic elements in various Indian fictions. The conventional gothic elements incorporated in the western gothic ranges from monstrous or fear-inducing characters such as zombies and vampires to the madwoman in the attic in order to address the latent fears and anxieties of then-contemporary society. Indian women novelists have tried to fashion the conventional western gothic mode to fit into the specific geographical location of the place in order to engage with questions of identity and entrapment. In her article "Resistance from Ruins: an exploration of Indian Female Gothic Narratives", Bolla Jyothsna Phanija tries to locate various forms of resistance through some of the Indian fictions written by women. The conventional gothic elements such as the castles, ghosts and ruthless male usurpers of are replaced by even more powerful manifestation of such hauntings such as the horrors of caste, religion and sexuality. The fear and terror of Indian gothic novels do not exist in the setting of strange or unfamiliar spaces; rather it exists in the most homely spaces.

Cry the Peacock (1963) by Anita Desai describes a young woman's tumultuous psychological deterioration caused by the haunting reappearance of a childhood prophesy. The protagonist's life is turned upside down by this memory of a fatal prophesy regarding her marriage. She is possessed

by the albino astrologer's prophesy and feels caught in an inescapable destiny. Her household and the familiar spaces assume a sinister form and she gradually descends into a state of delusion. The gloomy and terrifying ambience of the home is heightened by Maya's growing realization of her desperation, loneliness and sexual frustration. In this is paper an attempt has been made to read the novel through the gothic lens to showcase how female gothic utilize the 'uncanny' as a tool to disrupt and defamiliarise the 'canny' spaces and allows a fresh reading of women's resistance.

Freud describes the uncanny as "actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (148). Anita Desai's novel *Cry the Peacock* narrates a highly sensitive women's journey from a deeply frustrated atmosphere of the marital household to a rebellious insanity. In her doctoral thesis Gizem Akcil writes that "by incorporating elements of horror and madness, and by situating characters within dark, haunted, gloomy and uncanny places, the Female Gothic has articulated women's sense of confinement and the desire to escape from social pressures and obligations in order to form a separate, self-ruling identity"(7). In this novel Maya is haunted by her past –a prophecy of death that threatens the temporal stability of her marriage. The uncanny appearances of her past in forms of vivid memories and dreams, however, reflect the oppressive environment within the canny space of her house. Desai uses the conventional gothic trope of a seemingly docile woman trapped in her circumstances and subverts it to showcase resistance from within that sphere. Fred Botting says that the gothic novels written by female writers can be considered "as part of a wider feminist critical movement that recovers suppressed or marginalized writing by women and addresses issues of female experience, sexual oppression and difference (19). In this novel the uncanny appearance of a childhood prophesy of disaster also releases other forms of suppressed fears and desires that otherwise lay hidden in her subconscious.

Maya, in *Cry the Peacock* experiences the recurring fear of death –a common aspect of the gothic, throughout the narrative. This fear of death, as Freud observes, has a deep infantile connection with one's primary instinct of self preservation. Maya's growing fear of death, her anxiety regarding her upcoming destruction makes her immediate environment threatening. This fear is seen when she "would not lift her face from a cushion, for fear the stench of decaying flesh still hung in the bougainvillea coloured evening air" (Desai 7). Her inability to look at the dead corpse of the pet captures the haunting fear of death that leaves "a sordid horror" afterwards (Desai 8). The gothic atmosphere of the narrative is heightened

by Maya's complete isolation from her husband. Her familiar space of the house becomes "unheimlich" or unfamiliar when she feels the unease and overpowering gloom of being out of place. She says, "—His coldness and incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking, reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house (Desai 14). The unhomely nature of her existence paralyses her freedom as she is unable to speak or often remains unheard. She questions herself when she wants to go near her husband for comfort and states "Dared I go in? Beg for comfort? Confess my loneliness and terror of loneliness? Useless. Hopeless" (Desai 26). Barbara Patrick writes that Ghost Stories of women writers often depict of the home not as a safe haven but as a place of stultification, exhaustion, treachery and terror (75).

