

## ANITA DESAI'S MAYA IN CRY, THE PEACOCK

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**Abstract:** This research article explores the story of Maya, the protagonist, in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* from the feminist perspective. It postulates Desai's perception of perfect society free of male domination, by bringing the tensions and tussles of woman like Maya in the society, into visibility. Qualitative research methodology is adopted where Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is the primary text and other resources based on it are the secondary data along with this, the theory of feminism is employed as a tool. Desai constructs an ambiance of strain by illustrating the miseries of Maya who was predicted to cause calamity to her loved one. She is alleged to be the curse of the family as her mother died while giving birth to her. Maya gets ill-treated and her life gets occupied with misery which is because of the patriarchal society which discriminates woman. This research attempted to analyze the text from the feminist perspective and concluded that the protagonist Maya represents the predicament of Indian women torn and tossed in between convention/tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature, assertion and confrontation, imagination and reality and freedom and isolation. Desai successfully portrays the psychological state of her characters because she believes that inner self is more important than the external condition of life.

Key words: feminism, Hinduism, Indian society, modernity, patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

Anita Desai a prominent Indo-Anglian novelist presents Maya as a protagonist in *Cry, The Peacock*. It focuses on Desai's visualization of a society free of gender discrimination. The plot of the fiction depicts the plight of an innocent Indian woman, Maya, young Delhi housewife, who becomes the victim of patriarchal society, culture and tradition along with superstition which is still pervasively

present in India. Maya represents the complexities of the Indian practices by highlighting the Indian predicament of maintaining identity of an individual woman amidst the absurdities of cultural and ritual paradigms.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* archives the melancholic dismay, Maya's lineage to lunacy leading to perversion due to loveless, arranged marriage with Gautama, a misogynistic lawyer. She is just a puppet in the hands of male earlier father later husband. Maya is obsessed with the prophecy that is likely to bring ill and this restricts her to live a normal life. She suffers because her mother dies while giving birth to her; and society condemns Maya because of this ill-event. Maya is voiceless and suppressed because of the patriarchal rules and regulations.

*Cry, the Peacock* is the picturization of the sufferings of Maya who is bound to live with Gautama because of their marriage. It foregrounds the nuptial state consequential out of the divergence between two irresolvable personality of utterly two divergent attitudes towards life. Maya and Manisha in the first two novels of Desai fail to adapt the new changing roles prescribed to them hence their marriages smash. Desai's fiction has plenty of diversity in themes and her treatment deserves critical attention. She investigates the ambience with clinical precision and her fiction represents a vivid and comprehensive picture of the human predicament.

Critics opine that *Cry, the Peacock* has gone beyond the recurring themes of post-Independence fictions. The depiction of Maya's plight is excessively present issue in Indian writings. Satyal Anjum states: "The novel foreshadows . . . major recurring themes in Desai's works—... Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* goes to one of the root causes of societal evils persisting in Indian scenario" (45). The stereotypical literatures that were abundant of independence hangover and Western impact in Indian society. However, through Maya, the writer comes home with issues that were persistent in Indian society.

Postcolonial scholars focused on Desai's use of Indian settings contending that colonial appropriation of Indian cultural values remains an obstacle for postcolonial writers. Others have explored the effects of English culture on the subjectivities of Desai's urban Indian middle-class characters, suggesting that the unspoken gendered and imperialist premises of colonial culture inhibit the potential growth and artistic expression of the formerly colonized. Feminist critics have assessed the psychological development of Desai's female characters in terms

of the patriarchal Indian family structure while evaluating Desai's representation of the Indian feminine within the context of other Indian literature written by women. Although most of these critics have praised the complexity of the family relationships depicted in Desai's novels, several have objected to their resolutions as either too simplistic or perpetuating patriarchal values. Salman Rushdie praises this technique:

With her trademark perceptiveness, delicacy of language, and sharp wit in full evidence in *Diamond Dust*, Anita Desai once again gloriously confirms that she is India's finest writer in English. Desai's books are illuminated by the author's perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit that leaves its readers perplexed. (qtd. *Cry, The Peacock*: paperback)

Desai studies human psyche, though, initially developed as a therapeutic technique for the treatment of the hysteria patient, expanded later as a technique to approach a literature and a literary art for her. There are many patients who are imposed inhumane treatment in the name of tradition and who ultimately becomes a psychic or mental patient. Desai's Maya decides to succumb life because of ignorance and deletion of her presence by the society. It also serves her as a means to explore humane mind as Rayan Michael argues:

