

## Nature of Reality in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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### Abstract

*Cry, the Peacock* is a 1963 novel by the Indian author Anita Desai. It is her debut novel and is a classic of modern Indian literature. The novel tells the story of Maya, a young woman who is trapped in a loveless marriage and is haunted by a prophecy of doom. Maya's inner turmoil intensifies as she struggles to balance her loyalty to her husband with her growing feelings for Ram. She becomes increasingly obsessed with the prophecy of her death, and her mental state begins to deteriorate. *Cry, the Peacock* is a complex and psychologically rich novel that explores themes such as love, loss, identity, and the nature of reality. It is a beautifully written and moving story of a woman's struggle to find her own voice and to come to terms with her own mortality. The present paper makes an attempt to study Goutama as a victim of death on account of his wife Maya's neurosis.

Key words: Turmoil, neurosis, prophecy, deteriorate.

### Introduction

Gender is viewed as a culturally imposed role and is different from sex, which is biologically determined. The present day feminist thought is pro-woman, but the stance need not mean that it should be anti-man. Ancient Indian thought is predominantly metaphysical i.e., attaining truth or reality. Human personality is regarded as a composite of many planes with soul or *atman* as its supreme centre. This soul or *atman* is sexless distinction which has no gender discrimination. The quest for the spirit is open to all without implying superiority or inferiority. An institution like marriage is not just social but also cultural and ultimately spiritual. In actual social organization, marriage has not been looked upon as a subordination of one to the other but a common pursuit of elevating *dharma*, thus wife is referred as *sahadhrmini*. This common goal enables them to perceive the soul in the body and experience the secret of a profound spiritual communion.

It is said that *Yatra naryastu pujiyate; ramanti tatra devatah*, the gods themselves place where woman is worshipped, woman, so indispensable to man's life, an advisor in work, a slave in service, a partner in noble deeds, an earth in tolerance, a mother in affection, a harlot in bed, and a friend in enjoyment. In general woman was the fulcrum of the family, the preserver of the culture. Thus man was dependent on woman for his stability. This dichotomizing of the spheres of activity crystallized into appalling dogmas. The feminists of India have come to regard Manu as a misogynist. The other statements he makes in the course of the text on the need to treat women with care and respect, reveal a solicitude which has not received much attention. The protective attitude to women in course of time degenerated into an attitude of superiority, forcing society to regard woman as the 'weaker sex'. On the other hand what it means to be a man is a significantly difficult undertaking because masculinity is not a neutral site of critical discourse. The history of masculinity is inherently bound to the history of gender in equality, patriarchy and the exploitation of both men and women. As a critical subject masculinity cannot, and should not be excused from misogyny and violence that have historically accompanied individual and cultural expressions of manhood and what it meant to be a man. The term "masculinity" itself presupposes a single, fixed standard of referential criteria for the identification of the masculine self.

Historically definitions of masculinity have been grounded in their difference and opposition of feminism. In the most simplified of terms, to be a man has traditionally meant not to be a woman. This distinction is of course fraught with gender based ideological constraints that demand the "natural" subjugation of women as conditional for the maintenance of the patriarchal social structures. Great art is neutral and transcends the specifics of sex and race. All texts are not feminist texts even when written by women. Anita Desai is one such novelist with considerable merit in enriching the Indian novel in English. She was born in 1937 to a German mother and a Bengali father. Her mixed parentage of two cultures at home contributed a great deal to fertilize her creative imagination in crystallizing the maturity of her vision. Her predominant interests are social and sociological. She attributes some of the diversity of her fictional characters to having lived among a mix of Hindu, Muslim and Christian neighbors while growing up. She excels in delineating human relationships. The predicament of the man is in fact, Anita Desai's predominant interest. As a

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young woman when she started writing she was influenced by the writers like Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence and E.M.Forster who were her role models. She revered the Russian writers Chekov Dostovsky. In an interview given to Magda Costa in 2001 in Barcelona, Desai admits the fact that she feels suffocated by limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation. She says that she very deliberately opened the doors to widen the canvas and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because she felt they had a wider experience of the world so that she could address a greater variety of experiences. This interview was after 45 years of publishing her debut novel *Cry, The Peacock*. In fact the novel broke new ground in Indian English fiction as a trend setter in 1963 itself. Another critic named Raj Gopal has said that “The inner most psyche of her protagonists is revealed to us through their interaction with those who are emotionally related to them on the basis of kinship. For the purposes of fiction, no human relationship is more fertile and potential than that in the family and especially among the kins.” (46)

### **Maya’s disappointment**

The story is all about a young girl Maya, obsessed by a childhood prophecy disaster. The novelist builds up an atmosphere of tension as torrid and oppressive as a stifling Indian summer both in the crowded, colorful cities and strangely beautiful countryside. Desai has dealt with a sterile woman, highly sensitive and emotional, who is married to Goutama, a promising, prosperous and busy practitioner of Law. Critics have attributed Goutama’s character with many adjectives like insensitive, unsympathetic, unpardonable, cold, indifferent, uncommunicative and also as a misogynist. However the present paper makes a sincere attempt to glorify Goutama’s male agony with relevant evidences from the novel. In this context it is necessary to focus on the novelist’s selection of names of the characters and also the significance of the bird peacock. Goutama’s name evokes the reputed saint Goutama Buddha who shunned physical pleasures of life to attain *nirvana*. Goutama always viewed nothing subjectively and passionately and always looked like Buddha to whom physical pleasures of life are of no value. His strict adherence to profession leaves no room for Maya’s fulfillment of physical and emotional urges. His self-discipline and firmness in attitude has sharpened him look like a yogi. Gouthama preaches of detachment based on the Bhagavad-Gita. He is of the view that attachment is the root cause of all evils, as it breeds longing

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anger, delusion, delusion in turn results in loss of memory, loss of memory leads to ruin of discriminating faculty which further leads one to eventual death; precisely attachment is fatal.

