

Psychoanalytic Exploration of Maya's Mental Disintegration in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract: Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is an unprecedented psychological novel in Indian English literature that explores the emotional and mental disruption of Maya, a sensitive woman trapped in a mismatched marriage. Against the background of patriarchal social norms, the novel presents the distressing effects of loneliness, emotional neglect, superstition, and psychological conflict. The present study aims to look at the psychological causes of Maya's phobia and insanity through a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel. The research adopts a qualitative, descriptive methodology based on close textual analysis, supported by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and relevant critical studies on Anita Desai's fiction. The findings disclose that Maya's obsessive fear of an astrologer's prophecy, emotional isolation from her husband Gautama, father fixation (Electra complex), sexual annoyance, and inability to establish meaningful communication gradually led to hallucinations, schizophrenia-like symptoms, and ultimately the murder of Gautama. The study further demonstrates that Maya's psychological collapse is not merely an individual tragedy but a reflection of the oppressive social and marital structures that deny women emotional fulfillment and identity. It concludes that *Cry, the Peacock* is a profound psychological and feminist critique of patriarchal society, illustrating how emotional isolation, repression, and superstition can terminate in irreparable mental disintegration.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Criticism, Neurosis, Loneliness, Patriarchy, Mental Disintegration

Introduction

Anita Desai is one of the most renowned Indian novelists, transforming Indian English fiction by shifting its focus from external social and political events to the inner emotional and psychological lives of individuals. Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), established her as a leading voice in modern Indian literature, and she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times and received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Fire on the Mountain*. Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, is a story of a young, sensitive girl named Maya, who is obsessed with a childhood prophecy of disaster. Her extreme sensitivity, rendered in terms of immeasurable loneliness, makes Maya, an introvert and favorite daughter of a wealthy artistic father, marry an older man, Gautama. Maya's union with Gautama is likely to ruin each other's life and happiness. What Gautama taught her, she thinks, was pain: There were countless nights when I had been troubled by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much. Gautama is so much older than herself, which accounts for her turning to childhood and lapsing into childhood behavior, as evidenced by her crying and bursting into a fit of furious pillow beating to seek release from the oppressive present. Maya even remarks: The world is like a toy specially made for her, painted in my favorite colors, set moving to her favorite tunes. Further, her neurotic condition has worsened by her recollection of a prediction by an albino astrologer in her childhood.

This ominous prediction leads to all the tragedies in her future life. She, being superstitious, became obsessed. The prediction of an astrologer is itself a superstition which made Maya's life hell obsessed with the albino astrologer's ominous prediction Maya muses: It must be a mark on my forehead, which had been so clear to the opaque eye of the albino astrologer who had detected it, up on which the stars now hurtled themselves vengefully, and which prophesied a relentless and fatal competition between myself and Gautama. I tried to define the mark, give it a name, a locality. Was it an arrow? A coffin? Was it a star? Was it between the eyes? At the temple? Was it dark? Was it pale? And what made the Gods reach out and touch it with their cold fingers, as they considered the prospect of a murder? (Desai 106).

She is aware of her being confined to her private hell: Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment-these were the four walls of her private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain. Her obsession with death, reinforced by the death of her pet dog, plunged her into insanity of which she is uncannily conscious as she herself observes:

Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already. Perhaps it is I who imagine that horoscope, that encounter with the person with albinism, his prediction, my fate? (Desai 108)

This was the first emotional crisis Maya faces, arising at the death of her pet dog, Toto, on whom she has been lavishing all her affection. The opening chapter detailing it reports how Maya was frustrated. First, Maya could not stand the sight of her beloved

dead dog, and she rushes to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes. Maya thinks that "She saw the evil glint of a bluebottle grew hysterical. And grows hysterical and finds the setting sun swelling visibly like a purulent boil. Gautama's casual and unfeeling remarks aggravate her condition: It is all over, come and drink your tea and stop crying. You mustn't cry." (Desai 6) .

