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## **The Domestic Despair and the Demonic Gaze: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Exegesis of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock***

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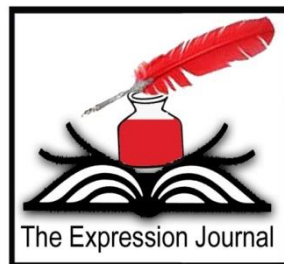
### **Abstract**

Anita Desai is a pioneering feminist Indian novelist who meticulously depicts the psychological problems of her female characters. Her novels are replete with women's suffering and social realism, as the veritable pathos of women's conditions has been depicted by her. Her characters are hypersensitive and emotionally fragile, and they are not able to cope with adverse conditions. They get affected by the complex web of their desires, which becomes a sanctuary and a prison. Desai has lucidly depicted that the breakdown of communication becomes the main cause of their suffering; patriarchal structures and a chasm of understanding lead to their existential crisis. She has depicted her women characters as very alienated and introverted. They are the victims of emotional neglect. Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* is the same type of novel in which Gautama is the symbol of logic and pragmatism, while his wife Maya represents ephemeral illusion and imagination. Gautama believes in real life, while Maya believes in a reel (ideal) life. They are not able to bridge this gap, which causes psychological distress in Maya's mind that culminates in tragedy. This paper is an attempt to offer a psychoanalytic feminist exegesis of Anita Desai's novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, examining how the protagonist, Maya, turns mad when her husband Gautama shows an apathetic demeanor toward her, creating a psychological prison in her mind due to which she suffers from hallucinations, anxiety, and strange obsessions. This paper further explores the insidious psychological violence inherent in our society and the domestic despair on the female psyche that can, when left unaddressed, assume catastrophic dimensions.

### **Keywords**

Anita Desai, *Cry, The Peacock*, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Gender Dynamics, Patriarchy, Domestic Despair, Maya, Alienation, Mental Health, Despair, Trauma.

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Anita Desai was born as Anita Mazumdar on 24 June 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She is a distinguished Indian novelist and a short story writer. She had a unique bicultural background at her home because her mother, Toni Nime, was German, and her father, D. N. Mazumdar, was Bengali. It influenced her life, and she started speaking German, Hindi, and English. She attended Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and earned her Bachelor of Arts in English literature from Miranda House at the University of Delhi in 1957. She began her literary career with the publication of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963).

Anita Desai is well-known for her psychological fiction and the tragic experiences of her women characters in the patriarchal society. Her other novels are *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Apart from her novels, she has written a short story collection, *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978), and a children's book, *The Village by the Sea* (1982). Dr. C. Ramya writes about Anita Desai's themes, "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" (26).

Her daughter, Kiran Desai, is also a well-established novelist who has won the Booker Prize for her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Anita Desai has received numerous awards and accolades for her literary contributions. Her novel *Fire on the Mountain* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978. She was also awarded the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize in 1983 for *The Village by the Sea*. She was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize for the novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). She has been conferred with the Padma Bhushan for her contribution to English literature in 2014. She also has been an honorary fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has taught at very prestigious institutions like Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, and the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is now an Emeritus Professor at MIT, Massachusetts. Anita Desai's novels are different from other male novelists.

Selden writes in his book *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature* that there is a difference in themes between men and women writers, "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" (147).

A woman who doesn't receive support from her partner, family, or society tends to suppress her emotions. She begins to feel that her emotions are insignificant, leading to internal suffering. This situation can push her into a deep abyss of self-doubt and despair. At times, these feelings become so overwhelming that she may contemplate self-harm. Sometimes this effect can also be seen not only on the woman's mental health but also on her social and physical well-being. Sometimes these things also come out in the form of insomnia, fatigue, and restlessness. Such women may resist openly or silently. Their open revolt remains a threat to patriarchal society, but their secret plans sometimes result in catastrophe. Anita Desai has written such a character, Maya, in her novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) who silently plans to kill her husband and finally kills him.

Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a landmark in Indian writing in English. It deals with women's thinking and their mentality. It is famous for its deep psychological insight. This novel deals with the complex themes of how the mental trauma of a woman can be so dangerous. Maya is not a sensitive woman; she is also a symbol of the inner layers of a woman's mind, showing how she is gripped by marginalization in patriarchal society. Through the character of Maya, Anita Desai narrates the existential crisis of many married women. Maya is the representative of all the women who face the problem of alienation and insecurity in their home. Maya was pampered and protected in her parental house. Her father, Rai Sahib, provided her all the comforts. He fulfilled Maya's all reasonable and even baseless desires.