From the very beginning Maya encounters this terror of death –symbolized by the white corpse of her dead pet. This fear manifests in her actions of sudden rise in emotions, violent outbursts of rage and her inability to confront her past. At one point when Maya goes to sleep, her mind is disturbed by "a persistent sense of some disaster I had known, and forgotten, or perhaps never known, only at one time, feared and now rediscovered"(Desai 26). This rediscovery of the fear brings out the uncanny nature of her familiar spaces when she states how her body began to shake as the ghost-white moon "rose out of her frenzy" and cast a "searing shaft of stark white across her body" (Desai 26). She further declares, "It was not the gentle moon of love ballads and fairy revels that so swiftly mounted the roof of our house, but a demoniac creature, the fierce dancer that had all day been trying to leap the threshold of my mind and home" (Desai 26). Her fate and fear tries to 'leap the threshold' of the canny setting of her home and break into the apparent stability of her relationship with her husband Gautama.

Freud remarks, "the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it" (152). Maya has repressed the prophesy of death for a long time and she remains firm not to acknowledge it even when it starts to peek inside her conscious actions .The albino's prophecy that into four years of her marriage one of them (Maya and Gautama) will die of unnatural causes brings Maya closer to the idea of death and she starts to contemplate on it. The prophecy's hold on her psyche gets stronger as the narrative cautiously traces Maya's marital condition in which Gautama's total indifference towards her feelings, emotions and choices creates a stifling atmosphere of restrained unease. The uncanny in this narrative has another spatial implication as it also incorporates Maya's conflict with Gautama's ideological and intellectual

beliefs. Maya and Gautama occupy two distinct stances in dealing with life. Her home becomes a space where she feels overpowered not only by the fear of a corporal death, but also death as a denial of her existential beliefs. The conflicts and contradictions of Maya and Gautama's spiritual and intellectual views create a terrifying environment where Maya feels devalued and outraged. In one instance Maya screams at Gautama's disinterested reaction to a woman's pregnancy and to this Gautama replies, " if a man were to react to the sight of pregnancy by bursting into tears, Maya, no court of law would consider him sane or sober"(Desai 59).

Maya's sensitivity often comes in conflict with Gautama's rational mind as he claims "Life is a fairy tale to you still, what have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for ordinary man" (Desai 98). Fights become frequent as their perspective on life grows visibly distinct from one another. Maya's daily activities, her routine works in her house start to give away a sense of desperation and she feels the arrival of death as she states, "the house was still, darkened. I sat as in a tomb" (Desai115). Her home becomes a battleground of opposing ideologies with looming uncertainties and hidden secrets. She feels unable to live in the house with her husband and when her visitors (Mother in law and sister in law) leave the house she declares, "God, to be alone with him again, my unknowing, unsuspecting and steelhard adversary in this oneiric battle, all night, all day, for how many more nights, how many more days?(Desai 144). The fear of abandonment in this unhomely space allows Maya to arrive at the most startling discovery of her narrative where she refashions the prophecy in order to save herself. She wonders "why, from the very beginning, it had never occurred to me that it might be Gautama's life that was threatened" (Desai 145).

The narrative of the novel progresses through Maya's thoughts and memories. However, for the most part, she resists the thoughts of the prophecy, refuses its reality and attempts, instead, to mend the friction in her marriage. However, her search for happiness and marital bliss proves to be futile and she gradually descends into madness in order to escape from the haunting environment of her house. Maya's fear of the prophecy takes a sinister shape as she gradually realizes her husband's total denial of her emotional, sexual and intellectual needs. She describes how once she leaps up "in a sudden, impulsive longing" to be with her husband and finds him fast asleep, far away from "any world of mine, however enticing" (Desai 83). This emotional and physical distance from her husband creates a deep feeling of alienation, a sense of absence which makes her a

prisoner of her own thoughts. The gap between the two ideologically different worlds becomes fully established when Maya arrives at this uncanny realization that "it might be Gautama's life that was threatened" (Desai 145). Maya has been keeping the prophecy a secret and was hiding her marital discomfort, the disillusionment and frustration from her husband. However, this unwillingness does not reflect a feeling of helplessness. She was willingly keeping those facts and feelings aloof in order to navigate her relationship with her husband. She becomes aware of her suppressed fears and desires when the prophecy comes back to haunt her after four years of her marriage. It is this uncanny emergence that gradually moves her towards realizing the motives behind her own actions. She begs her husband not to ask her about the prophecy not because she is afraid of it but because she is aware of the inevitability of it. Maya accepts the uncanny and allows it into her familiar space when she decides to kill her husband. Her narrative becomes fragmented and the distinction between dream and reality, sanity and insanity all vanishes as soon as she willfully descends into madness.