Concerned with dynamics of interpersonal relations and with the ways self is formed through interactions with its familial and socio-cultural environment. Depending on the school of psychoanalysis one needs the study of mind's operation in the literature should be concerned either with unconscious and the instinct or with the family, personal history and social world. (103)

The unconscious is the major force behind the creation of the literature and the other arts. The unconscious is the place where all the imagined fantasies, fulfillment of wishes that are denied by the reality or prohibited by the social norms are buried. Desai's characters bury forbidden wishes coming in conflict to the standard values that have been set to them by the society. Such centered wishes disguise the characters real motives and objects from the conscious mind. These characters live in a world that consists of forbidden wishes and desires, which they cherish in their soul.

Desai has portrayed Maya as a highly sensitive and cultured woman, and has gone deep into the feminine psyche from childhood to youth and to death. Besides

Maya, there are other women characters also in the novel. These characters reveal the other facets of female psyche. Meena Belliappa considers this novel as "a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience" (25). Darshan Singh Maini considers *Cry, the Peacock* a typically feminine novel because it is a story of a woman told by a woman, but because . . . it is the fruit of feminine sensibility . . ." (67). It gives expression to the long smothered sad cry of the wounded psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship narrated by protagonist.

Feminism as a tool is employed to interpret and analyze the text. 'Feminism' is originated from the Latin word 'femina', meaning 'woman' (French Feminism) basically it advocates women rights, status and power to gain equality. Precisely it is based on the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as of men. Desai appears to be conscious of the connection between feminism as a political movement, a literary and theoretical perseverance to contest against patriarchy and sexism, rather than as a gender study only. In fact, feminist fundamental viewpoint and concept grew to become more relevant to learn about and evaluate the gender-specific relegations amidst the sexes of social, institutional and private power. The execution of feminine sensibility and dilemma plagued by male subjugated social order has become the major theme in this fictional work.

### **Statement of the problem**

Women have always been the prey of patriarchy. Hinduism has been used as a tool by patriarchy to trap women. Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* endeavors to showcase gender discrimination pertinent in Indian society. She with the help of the protagonist Maya successfully illustrates female sufferings caused of a superstition and other tensions.

### **Research objectives**

The specific objective of this research is to explore Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* from feminist perspective to identify the cause of gender discrimination and bring the tensions of woman like Maya into visibility.

### **Rationale of the study**

This study is highly significant in today's context because it showcases the exact problem illustrated in *Cry, the Peacock*. Most of the researches carried out till date are on various aspects of suppression none of them have stepped into this area of

how a superstition can lead to the psychological and physical sufferings which lead to death from feminist perspective. In this back-ground this paper tries to advocate that unless the problem of female suppression of different types and levels are brought into visibility how can we think of the remedy and how can we think of a perfect society free of male domination?

### **Research Methodology**

This study explores the story of Maya, the protagonist in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* from feminist perspective. Qualitative research methodology is adopted. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is the primary text and theory of feminism is employed as a tool to achieve the objectives. The secondary data consists of collection of texts from libraries, different referential books, journals, internet sources etc. related to the text. Selection, collection, gradation and analysis of primary data consists of repeated reading of the text then they are described, compared and analyzed to attain the objectives of the research.

### **Discussion and findings**

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is the tale of woes of its central character Maya. It is the saga of pain of Maya and her unfulfilling relationship with her unsympathetic and insensitive husband, Gautama. Maya has been married to Gautama for four years. She is victim of neurosis living life of perpetual emotional strain. Maya shows exaggerated emotional response to seemingly mundane incidents in her environment. Gautama is a hard-headed, practical lawyer, who is too busy with his practice. He does not pay attention to his wife's dilemma. The entire novel revolves around this fragile relationship between Maya and Gautama. It depicts miseries of Maya pampered by father, and ignored by husband.

*Cry, the Peacock*, foreshadows major recurring themes in Indian fiction, like problems of independence and communication, the influence of the West, and so on. It targets women who are victims of tensions created by religious and domestic interactions. Maya is suppressed by the power so is voiceless. Childhood prophecy regarding Maya becomes the root cause of injustice, humiliation and dejection. Desai has delineated the self-alienation, despair, death, desolation and socio-psychic fragmentation of the protagonist as expressed "I was, being human, borne alone; I am, being woman, hard beset; I live by squeezing from a stone the little nourishment I get" (62). Every wife yearns for love of husband but she receives

hostility and indifference. Desai presents a silence, solitude, melancholy and dark world of shadows in which Maya is.