Maya starts thinking that this world is like a toy created just to make her happy. The novelist has written about it in the following words, "The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes" (41). Maya's father was a rich and liberal man who kept her aloof from the harsh reality of human life. This excessively safe environment also gives her a delicate and emotional personality. It becomes a cause of many problems in her life. This overprotected work functions like a gilded cage. She is not able to know about the wickedness of the world. She becomes highly sensitive and overreactive in her approach. Even minor problems make her tense and this childhood influence also helps shape her future. Nynu V. Jamal remarks in the paper "The Gendered Malaise in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*," "Maya is a victim of emotional as well as physical depression" (6).

Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* is a deep analysis of Maya's mental turmoil. The death of her pet dog, Toto, brings a storm into her life. This novel begins with Toto's death. It is hot April, and Toto's dead body torments Maya to a great extent. She gets badly shattered; she screams, runs, and tries to evade this grief but remains unsuccessful in her efforts. She waits for her husband and thinks that he will help her overcome this grief. But when Gautama comes, he shows no emotionalism over the death of the pet dog. He has been depicted as a pragmatic and logical man. He



immediately makes arrangements to get Toto's dead body and returns to his daily routine. "Gautama rose immediately, ordering tea to be sent to the study, forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" (9). But Maya is so distressed over the loss of her pet dog that she runs after the vehicle of the Public Welfare Department, which was carrying the dead body of her dog. "She was white and had hair like tassels of silk" (29). He does not even care for Maya's emotionalism for the loss of her dog. Gautam's indifference toward her makes her more alienated and depressed. Though Gautama brings a cat to cheer up her mood, Maya thinks that the cat cannot take Toto's place.

Maya thinks that her husband, Gautam, is not emotionally attached to her. She feels isolated. Even her name, Maya, stands for illusion and worldly traps. It means she is engrossed in worldly pleasures and is in the pursuit of money and luxury, while her husband, Gautam, stands for spirituality and enlightenment. There is a big difference in their age as Gautama is almost double her age. He is her father's friend and almost of her father's age. In this way, Anita Desai has depicted both Maya and Gautama as metaphorical characters who belong to two distinct age groups, and that is why their mentality does not match. She blames her husband for his money-mindedness, rationality and grossness. Anita Desai writes about Maya's mental condition, "...it's always money or property—never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exciting things like that—not for love or life basic things—like Toto dying" (24).

After her marriage, Maya's life is completely changed. Gautama is not able to understand her emotional needs and calls her worries for the trivial matters baseless. He wants to discuss with her on legal and logical matters and avoids talking on love and affection. Anita Desai writes about it, "On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre" (89). Maya thinks that Gautama may give her love like her father, but Gautama fails to do so. They live in a house with two distinct people where the wife is lost in the world of emotionalism and imagination, while the husband lives in the world of reality and logic. Gautama thinks that Maya should not behave like a child and she gets emotional like a child. He rejects her, calling her naive and innocent. He suggests that she be a mature woman, and ultimately when he notices no change in her behaviour, he starts taking less interest in her. But Maya insists he love her like her father did to her. That's why she says, "Love me as my father does" (46).

Gautam's this type of attitude makes Maya more isolated and aloof from her husband. She is not able to share her emotional turmoils with anyone and gradually becomes trapped in the prison of her illogical and baseless thoughts. She gets frustrated when instead of loving her, Gautama suggests her to show maturity, "You are a grown woman now, Maya, no light-headed child. You mustn't allow yourself to grow so upset about these things" (58).

Maya has an existential crisis and even a dread of death due to a fortuneteller's prophecy who tells her that either she or her husband will die within four years of their marriage. She becomes quite worried to think about this prophecy. It sows the seeds of deep fear in her mind and this prophecy gets embedded in her subconscious mind and she is not able to live a normal life. All the time she thinks that she will die and this problem results in the form of her mental sickness which alludes her from reality. This is not the fear of death alone, this is fear of being left alone and becoming non-existent. She asks herself, "Am I going crazy? Father, brother, husband. Who is my saviour? I need one. I am dying, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I will never sleep again. There is

no rest now. Only death and waiting" (98). Loveless life, loss of her dog, and despair, all these factors lead Maya to mental instability. She got so much love from her father but now she thinks that her husband is not understanding her. This new plight makes her mentally unstable which increases her sense of emptiness. Negative thoughts overpower her.