She succumbs to madness to fulfill the destiny and takes control of her life. Maya's madness seems inevitable as the harsh reality of her life becomes almost unbearable for her. Shoshana Felman observes that "madness becomes the symptom of a culture, but the symptom is incorporated in a silenced body (and a silenced soul) whose suffering cannot say itself" (13). Maya realizes her gradual turn to madness and she does so with a sense of awareness. She warns the readers regarding the unreliability of her narration as she was "insane with dread" (Desai 158). In "Remarks on a Canny Moment," Samuel Weber observes "The uncanny is bound up with a crisis of perception and phenomenality, but concomitantly with a mortal danger to the subject, to the "integrity" of its body and thus to its very identity" (Weber 1131). Maya feels enraged when her husband denies her emotional anxiety, fails to understand her needs and calls her actions madness (Desai 158). Maya writes "all order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar. . ."(Desai 159). It is only after a disruption of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the canny and the uncanny, the homely and the unhomley that Maya is able to break free from her agonizing relationship. She takes refuge in this breakdown of all orders and assumes agency of her life.

At first, she articulates her desire to reach fulfillment by negating the past –her encounter with the albino fortune teller and searches for an alter-

native, desirable reality for herself by attempting to fit into her domestic space. She is constantly oscillating between hope and hopelessness in her struggles to mend the friction in her marriage. However, she moves further and further away from the familiar setting and feels more in tune with the environment outside. She identifies her misery with the cry of the peacock and is haunted by the realization that it is the cry of death. The peacock here can be seen as a gothic animal that signifies the female protagonist's psychological journey into an uncanny Gothic space. Gothic motifs are employed in the novel to reflect women's struggles to escape the physical and psychological entrapment. Gothic literature has always been fascinated with the idea of madness and this notion has undergone tremendous change.

While madness as an illness can be seen as a poignant disruption of the human-nonhuman identity; it also stands out as a monstrous presence that threatens to break the structure of the family. In Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1972) he argued that the madman is someone who breaks the "fastidious conformity" of society and as a result brings upheaval and unrest. In gothic literature, madness came to be perceived as the other –a source of terror and fear. Madness, much like the ghost or a curse can be seen as an unwanted presence, an area of social exclusion. Both madness and the uncanny challenge linguistic certainty and these are often spatially-oriented. Uncanny is "that mental space where temporality and spatiality collapse"(Vidler 39). Maya's madness therefore can be read as a turn towards the uncanny. It is only by challenging the binary between the acceptable and unacceptable, the familiar and the unfamiliar that Maya is able to resist her marital suffocation.

Desai does not attempt to promote madness as a source of resistance; rather she attempts to read it as the choice made by an extremely sensitive woman to free herself from a century old system of internalizing cultural, social and religious oppression. The tone of the novel is not overtly defiant. She subtly brings out Maya's difficult childhood in her father's house where she was brought up to become a "toy princess in a toy world" (Desai 80). She was molded by her father to fit into the domestic sphere and accordingly she marries a man far older than her. Unlike her brother who runs away from their home; Maya further entangles herself in a never ending cycle of misguided beliefs and ill-adjusted circumstances. The narrative gradually unfolds countless layers of repressions that Maya underwent as a woman. She is the gothic heroine trapped inside the mansion of illusions – a space where there is no comfort, intimacy and joy promised to the dutiful daughters of patriarchy. As an Indian female gothic this

novel can be seen as a story of a woman possessed by the uncanny revelation that freedom is possible through a violent destruction of the social institutions.

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