



# Anita Desai's Portrayal of Well Cultured Maya Trapped in Feminine Psyche in *Cry, The Peacock*

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## ABSTRACT

*The condition of women has gradually changed globally and the meek female has yielded place to the liberated woman. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few centuries. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. Novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee have reacted to the changed psychological and emotional realities of Indian life. Being enlightened and exposed to the nuances of life in East and West, they are able to deal with the situation efficiently. Thus feminism, self-assertion, quest for identity are some of the major thematic concerns of these novelists. They have begun to delineate the mental trauma of their personages in order to expose the oppression inflicted upon women in the society. We see in the women protagonists the power and courage of women. These novelists shatter the myth that women find fulfillment in marriage and portray an honest picture of women who strive to be themselves. They move from submission to assertion in order to acquire*

*an identity and to fit into the mainstream of the society. Anita Desai probes into the inner consciousness of her women protagonists and explores the realities of their lives. Owing to their indomitable spirit and compromising attitude, they emerge as winners after undergoing considerable hardships. Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), fails to tread the path or play the societal roles traditionally assigned to an Indian woman. Desai's novels are thus a reflection of the disturbed psyche of women who are victims of alienation and male dominance. However, they find a way out by self-discovery and introspection.*

## INTRODUCTION

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.



Helene Cixous Born to a German mother and Bengali father, Anita Desai grew up speaking German, Hindi, and English. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Delhi in 1957. The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and a later novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) was criticized as relying too heavily on imagery at the expense of plot and characterization, but it was praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), considered the author's most successful work, is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life. Its characters are revealed not only through imagery but through gesture, dialogue, and reflection. As do most of her works, the novel reflects Desai's essentially tragic view of life.

Desai's novels and short-stories evoke characters, events and moods with recourse to a rich use of visual imagery and details, which has led to comparisons with the modernist sensibilities of T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The origin of her stories, as the writer explains, is itself rooted in images: 'there are so many images that remain in the mind but they often are also forgotten, they pass through one's life and then they vanish. But there are certain images, certain characters, certain words that you find you don't lose, you remember, they stay with you and eventually these come together, you begin to see what the connection is between them'.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, she delves into the mind of a hypersensitive young urban wife, Maya, who finds herself coupled with the ascetic Gautama, a man given to abstraction and philosophy. Discovering that the poetic, creative, and romantic side of her own personality is easily rejected by the patriarchal society of which her husband is an emblem, the disturbed young woman quickly slips into insanity. Desai's instinctive perception of the female psyche characterizes many of her novels and establishes her as a writer with an unusual feminine sensibility.

### **CRY, THE PEACOCK**

Maya is born in an upper middle class Brahmin family. She loses her mother at a very young age and this leads to heavy pampering from her father, Rai Sahib. Although sensitive and well educated, she is treated as a child rather than a mature, willing to be heard and spoken to. She has been brought up in a very protective atmosphere. Her father tries to fill the vacuum of her mother and creates a fairy world full of dreams. This is the reason why he marries Maya to Gautama, his own middle aged lawyer friend.

But both prove to be poles apart and the age gap between them is quite high. If Maya stands for the poetry of life, Gautama for prose. In the initial years, Maya tries to fulfill his desires by being a duty conscious Indian wife but when she finds that he is

insensitive towards her emotions and feelings, she becomes silent and passive. To Gautama, “lives are trivial and expendable” and a kind of understanding and companionship is impossible between the two (20). Her mental and emotional needs come into confrontation with her husband’s practical outlook. The novel shows how sharply contrasted childhood experiences of the couple can cause dissonance in their married life. Her inclination to her father worsens her relation with her husband. Gautama blames her father for her immaturity and calls her a ‘spoilt child’. Desai clearly shows how a motherless female child’s psyche is damaged which further affects her relations with all around her. She sought her guardian and protector in Gautama but finds that in him, “understanding was scant, love was meager.” (89)

Maya’s predicament can be linked to the failure to find a refuge either in marriage or in family. The spilt in her personality results in her loss of belief in herself. Her obsession with the father figure and separation from the mother along with her failure to identify herself with Gautama, has led her to isolation. She is trapped with the fear of albino’s prophecy. She confines herself in a world of superstitions and is unable to do away with the constraints imposed by the orthodox society, with its belief in horoscope and future- telling. She nurtures both- love and fear of the unknown. Though her father defies these false beliefs, Maya is unable to overcome her fears. In the fourth year of her marriage, she is seen building

this fear to such an extreme that it leads to an unexpected explosion.

Maya is not ready to accept the gloomy state of affairs. Hence she eases her tension psychologically by thinking how peacock stamps its feet and strikes its beak against the rock and how it seizes the snake to break its body to relieve its own pain. This affects her consciousness badly and she craves for an urgent outlet of her emotions. Thus under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband is a revenge reaction arising out of her own basic frustrations- unhappy married life, unfulfilled longings and a reaction against her husband’s cold unresponsiveness. Through this murder and suicide, she experiences fulfillment and is relieved from the anxiety of past and present dilemmas.

Anita Desai studies the inner life of her characters but she never allows them to forget their social and familial ties. Maya looks at her brother, father and husband to save her from this psychological predicament and cries,” Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? 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 anymore- only death and waiting.” (84)

## CONCLUSION

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." Unable to resolve her conflict with Gautama, Maya pushes him from a terrace, thereby terminating her struggle.

*Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai's first novel, has been described as a trendsetter in the field of psychoanalytical realism. It explores the inner world of the main protagonist, Maya, and demonstrates her fear, insecurity and strange behavior. Through her, she depicts a world of alienation, loneliness and suffering. Maya is described as a hysterical character whose impending tragedy is suggestively foreshadowed, time and again. This article is an effort to portray the psyche of a woman on the verge of insanity and the factors responsible for that.

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