Simon de Beauvoir in her revolutionary work *The second Sex*(1948) seeks the primary inquiry of modern feminism. In critical venture when a woman tries to seek her identity. She tries to define herself by saying, "I am a woman". "The factual analysis suggests the basic symmetry between the terms masculine & feminine. In fact both the terms "feminine and masculine represent social construct-patterns of sexuality and behavior imposed by cultural and social norms."

A feminist believes that woman has a potential for action, a passion for liberation and a desire to assert herself. That is why women's writings are playing vital roles in women's lives. As, Meena Shirwadkarnotes: "The girls are at the Centre of most of the novels by women writers in which some are first person narrations by the central woman characters, this has given scope to the feminist point of view to enter into the sphere of Indo Anglican fiction" (48).

Desai believes in the growing awareness among women of their rights and individualities concerning this, R.K. Srivastva observes, "Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitiveness, a penetrating analysis and a skill to point with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female though dominated by the latter" (37).

Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar says: *Cry, the Peacock* scores because Maya is at once the center and circumference in this world. Her insanity, sane or insane fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life." (16). It is an account of recorded past memories of Maya's married life with Gautama narrated by Maya herself. Her narration commences with Toto's death Maya's pet and its impact, "Something slipped in may tear gazed vision"; she further says: "a shadowy something the probed me into admitting that it was not pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps as yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair." (16).Once a prophet with an albino eyes, while she was young with her ayah and he had predicted unnatural death of husband or wife after her marriage. She is always haunted by this prophecy. It has been predicted that either husband or wife will meet the last doom by the astrologer. She knows that she is haunted by a "black and evil shadow" (32) of her fate, and the time has come.

When the time of the prophecy comes, Maya is in dilemma because "And four years it was now, we had been married four years. I knew the time had come. It was now to be either Gautama or me" (32). As nothing happen she slowly gains faith in herself.

Maya finds herself desettled even after four years of marriage, Gautama had failed to fecundate, "no you are too young"— possibly of the (barrenness) austerity of Maya had developed a vaguely grander competence for philosophy that she was born. Maya attributes Gautama for his grossness, for his concern with the fundamental and materialistic life in terms of money: "It's always money with property never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exciting things like that-not for love or life basic things-like Toto dying." (Dhaliwal 24). Maya is portrayed as a highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative character married to an irresponsible, insensitive and aged Gautam. She is neglected by Gautama because he practices the philosophy of detachment as prescribed in *Bhagwad Gita* hence he is indifferent to physical charms of Maya which frustrates and hurts her. She is instable which leads to madness, insanity and finally murder. Desai successfully circumscribes and projects feminine sensibility through the gesture, posture, action, reaction and responses of Maya during the course of her married life in the novel as "----- 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." (Dhaliwal 40).

Maya has very delicate conscience with fine sensibilities and a strong yearning for love and affection whereas Gautama is strong headed guided by materialistic thought hence temperamentally both are poles apart which is justified as "----- he knew giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath the blue flashing veins that run under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me." (Dhaliwal 9). Gautama didn't even realize her feelings. They communicate very less. Gautam fails to realize the loss and the misery she was undergoing at the demise of Toto. When she needhis comforting words and response he disappoints her. The unsympathetic and uncaring arrogance of Gautam is further justified as he asks Maya to go to sleep, 'while he worked at papers.' As she posists "----- He did not give another thought to me, to either soft willing body

or the lonely waiting mind that waited near the bed....” (Dhaliwal 9). This gradually cultivated a kind of depression in Maya.

