

Freedom vs. Responsibility: Cry the Peacock by Anita Desai

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Abstract:

The post-colonial Indian English literature is characterized by a revolutionary trend against female suppression. Anita Desai is one of the Indian Women novelists who raise their voice high against the patriarchal norms set by Indian society. Desai's overly emotional ladies enjoy the freedom of choice in the home's outside courtyard, away from the psychological and physical constraints of domestic chores. Desai's works tell the tale of women's painful situations, particularly in their marriages and households. The present paper focuses on the mental situation of a woman as depicted by Anita Desai in her novel *Cry, The Peacock*.

Key words: Post-Colonial, Patriarchy, Psychological, Marriage, Female Suppression

Anita Desai's novels represent a significant shift in the social and geographic environment of Indian English literature. *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai's debut book, is a significant contribution to this tradition in Indian English literature. Desai's early books were primarily concerned with the power dynamics that exist primarily within the confines of the house, women's incarceration in marriage, and oppression in different forms. Women are aware that they are subjected to masculine scrutiny and monitoring. They defy masculine gaze and authority by breaking patriarchal notions of femininity and motherhood and fashioning a life of their own.

Desai's female characters face numerous problems that are closely linked to women in her later books, and they fight the power systems that enslave them in various ways. This marks a turning point in the Indian woman's journey to independence. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, Desai's fiction is moving "towards a widening out of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscape," she believes ("Night" 9). Desai's female characters deal with sexual politics in many ways, including quiet resistance and outspoken revolt. Women's survival in an unfavorable home environment forces them to seek out a less stressful one outside.

The ladies in Desai's stories are often neurotic and overly emotional. They're stuck in a fantasy or a dream world because they refuse to face reality. The personal, marital, and home problems of women occupy the majority of Desai's attention, as opposed to worldly concerns. This may explain why she favors psychological over social or political topics in her books. Her books are on women's inner lives and psychological problems. The house or a place inside the institutions of family life may be

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figuratively defined as the space given to women characters in Desai's literature. However, within the limits of this space, Desai redefines women's position by emphasising on the willingness with which women try to break out from patriarchy's assigned feminine duties.

Desai's book, *Cry, the Peacock*, shows the inner struggles of women who are "owned" by others. It is "the first move in the direction of psychological fiction in English," according to R. S. Sharma (Anita Desai 127). Desai's emphasis in the book is discussed by Srinivasa Iyengar: "**Since her pre-occupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters.**"

The book is split into three sections: Part I is three pages long and reveals the protagonist's sensitive nature; Part 2 is the novel's whole narrative; and Part 3 is a few pages long and depicts the protagonist's self-destruction. Desai subverts the monolithic idea of canonical books by constructing her text in an unconventional manner. This is why Anita Desai's books are described by Meena Belliappa as "a break from contemporary forms of fiction writing" (31).

Desai's literature is notable for its deliberate rejection of conventional female norms. Desai's main focus is how women interact with others while maintaining their own dignity and sense of self-identity.

Maya, the young wife of a middle-class Hindu family, lives in a dream world in *Cry, the Peacock* because she is unable to cope with the reality of life. The gap between the realms of imagination and reality can be seen right from the start of the book. Maya is having a hard time accepting her beloved dog's death. She runs to the garden tap, unable to control her emotions, to "wipe the image from her eyes" (*Peacock* 1). Maya retreats to the past and reminisces about her early memories in order to escape the pressures of the present. This provides her with a great deal of comfort and pleasure. Maya is able to find purpose in her existence with the aid of such memories.

Maya is married to Gautama, a pragmatic and logical lawyer who is oblivious to her emotional nature. After her marriage, her perception of "home" changes dramatically. She was too reliant on her father as a child, and even after marriage, she seeks a father figure in her spouse. She is lonely since she is childless and has an indifferent spouse, and it is her loneliness that is causing her mental problems. Desai successfully conveys her protagonist's inner struggle and structures her worldview by using aberrant psychological states such as delusion, paranoia, and lunacy. At the same time, the woman character's aberrant mental condition becomes an expression of her resistance to phallogocentric power systems. Madness is portrayed as a creative expression of aberrated consciousness in all three books discussed in this chapter.

