

Struggle from Acculturation to Assimilation: Maya's Terminal Catastrophe in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

The psychological tumult is a common human phenomenon and there are only a few Indian women writers who spotlight the psychological narration in their fictions. Many Indian women diasporic writers have taken the theme of cultural clashes, acculturations and the immigrants' struggle to acclimatise in a foreign culture. There are many writers of Indian diaspora who have written their works on the East-West conflicts, cultural clash, identity crisis, rootlessness, placelessness and many more diaspora related themes but out of these themes, the theme of psychical turmoil and neurotic disorder is quite rare and only limited number of writers have capability to handle this theme appropriately and justifiably in their novels. Among such novelists, Anita Desai's name can be taken at the forefront because she has painted the hue of women's psyche and their shift-changing emotional tides in her novels. In this context, her novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a psychological study of its main female protagonist, Maya whose trials and tribulations, her status quo and her struggle against androcentric doctrines are the core themes of her novel *Cry, the Peacock*. It can be called a feminist novel with a tinge of violence in it. Maya's metamorphosis from a highly ambitious girl to a criminal has been narrated in this novel, and the subtle human emotions, the storm of desires and the female psyche have been poignantly described in it thorough monologue, stream of consciousness, and impassioned soliloquies.

Keywords

Indian Women's Writing, Womanhood, Psychological Conflicts, Emotional Predicaments, Memories, Marriage, Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, Manifesto, Maya, Fantasy, Indian Writing in English.

It is a well-known fact that women's writings are generally seen quite different in both theme and style from men's writings because only women writers can deal with the problems of women, their psychic turmoils, dreams, aspirations, depressions and frustrations more closely. Anita Desai has tried to show through her novels that women are supposed to be inferior to men due to some aforesaid reasons and this difference of mentalities is quite explicit in her works. Selden writes in the book *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature*:

It is believed that male and their writings are known for knowledge, power, clarity, conciseness and strong action, while female for their feeling, touch, domestic intimacy, small-scale forms and weak action. (Selden 147)

Anita Desai is one of the most acclaimed Indian woman novelists. She was born in 1937 in Mussoorie. She received her education from Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School, Delhi. She did her graduation in English from Miranda House, New Delhi. Anita Desai has taught at Baruch College, Mount Holyoke College and Smith College. She has won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 and Padma Bhushan in 2014. *Cry, The Peacock* is her debut novel that was published in 1963. Her novels deal with psychic anguish of her female character as Dr C. Ramya also argues about Anita Desai's novels:

In her novels, she skilfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities. (Ramya 26)

Anita Desai's female characters are not so ordinary women who can be easily controlled by men. They are not simple and submissive women from humble backgrounds, rather they belong to affluent families who are much concerned with fulfilling their needs. Shuvabrata Basu writes about it that "Desai concentrates primarily on the psychology of the characters" (Basu 166).

The main motif of Desai's fiction is to depict the inner world rather than the outside fictitious, selfish and materialistic world. The rebellious women characters of her novels change the course of the whole plot by their tragic auctions swayed in the gusto of emotions. The novel discusses the right of equality that "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel" (Brontë 95) and they sometimes defy the matriarchal orders. Mary Beard also remarks, "You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means decoupling it from prestige" (Beard 86-87).

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* can be called a psychological novel that has been written from a feminist perspective also. It has been written from the point of view of its central female character, Maya. The novel has been written in three parts. Neethu P. writes about this novel, "In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai highlights the problems emanating from the "misfit marriage" (Nethu 284).

Maya is a quite sensitive girl who remains very cautious to look beautiful. She was born in an aristocratic family that's why she thought that the whole world is like a toy and she thinks that the whole world has been created to give her pleasure, "The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes" (Desai 41). This novel deals with Maya's psychological turmoil.

Anita Desai has deliberately used the characters of Maya and Gautam deliberately in this novel. The names of the characters have symbolic meanings. Maya represents the illusion of the world while Gautama is a spiritual person like Gautama Buddha. Maya is materialistic while Gautama is religious. Gautama is a bit cynical who always remains serious. He reads the *Bhagavad Gita* and believes that the philosophy of detachment will bring a new dimension in his life. Gautama was only attached with Maya only for his physical needs and whenever Gautama becomes indifferent towards him, she gets inwardly shattered. Gautama gets hardly attached with Maya. Their age group also matters in their relationship. Maya is badly entrapped in this marriage and she has no reason to be happy now. She gets neither love nor attention from her husband. Maya feels comfortable when

her mother-in-law or sister-in-law comes to their house but she feels uncomfortable and alienated after their departure.