Maya’s woes are further heightened by the death of Toto which was intolerable for her. The pet’s demise indicates the eternal truth of human life that when one is in dire need of help everybody quits this terrifies Maya. The second part of the novel reveals Maya’s psychic death and narrates the tragic death of Gautama. Maya and Gautama have different approaches towards life and death. Being a lawyer for Gautama everything is mechanical. At home too he talks about parliament, bribery instead of love. On contrary, Maya’s talks and actions concentrate on human values. Maya wants to live a complete life of a woman as a wife. Gautama fails to soothe her burning heart. She opts for an ideal love unlike Gautama. Maya feels the pangs of the peacock mating: Do you not hear the Peacock call in the wilds? Are they not blood chilling, their shrieks of pain? “Pia, Pia”, they cry “Lover, Lover Mio, mio - I die I die” (43). The ill-fate of tragic Maya and her anguished shriek for mating, the crying and the yearning for the male peacock reaches out to Maya but not Gautama. She asks Gautama to hear the call “Pia, Pia,” but Gautama remains listless to the cry. He has no sexual urge towards her. Maya, the ‘pea-hen’ fails to have her instincts fulfilled from Gautama, the ‘peacock’. Gautama is a selfcontrolled, reasonable, dutiful and wise.

The attention of her father makes Maya oblivious of the deadly shadow, but Gautama "knew nothing that concerned her" (9). She is left to the solitude and silence of the house which prey upon her. Temperamentally, they are poles apart. Maya is romantic. Gautama is “no romantic” (26) and has “no use for flowers” (24). Maya is “a creature of instinct” (16), “a wayward and high-strung child” (48). Maya has to do with the illusion of life and living. The holy Hindu epics and Eastern literatures like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* symbolizes a female in the name of Maya, the eternal thread by which people are bound in the cycle of life and death.

Maya’s name stands for nothing but an illusion as novel presents her, “a wayward and child” (53). Gautama’s name symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is realistic and practical. He practices detachment as preached in the *Bhagvada Gita*. There lies a vast difference between husband and wife. The woes of Maya are expressed in the form of desire of being out with Gautam. She imagines:

‘If only we could go away for the summer’, I sighed, lethargically,... Gautama who had never been able to “go away for the summer” till he married me, and then refused to do so . . . I cried, tearfully, and rose from my pillows to hold and draw him into my own orbit of thought and feeling, yet not daring to make the bold, physical move. (38-39)

Such irreconcilable temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony. Maya expects love from Gautama but he treats her as servant as patriarchy has prescribed gender roles. R. S. Sharma points “Most of Maya’s problems begin with the incompetence of the society and insistence on style on too small a canvas” (167). No one understands the actual pain of Maya as Maya feels as his hand appears “as cool and dry as the bark of an old shady tree” (22). Facing Gautama is like nightmares:

. . . wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of tone, flying away into the distance amid the black clouds and not being lost into the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering tapering edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock. Then there lies, a head . . . Danger!” (150)

The pain of being motherless and deprivation of love impacts on the psyche of Maya which ends up shouting and yelling at nights followed by constant nightmares. The novelist depicts the cry of an agonized lonely and unwanted woman. She clings to Gautama, intrigued by his arrogance. She is compelled to be intact despite their ever-widening inner division. Unconsciously, she surrenders. The wisdom to surrender to a stronger personality is inherent in a morbidly dependent character. Her expansive traits remain suppressed in her unconscious, because she does not want to master her life.

Earlier father helped externalize her and she felt strong whereas Gautama fails. For Maya, both father and husband are ‘magic helpers.’ As a morbidly dependent person, Maya cannot express her rage openly. She hides her aggression behind her self-effacing and self-minimizing process. Her act of pillow-beating and crying piteously is the shrinking process wherein she finds herself helpless child. These expressions lead to self-pity. Psychomatic systems like splitting headaches and fever, followed delirium occur. Maya becomes vindictive when finally, the self alienates itself from the real center, and self-hate takes hold.

One of the most probable outcomes of self-hate is a conflict between Maya’s pride

and her real self. It is a tussle between healthy and neurotic and constructive and destructive elements. Desai presents Maya's internal anguish as conflict as a mirror imagery. As she gazes in the mirror, she sees her own body detached itself "upon it from a cool distance" (90). This detached body is glorified itself and it is served from is the actual self. Maya studies her reflection in the mirror. Spivak, in her interview with Elizabeth Gross, says, "I think you have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse" (184). Maya's character lies in comprehending her divided self. There is no self-analysis to comprehend her demands. The fast withering self and the receding contact with the outer world, leave the core of her integrity impaired. Her failure to find life and more of it, becomes an appalling crime. She condemns Gautama to death and then, burdened with guilt, and haunted by self-contempt, self-accusation and self-hatred, she drags herself to insanity.