Female psychology has been shaped by an oppressive and dominating male society that allows for women's subjugation. Maya struggles to fulfil the passive feminine role as a wife and hesitates to accept her husband's world of reality. In order to live a good life in a patriarchal setting, a woman must accept and adapt to the behavioural standards for her sex. Her psychological condition is mostly

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due to this. All patriarchal societies have a male mental health ethic. Maya separates herself from family and societal connections, allowing her to live in her own world. Maya's early reminiscences reveal a neurotic sense of her own importance. Her fatalist father has allowed her to live in a fantasy and superstition-filled environment. Maya is raised as a wayward and high-strung kid by an overindulgent father with the assistance of ayahs after her mother died young. This is shown through her childhood reminiscences: **"As a child, I enjoyed princess-like, a sumptuous fare of fantasies of Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian Mythology, 39 long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and, being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well, that were read out to me by him, that inveterate reader-aloud, so that a doll dressed in pink I named Rose rather than Gulab."**

Childhood events may be considered to have a lasting impact on Desai's female characters and to govern their personality development. Desai says of her overly sensitive and lonely characters, "I believe that childhood memories are the most vivid and enduring" (Bande, Victim Consciousness 102-3). Maya's early memories, in fact, play an important part in her character development.

Maya considers herself fortunate to have her father's paternal care and attention. She considers her upbringing in Lucknow to be her "happiest days" (Peacock 8).

Maya's yearning for love is unmet since she is childless and has an unloving spouse. Her profound need for love is shown in her great care for animals. Her affection for animals exemplifies the compassion and generosity that run through her veins. Her dogs are "everything" to her (Peacock 16). She even imagines a dancing bear, a "magnificent beast," becoming an out-of-control toy.

Maya yearns for love and a life that is both physically and emotionally "full." In marriage, she expects to find fulfilment of her romantic ideas of love. Maya, on the other hand, is taken aback to discover that, despite her efforts, Gautama remains chilly and aloof. Maya's pain is exacerbated by the couple's complete lack of communication, and she develops a habit of worrying about her predicament: **"Being intensely in love with life, she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death. Am I gone insane?... I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more -- only death and waiting!"**

Romantic love, according to feminist theorists, is a fiction produced by fairy tales and glorified by the phallogocentric value system. The myth promotes the idea that marriage is the "be-all and end-all" of a woman's existence (Ruthven 79). Maya compares her marital woes to the anguish of peacocks in the process of making love. The peacock's love song is also its dying song. Maya, in pleasure, compares herself to peacocks, who are monogamous birds. With their beaks wide and panting, they tear each other's breasts to the point of blood. Maya believes that peacocks symbolise the drive of survival. They have nature's own knowledge, she claims, since they are aware of death while alive: **"Like Shiva's, their dance of joy is the dance of death, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die.... Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life."**

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The peacock is the primary emblem for the feminine mind. It has religious and cultural origins that contribute to the symbol's significance by giving undertones.

Maya aspires to a life of love and marriage that is equally loving and passionate. But there is no room for fantasies, joys, cajolery, or lovemaking in her husband's world. "The facts of ordinary human life are not love and passion, but living, dying, and working," her spouse says. (115 Peacock) Maya is reduced to "a body without a heart, a heart without a body" in Gautama's universe (Peacock 196). Maya, however, is committed to a romantic world of love and asks Gautama, "Is there anything in you that would be affected even slightly if I told you I spend my life for you?" Peacock (Peacock 114) Maya is terrified and anxious because of her excessive participation and Gautama's total lack of it. Gautama is unresponsive to the soft, eager body or the lonely, waiting mind that stood at his bedside" (Peacock 9). Gautama creates a life pattern that maintains his sovereignty, rejecting Maya's yearning for sexual union. He preaches and lives a detachment-based worldview. The couple's incompatibility is destroying their marriage.

Maya's marriage is marked by "matrimonial silences" throughout (Peacock 12). She confesses that she feels defenceless, completely alone, completely mistreated and unwanted: There had been countless nights when I was tortured by humiliation, a sense of neglect, loneliness, and desperation that would not have existed if I hadn't loved him so much, if he hadn't meant so much to me. (Peacock No. 210).

Maya's anguish and psychological pressure are what propel her to a realm that exists between truth and imagination. Maya has a hard time adjusting to her husband, Gautama, and refuses to embrace his life philosophy. In the book, Desai utilises the Gita's debate on whether to be engaged or not to be involved. Gautama cites the Gita to teach detachment from Maya: When a person thinks on sense things, he gets attracted to them. Yearning emerges from attachment, and rage emerges from longing. Anger leads to delusion, and delusion leads to memory loss. The discriminative faculty is destroyed by memory loss, and he dies as a result of discrimination's destruction. (Peacock 112)

As a result, she tries to see a unified world that is pleasing to her sensibility. Maya has been raised in a wealthy environment and is ignorant of the harsh truths of life. This is what gives her a skewed view of the world, making her a highly sensitive character with an overactive imagination. She, on the other hand, defies her husband's chauvinistic demands, which are the philosophical result of "a huge and serious knowledge founded on self-sacrificing years of study and hard labour" (Peacock 93).