Maya is convinced that she is becoming insane as she herself remarks. This is not natural, she told myself; this cannot be natural. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? In her insane condition, she becomes all the more obsessed with death, which makes her think that it was now to be either Gautama or her. Faced with such a terrible choice, she decides that Gautama has to die, as he is detached from and different from what makes life livable. An ever-widening gap in communication between Gautama and Maya is felt in the novel. This led Maya to a psychic condition. Maya muses: Had there been a bond between us? he would have felt its pull... But, of course, there was none... There was no bond, no love-hardly any love. She feels defenseless and utterly in the company of the bleak, comfortless figure passing as her husband. She says:

There were still spaces of darkness in between us, above and around, and it was that which gave the air such weight.... Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke, separation, loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bounds of that single word and its associations... I cried to myself-what is the use? I am alone (Desai 22).

As his grip over herself begins to slacken, she begins to experience hallucinatory visions of lizards and birds copulating in weird settings.

Of lizards, the lizards that come upon you, stalking you silently, up on clawed toes, slipping their clublike tongues in and out, in and out with an audible hiss... They gave you to a pillar of salt which, when it is motionless, they will mount and lash with their slime-dripping tongues, lash and lash again, as they grip you with curled claws, rubbing their cold bellies up on yours, rubbing and grinding, rubbing and grinding. (Desai 127)

Here Maya seems to be a symbolic gratification of the sexual desire which remains unfulfilled in actual life. The image of fighting and mating peacocks, apart from being the central motif of the novel, underlines Maya's sexual frustration too. Several passages in the novel have been developed to portray her disillusionment with sex. At the beginning of the novel itself, Maya makes a frank admission of sexual dissatisfaction born of Gautama's unpardonable negligence.

Gautama's philosophical detachment, his imperviousness to the beautiful yet gaunt, tremulous beauty of the natural world, and his gross ignorance of the basics of life. Of logic to its end, slowly and steadily as a meticulous tortoise. Gautama and Maya's union is likely to ruin each other's life and happiness. What Gautama taught logic to its end, slowly and steadily as a meticulous tortoise? Gautama and Maya's union is likely to ruin each other's life and happiness. What Gautama taught her, she thinks, was pain: there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect,

of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much.

Her obsession drives her to a curious insanity; they continued to live together, and they find their temperaments irreconcilable and their sensibilities marked by divergence. Surprised by Gautama's inability to differentiate between the smell of lemons and petunias, Maya muses

The blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different; of much stronger, crisper character, they seemed cut of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother of pearl, into curving simitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent, too, was more vivid, an astringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxiety, for now, when his companionship was a necessity, I required his closest understanding. (Desai19).

Tremulous beauty of the natural world and his gross ignorance over the basics of life. Gautama would shrug Maya's words off as superfluous, trivial. This gaunt, sarcastically silent intellectual was ever Eager to pursue the thread. What Maya experiences here seems to be a symbolic gratification of the sexual desire that remains unfulfilled in actual life. The image of fighting and mating peacocks, apart from being a central motif of the novel, also underlines Maya's sexual frustration. The memory of her innocent enjoyment of their call in her childhood becomes a foil to her present overcrowded mind, full of bird and animal imagery. A continuous frustration of the body's sexual needs can be disastrous to somebody like Maya, given her fierce instinctual nature. A healthy emotional and sexual life would have given her a sense of security and stopped her psyche from decaying. This view acquires validation from Freud's observation:

Experience shows that women, who, as being the actual vehicles of the sexual interests of humanity, are only endowed in a small measure with the gift of sublimating their instincts, and who... when they are subjected to the disillusionments of marriage fall ill of severe neuroses which permanently darken their lives. (Freud 47).

