

Psychoanalysis of Maya in Desai's *Cry the Peacock*

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Abstract: Anita Desai is really one of the most hilarious contemporary Indian novelists in English. Her novels are based on psychology. Her psychological novels are hailed as purely objective novels. In favour of this term she says, "it has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends on observation than a private vision." Anita Desai has innovated power of writing novels. Her novels are enriched with tradition. Her real concern is only to explore the human psyche. While going through the fiction of Anita Desai what impresses the readers most is the manner how she peels off layer after layer the inner self of her protagonists and places it before the readers in a realistic manner. Many a times the readers get so much involved with these characters that they begin to share their joys and sorrows.

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Anita Desai's first novel "Cry the Peacock" is one of the most poetic novels in English language. The novelist has handled the theme of marital disharmony and anxieties in a skilled manner. The opening of the novel evinces the marital boredom between Maya and her husband Gautama. The story is about Maya's cry for love, fulfillment and emotional security. Maya and Gautama are the opposite poles. Maya is a daughter of wealthy artistic father but she is married to a man who is very senior to her in age. The peacock's cry symbolizes Maya's cries for a life of involvement. In the temperament and nature both are totally opposite. Maya expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both of them are denied her, one by Gautama's cold intellectual attitude and other by his age. Maya's longing for the sensuous enjoyment of life is dampened by liberal doses of the Gita philosophy of non attachment. Her effusive emotionality is always counter balanced by Gautama's analytical mind.

Maya has charm in changing beauty of Nature, in the life of birds and animals but Gautama is dry and prosaic personality. Gautama views "nothing subjectively, nothing with passion" (CTP-150) and she is "flooded with tenderness and gratitude" (CTP-11) when he merely touches her hair, falls "into the soft velvet well of the primordium or original instinct" (CTP-11) when he draws a finger down her cheek and takes to hating her own pretty face for failing to make any impact on him." (CTP-11) She has to thus contend with this cold attitude of her husband. Gautama being an older man Maya fails to communicate with

him. She says, " How little he knew of my misery, or how to comfort metelling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give thought to me either the soft willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed ." (CTP-9) Maya is not able to attract Gautama even in her seductive posture, she is shocked and tells her predicament in the following words: " I turn upon on my side, close to him conscious of the swell of my lips that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded form. His eyes remained blank of appraisal of any response." (CTP-175)

Maya's marriage to Gautama is not out of love but it is based on her father's choice. So there is a great temperamental difference between them. Maya spent a luxurious life in the house of her father but she feels loneliness in the house of Gautama, "as the two have different temperaments, they drift apart through the very process of their living together." (Roy-56) But in the opinion of Gautama, her father is responsible for making Maya a spoilt and a neurotic baby. Maya's father Raisahib unconsciously contributes to the ruining of her psyche. Raisahib is a thorough Brahmin with an unshakable belief in fatalism and he exhorts Maya to accept the bitter facts of life. " If one can do nothing about them, why not accept?" (CTP-54) His fatalism also explains his exaggerated reaction to the albino's prophecy which predicted that in the fourth year of her marriage either Maya or her husband would die. Raisahib has special attachment for Maya because of her mother's death and her submissive nature to his philosophies of life. Maya is all submissive and so he rejoices in her saying that in a daughter he has a treasure. He likes her to be daddy's girl evoking his feelings of protection rather than showing any sign of maturity and independence. While he is much concerned for his son Arjuna's social status. First of all her mother's death in her childhood created a sense of loneliness and it haunts her throughout her life. The growing conflicts between her brother Arjuna and her father creates a sense of fear and insecurity in her. She does not mix in the company of her friends and she gives up her playing with them. After her marriage her fear increases.

