

Feminist Consciousness in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*

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ABSTRACT

This novel depicts the inner psychological dilemma of Maya. It is a psychological exploration of a woman's inner turmoil. Due to emotional neglect in her marriage and beliefs in a childhood prophecy, Maya's mental state deteriorates and she commits murder and suicide. Anita Desai explores the psychological aspects of her characters through her writing style stream of consciousness. This novel depicts the inner psychological dilemma of Maya. This novel depicts the inner psychological dilemma of Maya. Desai presents a society where individual aspirations are often stifled by societal norms and expectations. It is a powerful psychological analysis of Maya, the main protagonist of the story.

Keywords: psychological, dilemma, exploration, marital, temperaments and consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Cry, the Peacock, Desai's first novel, is divided into three sections: a short introduction and conclusion in objective, third-person narrative, and a long subjective middle section narrated by the neurotic heroine, Maya. In Maya's narrative, Desai employs stream of consciousness to fill in details of Maya's past and to chronicle the progressive deterioration of both Maya's relationship with her husband, Gautama, and her own mental poise and sanity. In the climax, Maya, a slave to the fate she has feared, kills Gautama in accordance with the prophecy of an astrologer. The novel ends with her total mental collapse. This novel portrays the trauma of a married woman inflicted by a male dominated society.

Maya is the sensitive, poetic, intuitive, and unstable type of personality that appears consistently in Desai's fiction. She is extremely sensitive to the beauty around her the flowers and fruits in the garden, the trees and plants, the sky and the seasons, her pets and other animals in brief, the whole gamut of nature. Gautama, her husband, is her opposite: He is insensitive to transient beauty; a pure rationalist, he is concerned only with absolutes. The characters' names themselves epitomize their irreconcilability: Maya means "illusion and Gautama is the name of the Buddha, who was able to rend the veil of Maya. Thus, while Maya revels in the world of the senses, Gautama rejects it entirely. According to the

astrologer's prophecy, one of them must die. Maya decides to kill Gautama because, in her view, he has rejected all that makes life worth living; hence, to her, he is already "dead." (Desai, 82) Unable to resolve her conflict with Gautama, Maya pushes him from a terrace, thereby terminating her struggle. Maya feels emotionally isolated in her marriage and life, which intensifies her psychological turmoil.

In her novel, *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai portrays the psychic tumult of a young and sensitive married girl Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. She is the daughter of a rich advocate in Lucknow. Being alone in the family, her mother being dead and brother having gone to America to carve his own independent destiny, she gets the most of her father's affection and attention and in her moments of affliction exclaims to herself: "No one, no one else, loves me as my father does" (Neeru Tandon, 37) The excessive love Maya gets from her father makes her have a lop-sided view of life. She feels the world to be a toy made especially for her, painted in her favorite colors and set moving according to her tunes.

Having lived a carefree life under the indulgent attentions of her loving father, Maya desires to have similar attentions from her husband Gautama, a father surrogate. When Gautama, a busy, prosperous lawyer, too much engrossed in his own vocational affairs, fails to meet her demands, she feels neglected and miserable. Seeing her morbidity, her husband warns her of her turning neurotic and blames her father for spoiling her. The novel observes the involvedness and strains in Maya and Gautama's marriage, including communication gaps and emotional disconnect. "Peacocks symbolize frantic desire, obsession, and the haunting cry for love that parallels Maya's own fatal yearning and descent into death" (<https://literariness.org>). It is the story of a female striving to experience a meaningful life.

Although the reason for Maya's neurosis is, however, not her father fixation though it aids to hasten her tragedy, but persistent obsession of the prediction by the albino astrologer of death either for her or her husband within four years of their marriage. The terrifying words of the prediction, like the drumbeats of the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, ring in her ears and unnerve her. She knows that she is haunted by "a black and evil shadow-her fate and the time has come: And four years it was

now. It was now to be either Gautama or She”(Desai, 119.) The story rotates around a young woman's lingering mania with a childhood prophecy, and her struggle to find consolation in a world.

The loving attention of her father makes Maya oblivious of the deadly shadow; but as her husband Gautama fails to satisfy her intense longing for love and life, she is left to the solitude and silence of the house which prey upon her. She muses over her husband's lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight to his face: “Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me. . . .” (Desai, 89). Temperamentally there is no compatibility between Maya and Gautama. Maya has romantic love for the beautiful, the colorful and the sensuous; Gautama is not romantic and has no use for flowers. Maya is creature of instincts or a wayward and high stung child. As symbolized by her name she stands for the world of sensations. Gautama's name on the other hand, symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is realistic and rational. He has philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagwad Gita. Such irreconcilably different temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony.