Even the beginning of the novel indicates that Maya is highly obsessed and grief-stricken over the loss of her pet dog, Toto, whose body was rotting in a hot day of April. It has been depicted when the novel begins. The vision of the dead body bears an apparent impact over Maya's mind. She "screamed and rushed into the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house" (Desai 7). Maya was feeling very bad and she was passionately waiting for her husband, Gautama, so that the corpse of the dog could be removed from their house. Her husband, Gautama, a hard-core realist man, remains quite busy with his work. He thinks that the death of the pet dog is a simple thing and there is no need to become emotional over it. That's why after disposing of the dead body of the dog through the Public Welfare Department, he moves ahead in his life. Desai writes about it, "Gautama rose immediately, ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" (Desai 9). Knowing all her anguish and agony, Maya's husband leaves her alone in the prison of depression in order to hallucinate her vision of Toto's dead boy; a confrontation with her own death. Through the marital cacophony of Maya and Gautama, Desai foregrounds the theme of marital disharmony. Maya had got much love, attention and care from her father. Her father was an advocate and he is known as Rai Sahib. Maya's brother has gone to America for his higher studies. Now Rai Sahib had nobody in India except Maya. That's why Maya's every wish was fulfilled by her father. But unfortunately, her marriage is fixed with a man, Gautama who is almost double than her age. Gautama is her father's friend and a lawyer by profession. He was not a suitable match for Maya and there was nothing common between them. Her husband thinks that Maya can become mad if she keeps doing all the silly things. She expects love from her husband. She says, "Love me as my father does" (Desai 46) but her husband does nothing but to ignore her. Neethu P. writes about Maya's love for her father:

The climax of the story lies when Maya's attachment with her father further develops into an "Electra Complex" which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated, Maya then looks back to the days of her childhood spent with her father. This reminiscence of those long lost days serves as the defence mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflicts. (Neethu 283-84)

Maya keeps thinking about her past and the suggestion of an albino priest (astrologer) keeps disturbing her who told her that either Maya or her husband will die within four years of their marriage. The astrologer's prophecy keeps echoing in her ears like a drum all the time. That's why she feels unhinged.

Another aspect of Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is that Gautama's family has many other themes for discussion such as job, money, bribery, politics, society, but they never talk about love as they do not think it important in their life and so does her husband also. Maya is treated like a toy by her husband and he never develops intimate relationships with her. Maya is unable to have an open discussion with them and she cannot share her deepest feelings with anyone in Gautama's family. That's why she feels lonely. She accepts it to her brother Arjuna also when she says, "Arjuna. I believe I am ill. Something has gone wrong. But in silence only I no longer dared speak aloud. It must be kept a secret. The danger of it, the terrible danger" (Desai 128).

Maya's husband, Gautama, as name denotes, is detached, philosophical, rational and professional. He is unable to fulfil Maya's emotional desires and sexual urges. Desai writes about him, "On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre" (Desai 89).

Another problem was that Maya was an issueless woman and that's why she feels alienated and expects her husband's love and attention all the time. When Maya talks about love, Gautama ignores and treats her like a child. This reminds the readers of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* wherein Nora is also treated like a child by her husband. Maya needs someone with whom she may share her feelings but she has neither mother nor brother or husband with whom she may talk about her problems. She does not want to share her problems with her father. She is in utter dilemma that's why she ponders over her plight:

"Am I gone insane. Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my saviour? I am in need one. 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 98)

Maya's psychological disorder makes her mentally sick and she becomes highly obsessed with things in her life. When the novel opens with the death of her dog Toto, Maya becomes so shocked that she is unable to come out of this grief. Her husband does not pay much attention to it but Maya runs behind the vehicle of the Public Welfare Department which was carrying the dead body of the dog. Gautama is not the least sensitive towards his wife's feelings and he tells it was merely a dog and another dog can also take its place. He tells her to behave like a mature woman, "You are a grown woman now, Maya, no light-headed child. You mustn't allow yourself to grow so upset about these things" (Desai 58). Gautama brings a cat also for Maya, "She was white and had hair like tassels of silk" (Desai 29), but this cat does not take Toto's place in her mind.

Maya is badly entrapped in this marriage and she has no reason to be happy now. She gets neither love nor attention from her husband. Maya starts having nightmares and she feels uneasy and thwarted when peacocks cry for rain. Peacock is generally considered to herald rain. Maya has been compared with the peacock because she also needs the rain of love, attention and belongingness from her husband. She compares herself also with the peacock and feels that she is also thirsty for love. She becomes a love-sick woman who is devoid of her husband's love. Margaret Walters also postulates "if women's rights are not the same as those of man, what are they?" (Walters 42).

Maya's loneliness and alienation becomes the cause of her nervous breakdown and psychological disorder. She starts over thinking over the trifles. Her anxiety level sinks her into depression and the disenchantment goes so deep in her unconscious mind that she fails to maintain the equilibrium of her mind and even murders her husband by pushing him from the terrace of her house. Thus, her obsessions, mood swings and abnormality have been depicted in this novel from psychological perspectives. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly states, "Maya is at once the centre and the circumference of this world. Her sanity—whether she is sane, hysterical or insane fills the whole book and gives it form, as well as life" (Iyengar 468).

In the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya feels helpless by following patriarchal rules, and she becomes so nervous that she kills her husband herself which was the worst decision she takes in her life. It is a psychological novel about the problems of an immigrant woman Maya and her injured psyche. Dr C. Alice Evangaline Jebaselvi also writes about Maya's psychological sufferings, "Cry,

the Peacock is a typically “feminine” novel, a novel of sensibility rather than action. The novel *Cry, the Peacock* portrays the psychological sufferings of Maya, a young protagonist” (Jebaselvi 2). Anita Desai has remained successful in accentuating the female quandary through Maya’s psychological turmoil. In this context, Manu Verma also writes about this novel:

Cry, the Peacock is a psychological novel which involves the study of a hypersensitive, childless, young married woman Maya, who is obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, kills her elderly husband in a fit of anger, goes mad and finally commits suicide. The novel very skilfully reveals Maya’s search for an individual identity. (Verma 91)

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