The conjugal love of Maya and Gautama is based on Hindu culture. In Gautama's family , " one did not speak of love far less of affection." So naturally she feels lonely and dejected. Gautama's life style and circumstances are just opposite of Raisahib's family. Raisahib thinks that a person of such mature age and understanding will just fit into his own shoes and give the protection to Maya like him. Maya hopes to prolong the relationship with her father in the same spirit as in the past as she clearly perceives that Gautama can never play the father for her. When Maya feels lonely she desires to get the company of her father and his pleasing words. It is true that she is neurotic and over sensitive woman who always fears of Death, Loneliness and Destruction. Maya fails to cope with the intellectual bent of mind of Gautama so she withdraws to the inner world of her mind and is always haunted by her childhood's memories. She always remains upset due to her mental loneliness. ' I am alone, I was alone', always cries the poor soul of Maya throughout the

novel. To a large extent Maya's subjective and emotionally vulnerable self is fairly responsible for her misery. The tragedy with Maya appears to be emerging from the fact that she not only wants to live but wants to live happily and is not ready to accept the woes of life. Maya is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with the gloomy prophecy of the albino astrologer. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. Obeying her father's wishes Maya keeps this prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautama enters the fourth year. Her fear is triggered off by the death of her pet dog Toto. She is unable to bear the death of her pet dog, she is physically exhausted and mentally disturbed and emotionally shattered. After doing the needful for the disposal of Toto's dead body Gautama tells Maya very casually : " It is all over.....come and drink your tea and stop crying. You must not cry". (CTP-6) It is a superstitious belief that neurotic people, in the full moon night, lose control over themselves. Maya's madness in the summer full moon light is the correct example of it. Maya has special charm for the window that is like a mirror for her. She says, " the mirror that reflects the window, I saw no rain, no clouded sky, no promise, no sweetness but only the summer heat, the summer sky...." (CTP-24) Maya's loneliness and neurotic nature develops fascination in her for Nature.

Maya's longing for Gautama to share her response to the beauty of starlit night finds no response but one of phlegmatic practicality : ' they are so bright tonight, I pleaded' Well, I hope bright enough to spot a fly if it falls into my dinner.' (CTP-24) She wishes for sensuous enjoyment of life and therefore prizes her attachment to sense objects sometimes against the dictates of her ego. " I don't care to detach myself into another world than this" (CTP-117). Maya is so much attached towards peacocks that she says, ' Peacocks are wise' : " In the shadows I saw peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing steadily, unwinkingly upon the final truth-Death." (CTP-215)

But gradually the circumstances take another turn. Maya is constantly tortured with the prediction of astrologer. At this time she wants to get complete love, solace and support from her husband. Maya never tells this thing to Gautama but she is unable to bear this horror of secret. In this way Maya is confused and does not know what to do? There is lack of communication between husband and wife which results in inner suffering. Being intensely in love for life her attachment assumes pathological dimension and she fails to understand the real nature of love propounded in Gita. Attachment for her is love and her life has always been full and when, according to the albino astrologer's prophecy, one of them has to die, it is obviously Gautama because he does not love life. "It has to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn't really matter. He didn't care, And, I did." (CTP-215-216) Being intensely in love with life she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death. "Am I gone Insane? Father: Brother: Husband : who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am

dying.”(CTP-98) Discontented with her present circumstances, always absorbed in the roots of her protected, self complacent childhood, she fails to appreciate the changes in her life. Gautama too feels irritated at her behaviour and temperament . He often tells Maya: “Neurotic, that's what you are.....A spoilt baby, So spoilt she can't bear one adverse word Everyone must bring a present for little Maya That is what her father taught her” (CTP-115) The words like Fate, stars, destiny, life, pain, fear and death hover throughout the atmosphere of the novel and the descriptions of the world of Nature speak of Maya's insatiable love for life. The fear of Death, destruction and annihilation keep on haunting her mind till the end. Finally Maya discovered: “ For now I knew my destiny. It was annihilation. Annihilation...” (CTP-102)

Such intense moments of introspection are followed by utter silence and Maya feels herself disjointed. She finds : “My body detach itself ... and Float away, to rest upon the dim mirror where I could gaze upon it from a cool distance.”(CTP-105) The sense of loneliness too tortures her constantly : “ trains passing in the night, I cannot bear to hear them. They all leave me behind alone.” (CTP-164) The novelist uses the stream of consciousness to explain the cause and the growth of her frustration. Desai portrays the character of Maya in a very mysterious manner. When the novel opens we find Maya's marriage with Gautama is running in the fourth year and Maya's agonies increase due to a prophecy. The beginning and the end of the novel are linked together with the events of death and the middle forms and unfolds the rising conflict due to the clash between the past and the present. Recalling the past at a moment , Maya feels certain of the prophecy:

I was aware of a great, dead silence in which My eyes opened to a vision that appeared through the curtains of the years, one by one
Falling back till I saw again that shadow.... it was, I remembered it
now, Fate. (28)

Contrary to Maya , Gautama has mechanical attitude towards life. It creates bitterness in the heart of Maya and Gautama's detachment makes her suffer too much. Maya tries her best to show her love to Gautama. But Gautama treats her as a child , a light headed woman who is not self confident. Her longing for sexual desire is not fulfilled. She says, “Smiling with pleasure at the through of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the care of the female papaya tree and twine about her slain trunk and the firm wax petal led blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the Male... Besides if I could feel pleasure in contemplation of the male papaya how much more food for delight in this male companion surely.” (CTP-186). Shanta Krishna Swami remarks about this relationship, “ Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of husbanding her in his traditional masculine role.”(qtd in Helicon View,P-184) Gautama runs into problems with Maya when he tries to put his philosophies into practice. He scrupulously maintains non attachment and distance as, what seems to Maya , 'the part of a pattern' (CTP-194) and she feels slighted and hurt by it all the time. While shrinking from physical contact he lives in a world where ' there are vast areas to which

Maya never quite gains access' (CTP-104). On the death of the pet dog he does not understand why she should grieve so much at the "moment of the disappearance of an attachment" (17). What surprises and intrigues him is that Maya used to study the Gita "ferociously, every night" (111) but has been practising what the book preaches against. But, as can be expected, he does not allow himself to be disturbed. He takes it in his stride and tries to reason with her: "you are a grown woman now, Maya, no light headed child. You must not allow yourself to grow so painfully involved". (67) He exhorts her to understand the Gita and warns her of the consequences of not doing so.

Maya does see his words as constituting "a mass of Rock, a large and steadfast rock high and dry in middle of a tossing sea" (120) but for only a split second. The next minute her earth bound nature asserts itself. She is soon accusing Gautama of being, ironically enough, "so flimsily attached to the world of solids and riches, so ill defended against it" (200). It is therefore natural that when these diametrically opposed human natures, in terms of the Gita dynamics of attachment (Maya) and non attachment (Karmayoga) are bound in marital relationship it should result in friction-both ideological and psychological. To escape all these, she wants to go and visit the Kathakali troupe of dancers but Gautama coldly tells her to wait till they come to Delhi for performance. She likes to go to the hills to escape the summer loo but Gautama remains busy and is never perturbed by the scorching heat around. Maya is so passionate for him that she tells: "Because when you are away from me, I want you. Because I insist on being with you being allowed to touch you and know you. You cant bear it. Can you? No – you are afraid." (164) The symbol of the crying peacock has a significant role in this fiction. While traveling through the corridors of the time mentally and fluctuating between the past and the present, Maya is always reminded of peacock's tragic experience of life and death. She used to see in her childhood the magnificent peacocks with hundreds of eyes on their tails dancing frantically during the monsoon season. Now Maya can recall and compare their dance with the dance of Shiva – the dance of Death. They appear to have the knowledge of both life and death while living they are aware of Death and dying they are in love with life. Their wild calls in search of their mates, their physical fights before making love, all haunt Maya passionately. At one level Maya and Peacock become one. Like peacock, Maya cries for love: "you don't understand..., ...you don't understand" (145). Always pining for love and fulfillment Maya merely receives the agony of cold distance and dissatisfaction. While remembering the crying peacocks Maya tells us: "I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine." (CTP-97) Thus unable to assert her point of view in any significant way and having to put up with constant hurts to her feminine pride Maya becomes desperate. Yet at a deep psychological level she gains some ground.

Through the character of Maya the novelist has depicted the problem of existential suffering caused by loneliness. Maya pines for love day by day and being frustrated by her loneliness she thinks that it is the warning of

some calamity that is about to happen. The world of Gautama is in seclusion when Maya tries to get entry in to his world, he does not permit her. Thus Maya cannot find her existence in her family of Gautama. She says "His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me, talk and talking reveal myself. It is that –my loneliness in this house." (212) Under the circumstances, Maya can hardly maintain the balance of her mind. Maya's increasing inwardness and ever receding contact with the outside world push her towards the final disintegration of her psyche. Her growing insanity forces her to kill her husband, since her husband does not love life, he does not have the right to live. In a moment of madness she throws Gautama off the terrace and then tells her mother-in-law the truth with a childlike innocence.