Maya is also deeply affected by the natural signals. She feels deep attachment with the natural things such as peacocks, monkeys, and dogs. The cry of a peacock is also a symbol in this novel. She compares herself to a she-peacock who hankers for her life partner's love. "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel" (Brontë 95). Whenever she hears the cry of a peacock, her own grief gets doubled. A peacock longs for rain and cries. Likewise, Maya also expects the shower of love, care, and attention from her husband. She becomes sorrowful to think about Gautam's detachment with her. The peacock's dance and cry make her restless. All these things show the state of her inner mind. Maya's attachment with natural things shows that she is close to nature but not to her life partner, which further aggravates her condition.

All these things become the cause of her mental decline and take her towards psychosis. Her depression, loneliness, and fear of death turned her depressed. She is always lost in her emotions. Her husband's past and present intertwine. Her father's death and her husband's detachment make her completely broken and thwarted. She starts living in a world of her own fantasy and fears. It makes her psychologically thwarted. Dr. C. Alice Evangeline Jebaselvi writes that, "The novel *Cry, the Peacock* portrays the psychological sufferings of Maya, a young protagonist" (2).

She gets so emotional that she kills her husband Gautam. There is a strange thing that it does not look like an impulsive act to her; it was the result of her mental illness. It was a distorted attempt to find liberation from the patriarchal powers. She takes it as a way to get rid of all the problems of her life in a single jolt and assert her identity. Baljit Kaur Dhaliwal also writes in the paper "Feminism in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*," "*Cry, The Peacock* is a story of a highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative woman told by a woman novelist. Maya is shown to be fast disintegrating under the pressures of marital discord" (2).

Thus, Maya's character is a reflection of a modern woman who wants no hindrances in her personal life. She is a psycho woman who does not understand the reality of life. Her immaturity and over-emotionalism become the cause of this tragedy and make her a widow. Shuvabrata Basu writes that Anita Desai's novels are based on the theme of the psychology of her women characters, "Desai concentrates primarily on the psychology of the characters" (166).

She is a character who lives in a world where emotions and pleasures are crushed by patriarchy, logic, and materialism. Through the character of Maya, Anita Desai has tried to show that sometimes excessive safety and lack of emotional attachment can hollow a person from within. Her character makes the readers think that this logical world needs money and materialism, and here there is no place for emotionalism. Maya is a woman who is trapped in her own trials and tribulations. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* narrates the terrifying journey of a woman, Maya, whose inner world is quite distinct from that of her husband, and that's why their marriage culminates in a disastrous ending.

Human life is a complex web of emotions in which love, care, cooperation, and respect are the main things. These emotions not only give us confidence to move forward but also give us an identity. When a married woman does not get love and cooperation from her husband, her life is filled with a void that breaks her mentally, physically, and emotionally. She sometimes is gripped in depression and anxiety. The lack of love and cooperation makes her feel insecure and also erodes her self-confidence. She starts suppressing her emotions, which pushes her into the abyss of self-doubt. This situation also results in social and physical harm. Neethu P. writes about this novel, "In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai highlights the problems emanating from the 'misfit marriage'" (284).

Maya's psychological fallout and her isolation distort her mental condition. She becomes very obsessive over trivial matters and gets angry. When her expectations are not fulfilled, she sinks into depression. She gets nervous and thinks that she has no way out now. When she is at the peak of her nervousness and mental turmoil, she pushes her husband off the roof and kills him. This tragedy indicates that Maya loses her mental equipoise, as no good woman would like to go to that extreme step of killing her own husband. It was an impulsive act that shows her mood swings and abnormal behaviour.

Conclusively, it can be stated that Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is a tragic story of a woman, Maya, whose childish expectations from her husband make her depressed when her husband, Gautam, considers her love and emotions baseless. She does not get any emotional support from her husband, which is why her emotionalism becomes her affliction. Her emotionally distant husband exacerbates her mental condition. Consequently, Maya sinks into depression and psychological alienation. Her ultimate act of killing her husband is an attempt to break free from a system that suffocates her. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Her mental condition—whether sane, violent or insane—fills the entire book and gives it form and life" (468). Anita Desai has depicted how a woman's mental turmoil and her emotionalism can destroy even a happy family if she is not loved and regarded in the family. Men's false ego and over-rationality make women revolt against them, and Maya is a perfect example, who even kills her husband in order to gain her independence. Thus, this novel is a poignant exploration of the complexities of a woman's psyche, showing how societal pressures and patriarchal restrictions cannot prevent her from her liberation. Manu Verma holds the view that it is a psychological 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. (91)

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