Maya replicates peacock that performs to please others but nobody evaluates her pain. Peacock symbolizes Maya though being madly in love they destroy each other as them. Maya thinks of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. Rebuffed by Gautama, Maya is torn between her love of life and her fear of death. The gradual disintegration of her personality is powerfully dramatized. She is deeply stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity:

God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release? This net was no hallucination, no.... Am I gone insane? Father! 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. (84)

Maya is the victim of society and the politics of Maya's suffering has no end which is the reality of most of the women. Maya's perspective towards the world shows her obsession for love. She is intense about the interpretation of the realm of nature. She is fond of the beauty, color, smell, and shape of flowers and fruits. She is inclined to the sights and sounds of the natural world. She is infuriated when she discovers that Gautama did not observe the dust storm which suggests his tactlessness and recklessness of life. Gautama for her is an archetypal of male centered materialistic civilization and culture. Maya kills Gautama because she is

obsessed by life. Murder of Gautama is a revolution against unsympathetic social materialistic structure. As Maya gets enslaved and captivated in her own house by the shackles of patriarchy she wants to liberate herself. Her revolt in contradiction of the set patriarchal norms is reflected when she admits “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” (195).

Desai digs deep into the psyche of woman as Maya where she employs the horrible image of albino to portray Maya's lacerated feelings. Maya's association with male figures like her father, brother and husband seems to be archetypal. After studying modern Indian fiction writers from feminist perspective, it can be calculated that the major concern of writers like Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Parwer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Shahi Deshpande is self-assertion and alienation. In accordance with this Desai's major focus is on the human relations which are meant to be sustained and lived by heart not by mind. This kind of theory is more realistic rather than the western feminist point of view. Fundamentally Desai rejects any theory as such and proposes her own assessment of the predicament of Indian women tossed in between convention and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature, assertion and confrontation, and freedom and isolation. The problems and conflicts faced by women in her novels are existential in nature.

Dorothy Richardson accurately terminologies of her endeavor to create ‘feminine prose’ and Virginia Woolf describes ‘a women’s sentence.’ Anita Desai’s treatment of women characters looks the past to anatomize the pain inflicted on women in the past and present in passionate affirmation of female identity and experience. The trademark of Desai’s fiction is “to focus on the inner experience of life”. She expresses a distinctive Indian receptivity that is yet absolutely at straightforwardness in the concentration of the west. In conclusion it can be said that Indian Women is captivated in the shackles of patriarchy which is advocated by the societal institutions and culture. This is the disaster of an Indian daughter who is destined to suffer right from birth to death. This is the reality of being and living a life of virtually non-existent. This is the life of Maya whose feelings and voice is often negated by the family and the society. The darkness in which they live is as Antonio Gramsci has said, “A voiceless world of people” (64).

It is the narration of woes of Maya who is cursed. Despite being born in high

class Brahmin family Maya has to bear discrimination and she becomes one of the victims of Hindu orthodox system which believes that the death of her mother during her birth results from her ill-luck which is from her birth which leads her life to disaster. She is ignored by family and society right from her childhood to maturity. She is the victim of age-old unfair societal practice followed in Hindu culture which has no practical, sensible and scientific reason. She only had Toto the pet as her company and the death of Toto lead her to alienation and depression and later to suicide when she is unable to bear the injustice being imposed upon her. Patriarchy refuses to accept her as a normal woman. She is restricted from participating mass culture and trends as she is tagged of prophecy. This is mere an illusion in which many people of the society find ways to satiate their ill intention. Because of such reasons, innocent woman like Maya become easy prey and are forced to live a secluded life confined within the limitations set by the society.

### Conclusion

The Exploration of the story of Maya, in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* from feminist perspective clearly projects Desai's proposal of the perception of perfect society free of male domination, by bringing the tensions of woman like Maya in the society, into visibility. To meet the objectives Desai constructs an ambiance of strain by illustrating the miseries of Maya who was predicted to cause calamity to her loved one. She is alleged to be the curse of the family as her mother died while giving birth to her. Maya gets ill-treated and her life gets occupied with misery which is because of the patriarchal society which discriminates woman. This research attempted to analyze the text from the feminist perspective and concluded that the protagonist Maya represents the predicament of Indian women torn and tossed in between convention/tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature, assertion and confrontation, and freedom and isolation. Anita Desai an eminent, Indo-Anglian novelists successfully portrays the psychological state of her characters because she believes that inner self is more important than the external condition of life. **Works cited** Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

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