Freud attributes neurosis of women to sexual dissatisfaction resulting from the rigors of civilized sexual morality. Freud continues: the more strictly a woman has been brought up, and the more sternly she has submitted to the demands of civilization, the more she is afraid of taking this way out; and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty, she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis. Nothing protects her virtue as securely as illness. The more Maya tries to hold on to security, the more poignant becomes her restlessness, the more pathetic becomes her helplessness. Eventually she turns into a person with schizophrenia, and she starts feeling that she is at times a body without a heart, and a heart without a body. Desai captures this desolation of Maya very graphically:

See, I am grown thin, worn. My blouses hang on me; my ring slips off fingers...
I go slowly up the stairs to the roof and then lean over the parapet, gaze into

golden garden and garden of others, their bungalows there are our neighbors and search in this pattern for an order of lines and designs. This symmetry has deserted my own life. (Desai 179)

This sense of desolation leads her to muse. On Death, and subsequently this obsession with death makes her decide it was now to be either Gautama or I. It was Gautama's detachment that came in Maya's involvement. The tragic end of Maya's life is seen in her act of killing her husband. Throughout the novel, Maya suffers from a painful sense of disintegration. She possesses an extremely imaginative, sensitive mind, and she is unable to find someone in whom she can confide. The following lines are most revealing:

Sita suffers from the pangs of loneliness not only of a woman and of a wife but also of a mother. The isolation between Maya and Gautama is brought out by the image of the house, a symbol of animal blindness and apathy to the splendor of nature. Gautama walks very silently on the lawn, for whom Maya speaks: "I strolled with him slowly across the lawn, feeling that an unreal ghost stalked beside me- a body without heart, a heart without body-what was he?" (Desai 196).

There is another incident when Maya recalls: "He taught it pain, for there were countless nights where I have been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation.....so much." (Desai 201). This loneliness made her prone to succumb to other forces wafting across the world of her consciousness. Her imagination gets impregnated with the prophecy of the person with albinism and the myth of the peacock's cry. Maya continuously searches for her father substitutes in her husband, where Gautama proved nothing. The tragedy of Maya's loneliness is due to the Electra complex. This father fixation acted as a catalyst to the material discord. This ultimately made her surrender to superstitions, which precipitated Gautama's death. In this connection, D. S. Maini has pertinently observed that "Desai probes an in-depth analysis of Maya's masochism and Monisha's neurosis" (Maini 54). She is aware of the unseemly consequences, and she is scared of not only society but her own conscience.

It is significant that even before becoming insane, she contemplates murder, as is brought out by her remark that murders are committed "Only for the sake of money, or property-or anything solid, and dirty. Not for love, or life, or basic things. That she should think of it at all suggests her longing for a life of freedom possible only through the death of Gautama, which later becomes accentuated when she receives a letter from her brother, Arjun, informing her of his having 'rebelled' against their father and the socio-cultural tradition that have inhibited the development of his individuality. Ironically enough, her yearning for freedom seems fulfilled by her insanity which drives her to murder her husband. What is 'heard' at the end of the novel is not the shriek which a gruesome murder would cause but "the patter of a child's laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight - a brilliant peacock feather perhaps?" (Desai 218).

Conclusion

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* concludes with the tragic psychological collapse of Maya, whose obsessive fear of death, rooted in an astrologer's prophecy made during her childhood, steadily overwhelms her reason. She is unable to find emotional support or understanding from her rational and detached husband, Gautama, and becomes increasingly isolated and mentally disturbed. In a moment of psychological breakdown, she pushes Gautama from the terrace, causing his death. Soon afterward, unable to cope with the consequences of her actions and completely consumed by madness, Maya also dies, bringing the novel to its tragic end. The conclusion highlights the destructive effects of loneliness, emotional neglect, and psychological instability. Maya's tragedy is not merely the result of fate or prophecy but also of her inability to communicate her fears and Gautama's failure to provide emotional companionship. Desai suggests that emotional isolation can be as devastating as physical suffering. Through this tragic conclusion, Anita Desai emphasizes the importance of empathy, emotional understanding, and psychological well-being, making *Cry, the Peacock* a landmark psychological novel in Indian English literature.

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