Women's subjugation is exacerbated by the idealisation and institutionalisation of love, marriage, and family. Love and marriage in Desai's books are often profit-driven human transactions that benefit the masculine parties. Maya's married life therefore becomes a lonely quest for the meaning of her existence as a wife and a woman. Gautama, as a controlling spouse, has complete control over Maya's intellectual, emotional, and sexual desires. Maya is engrossed in the beauty of the scenery and the sight and sound of birds, while Gautama seems unconcerned. Maya's love of poetry, music, and dance is despised by Gautama, who also views her father's cultural heritage as decadent.

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Maya believes that her position as a wife is unimportant when she is free to live as a "doll princess" in her own play world (Peacock 89) Maya ("illusion"), according to her name's literal meaning, is caught between separateness and relatedness. Gautama, whose name is derived from the name of the Buddha, teaches and strives to cultivate detachment. Maya likens her husband Gautama to Gautama Buddha, saying, "He looks very much the meditator under the boo tree... finicky to embrace such things as love, with its attendant dread of copulation, of bodily demands" (Peacock 113).

Her marriage, which is devoid of affection, becomes the setting for a power struggle. Maya is subordinated in every manner by Gautama, the strong husband. Maya transforms into a doll inside her husband's power structure and realises that a woman's or a wife's status is nothing more than that of a toy. Nora from Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* comes to mind.

Maya and Gautama do not consider divorce, despite the fact that their marriage is on the brink of falling apart. It is their socialisation that drives them to stay in a failed marriage. The husband and wife become two opposing selves who refuse to work together in a constructive and dialectical way. The lines of contact between husband and wife have been severed, making reconciliation difficult. Maya is shattered by the demands of a loveless marriage and retreats into solitude. As a result, silence becomes a weapon of resistance.

Maya, stranded in a difficult home environment, separates herself from patriarchal ideals of a perfect woman/wife. She despises the conventional duties given to women and opposes the prevailing value system, therefore she is unsatisfied with subservient domesticity. Maya is therefore caught between her rejection of femininity and the feminine role that society has imposed on her. Such existential issues eventually drive her to madness. Juliet Mitchell points out: **"Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity within patriarchal discourse."**

Maya throws Gautama off the roof and murders him under the harsh glare of the moon, as the couple stands together. Gautama stepped between her and "the adored moon," which prompted the instant outrage. She subsequently kills herself. Maya's realisation of her helplessness and subsequent resistance to unfair authority drives her to commit murder and self-destruction in a violent manner. Desai's female heroines speak in a vocabulary that is distinct from that of her male ones. This may be seen as the author's effort to develop a vocabulary that allows a woman to communicate her very personal emotions and experiences. Women authors want a language of their own since their meanings and values vary from men's. In contrast to the conventional male perception of linear time, women often perceive time as static. Maya's agitation is reflected in the verbless phrases she speaks. She is distraught at the loss of her beloved dog and expresses her emotional anguish: **"Shooting-star, rocket, comet, great fountain of light, light, diamond, brilliant, sapphire light, Darkness, chaos - gone. And I spun around to face him [Gautama], this visitant to what had seemed a pit of emptiness, as the night hurtles towards a falling star, clinging to its traces. He had already put his hands behind his back, was already walking away restlessly."**

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Maya's mental state is conveyed by the words' erratic pace. Desai used asymmetrical phrases and uneven punctuation to convey the frenzied state of mind of the novel's female protagonist: "**But Gautama, I thought you would be interested in that, too - more than in the hills, and pony rides and things. It must be such a - marvelous sight, so - violent, and - bizarre. I groped for words painfully, the vision was excruciating in its vividness to me, and here was one who did not even glimpse it, no matter what I said. "The masks they wear - you must have seen them? Their costumes, the special kind of music and it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight - and perhaps they have torches. Yes, I suppose they dance by torchlight."**

Maya's hypersensitivity is shown by her use of fragmented and uneven grammar.

Maya resorts to a powerful subversion technique, namely, crazy, in order to survive in a harsh environment. Maya's insanity allows her to remain as Gautama's wife in the same hostile home setting. Far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is a cry for assistance, a symptom of both cultural impotence and political castration, as Shoshanna Felman points out. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking conduct is philosophically embedded in the behavioural pattern and the dependent and helpless position given to women as a whole. (118) Maya is perplexed by the married lives of the novel's other female characters.

Thus, Desai redefines women's position by emphasizing on the willingness with which women try to break out from patriarchy's assigned feminine duties. The agony and tense tension of caged birds, which have long been thought to represent women's life, are reflected in her writings.

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