Anita Desai has beautifully handled the difficult subject of a dis-integrating personality with a stylistic deliberation. She stated in an interview: "It is not only an individual psychology that I am pursuing when I write. I am interested in language, in prose style in aligning words to experiences and images." (Libert-52. qtd. In *Feminist consciousness in Indian women writers*). In *Cry the peacock* narrative form, language, syntax become an integral part of the exploration of an individual psyche. In part second of the novel the novelist has made a felicitous choice in placing the account of Maya's deteriorating mental condition. As Darshan Singh comments, "the protracted agony of a lacerated psyche could be best rendered through her own consciousness and in her own idiom." (qtd. In *Feminist consciousness in Indian women writers*) In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai denied any extensive study of psychology but her deep interest in the worlds of human psyche that has brought her in tune with contemporary theories. This is the skill of Desai that Maya's hyper-sensitivity is made clear from the very beginning of the novel. Maya suffers from a sense of inadequacy in all the three levels of psychological needs defined by Maslow. Her father's over weening control has installed in her a great deal of fear and fatalism that is why astrologer's prophecy takes such fearful shape. It is the non fulfillment of esteem needs that exerts the greatest psychological pressure, for it denies Maya that self respect essential for the growth of human personality. An acute sense of loneliness, an absence of communication and a lack of self esteem acts powerfully on Maya's sensibilities; unable to cope with the pressures, she retreats into a self enclosed mental world. Maya's fantasy world is one of nightmarish fears filled with horrifying images and deafening noise. Rats, snakes and albino's astrologers infest her world while all the while, reverberating through her blood, is the ominous sound of drums. The feverish quality of the prose, the gush of images powerfully convey Maya's mental disintegration. The description of the dust storm takes on a realistic quality: "for all the while the heat was oozing into the room, pouring in like thick warm oil ... a presence that passed against one's body, strangled one in great virulent arms." (CTP-182) As the storm breaks she exults in its wild frenzy, for it is an externalization of her great emotional upheaval. "it revolved around me,

about me, was mine, mine this life was mine.” (182) She runs from window to window yearning to let the storm into the room. In a revealing statement she longs “to send the whole card house toppling... leaving a great space of light and freedom in which to dance round and round” (190).

To add to her problems stemming from inactivity she remains childless. The birth of a child would have given her a sense of achievement and her creative urge would have got focused on a helplessly dependent human being instead of getting diffused over nature and spread outside human interest. Three plus years of married life and the prospect of a passionless and unchallenging life for the next forty or fifty years during which she would continue to be obedient to her husband and face neither choices nor challenges, comes as a shocking revelation to her hyperactive mind. Her repeated confession that she or Gautama will have to go. And the focal point of her thought, day in and day out becomes the albino's prophecy which appears to justify and dramatise her wish. But she allows herself considerable time before she does anything drastic. All through the novel she keeps her wish hidden in her unconscious but as a neurotic she is still aware of the moral sanctions against such wishes. Although Desai's sympathies as a writer are with Maya, she maintains a distance from her character so that the reader is able to see the character in all its complexities and richness. Thus Anita Desai has presented Maya as a neurotic character who is growing in the conflict of her identity. Maya is extremely instinctive. The chief cause behind her mental tension is her deep awareness of her alienated and estranged self in her own house. Her joys and sorrows are not shared at all. Her expectations to get emotional and cardinal desires fulfilled, are extinguished by the cold attitude of her husband Gautama. Sex is the source of increasing pleasure in life of husband and wife but because of the age difference and Gautama's rigid attitude, Maya becomes frustrated. Maya thinks that there is nothing significant in her life. Her life seems to her as an endless tedium. The avoidance of her husband and the restrictions of the family make her life suffocating. All these factors contribute to her mental and emotional instability. Another fact that we realize is that the childhood memories and past experiences also keep on haunting Maya's mind and further increase her mental tension. What gives rise to the mental conflict is Maya's realization of an unending chain of past and present and future which is closely linked with the chain of introductions- involvements- attachments and then disintegrations.

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