Had Gautama shown an understanding towards and been attentive to Maya, he would have saved her from the haunting fears of “shadows and drums and drums and shadows.” (Desai, 98) The gap of communication between them leaves her lonely to brood over the morbid thoughts of the albino astrologer's prophecy. Her attempts to divert herself by visits to her friend Leila and Pom or Mrs. Lal's party or the restaurant and the cabaret, prove powerless to dispel the creeping terror. The visit of Gautama's mother and sister Nila brings a brief respite to her and she enjoys her busy life in their company. But once they are gone, she finds the house empty and herself alone with her horrors and nightmares.

Maya is so much possessed by the vision of albino astrologer that she recalls his talk about the myth surrounding the peacock's cry. “Maya is the sensitive, poetic, intuitive, and unstable type of personality that appears consistently in Desai's fiction. She is extremely sensitive to the beauty around her the flowers and fruits in the garden, the trees and plants, the sky and the seasons, her pets and other animals in brief, the whole gamut of nature. Gautama, her husband, is her opposite: He is insensitive to transient beauty; a pure rationalist, he is concerned only with absolutes”(https://literariness.org)

Listening to the cries of peacock in the rainy season, she realizes that she should never sleep in peace. She is caught in the net of inescapable. Being intensely in love with life she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death, “Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband!

Who is my savior? I am in a 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 anymore- only death and waiting.”(Desai, 67)

Maya suffers from headaches and experiences rages of rebellion and terror. As she moves towards insanity, she sees the visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her, slipping their club-like tongues in and out. Her dark house appears to her like her tomb and she contemplates in it over the horror of all that is to come. Then suddenly, during her interval of sanity, an idea hopefully dawns in her mind that since the albino had predicted death to either of them, it may be Gautama and not she whose life is threatened. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks that as he is detached and indifferent to life, it will not matter for him if he misses life. In her perversity she is even haunted by the word ‘murder’. Gautama remains so much lost in his work that Maya finds him even oblivious of the dust storm that has raged earlier in the afternoon.

When she asks him to accompany her to the roof of the house to enjoy cool air, he accompanies her, lost in his own thoughts. Passing out of the room, Maya catches sight of bronze Shiva dancing and prays to the Lord of Dance to protect them. Climbing the stairs she finds her cat suddenly speeding past them in a state of great alarm. “Maya's marriage functions as an unequal, stifling institution where her intense emotional and sensory needs are ignored. Gautama represents a cold, rational, and detached male authority, personified by his rigid adherence to philosophical non-attachment” (https://www.google.com/search?q=feminism). They walk towards the terraced end, Maya looking enraptured at the pale hushed glow of the rising moon. As Gautama move in front of her, hiding the moon from her view, she in a fit of frenzy pushes him over the parapet to “pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom”(Desai, 109). It remains in the end for Gautama's mother and sister to take away completely insane Maya from the scene of tragedy of the house of her father.

Anita Desai is representative of the present trend in Indian English fiction. She is a representative of the present trend in Indian English fiction. “Feminist readings look at Maya as a subversion of the docile Indian homemaker. Her obsession with a childhood prophecy of doom acts as an outward manifestation of her internal claustrophobia and lack of agency in a world controlled by me” (web) She represent the welcome “creative release of the feminine sensibility which began to emerge after the world war second” In her review of Amitabh Ghose's *The Circle of Reason*, she shows her disfavor for the novelists who take interest in the ‘outer’ rather than the ‘inner’ world preferring the social to the psychological novels.” In her interview she says that as

an author she is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than every day, average ones. The novel delicately reviews the traditional roles and opportunities forced on women in Indian society.

In *Cry the Peacock* is a spoiled and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin and is married to Gautama, an older man, insensitive, pragmatic and rational lawyer who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Childless, with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. Maya's tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. Temperamentally, they are opposed to each other. And to cap it all she is not even sexually satisfied. Gautam does not respond "to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed" (Desai, 123). It is exploring its ideas of female subjectivity and psychological chaos.

The ever widening gap in communication between the husband and the wife is felt throughout the novel. In her childhood, an albino astrologer has predicted that four years after her marriage, one of them would die. Maya is hypersensitive and highly disturbed. Reacting to the death of her pet dog, She rushes to the garden tap "to wash the vision from her eyes" But her husband does not take it seriously, remains unaffected and shrugs her "words off as superfluous, trivial. Ultimately, Maya's psychic problems, aggravated by her infantilism, drive her to a kind of schizophrenia. She delineates herself as "body without heart, a heart without a body" (Desai, 189) Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* is an externalization of the interior of Maya's sensibility.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai has showed the feminine mind of both a girl and a woman. She is a deep examination of the human consciousness, societal constraints, and the awful consequences of emotional neglect. The story reveals on Maya's belief in astrology and fate, which shapes her awareness and measures. It is a tragic story of Maya; Novelist explores loneliness, fear, obsession, mental insecurity, and the arousing calm. This novel reveals the complications of characters and self-discovery in postcolonial India. Feminism appears as a idea that is based on serious examination of male advantage and woman's subordination within any given society. Desai's novels intricately explore alienation and loneliness through various relationships.

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