Maya in has multiple meanings within Hindu coded context. The word refers to the concepts of “illusion”. Maya is the principal concept which manifests, perpetuates and governs the illusion and dream of reality in the phenomenal universe. The word of Maya is derived from the Sanskrit root of ‘ma’ means “not” and ‘ya’ meaning “that”. Maya symbolizes illusion. Commenting about Maya and Goutama, Rajeshwar Mittapalli considers Maya as a creature of instinct who has not only failed to transcend her maya but also lose the sense of distinction between proper and improper ultimately becoming a slave to her animal instincts. Hefurther says that,in Gita scheme of things, a person living in maya is not happy In Greek, and Roman mythology, the peacock is considered much like the evil eye. Peacock’s scream was said to be evil in European lore. Peacock is considered sacred which is associated with Japanese and Chinese Goddesses of mercy. In the Buddhist tradition, the peacock’s ability to eat poisonous snakes can be understoodas a symbol of the transmutation of evil into good. In some Islamic traditions, ithas been portrayed as the greater at the gates of the paradise. In ancient Persian texts the peacock represents eternal life. The early Christians praised the many “eyes” in its feathers as signs of the seeing God. The later Christian generations started to regard the peacock as a symbol of vanity. They considered the message that just like the beautiful peacock considers its own feet ugly so also humans should also take their own imperfections no matter how great their worldly gloryis.

Based on mythological and archetypal images in the symbols of this novel explores the hidden and dormant impulses of Maya’s psyche. Though Goutama is a faithful husband who takes care of Maya and loves her in his own way yet Maya is never satisfied and happy. She feels that Goutama never cares for her and does not have any feelings for her. To an ordinary reader, the novel gives an impression of the marital incompatibility and unhappy conjugal life. The novel begins with death of Maya’s pet dog Toto. Though Goutama is late from his office, he makes necessary arrangements for the cremation of the pet dog Toto quickly and quietly. He telephones the public works department to send a scavenging truck to take the dead dog away with utmost care. He insists, ‘Yes, Yes bed too’ (1). After the trucks departure Goutama comforts Maya by offering tea and tries to ease her by saying “It is all

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over”(1). He tells that she mustn’t cry and further says, “Maya”, he said patiently. “Do sit down. You look so not and worn out. You need a cup of tea”(9). In the process of consoling her he says that he would bring another dog for her which does not mean that he takes the event easy. He is quite philosophical in educating Maya to reconcile with the reality of Toto’s death. In Goutama’s words, “ You cannot understand that reality and idealism are one and the same. Life is not matter of distinguishing between the two, but of reconciling them. But, in such matters we are all opsimaths, and one day you shall learn that these ideals eventually resolve themselves into realities one has known all one’s life and spurned perhaps (Desai 1980 23).

Goutama, in the process of making her relaxed proposes to go to Darjeeling for a change of mood and place. However, she opts Travancore, Cochin, Mysore and Malabar as she is genuinely interested in Kathakali dance, ballet etc. In a reply he suggests her to wait till Kathakali troupe comes to give performance in Delhi as it will be less expensive. Goutama is very good at convincing Maya and exhibits a lot of patience in gossiping with her in the verandah.

A lively conversation is when they talk about orchids, “well, that atleast must have been a bright spot in the depressing evening he said, smiling a little, slowly and indulgently. In reply Maya says that orchids never bloom to which Goutama starts to laugh and says, “So it was one long stretch of unrevealed gloom! Poor, poor, Maya. And I thought I was doing you a favour by taking you out an evening. I hardly ever do these days.” (ibid 65). Goutama shares his experiences in the court with Maya, “I was in the courts all day- its so stuffy and dark in there, heaven knows when the new courts will be completed, and if they’ll be any better. I don’t know (ibid 162). It is unjust to blame Goutama for Maya’s neurotic behaviour. Her emotional crisis has many reasons like her childhood without maternal love. The main reason of her neurotic behaviour is her encounter with an albino in the temple and his foretelling of the death of her husband. After her marriage with Goutama she desperately wishes to have children and also aspires for love and life. His strict adherence to profession leaves no room for Maya’s fulfillment of emotional urges. He is always busy attending his clients and money making. Moreover Goutama’s age and his attitude to sex remain intractable difficulty to her. His sensible suggestion that the sight of pregnancy should not reduce one to tears (ibid 56-57)

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makes her “jump to learn over the bedstead” (ibid 57) and throws back her head to scream at his. He says “I don’t even understand what you are working yourself up over” (ibid 57). Goutama pacifies her by saying, “You are a grown woman now, Maya, no light headed child. You mustn’t allow yourself to grow upset. What if they live in a grubby house? What if she is pregnant again?”(ibid 58). Later on Goutama analyses that it is nothing but her father’s pampering in which made things different in her adulthood. From Gita he advises her to remain detached. He notices the symptoms of Maya’s imbalanced mental status. Her meaningless waiting for the postman confirms Goutama’s conviction about her neurosis. He says, “Why? Who is going to write you” for which she shouts in reply: “No body” (ibid 111).

Further, Goutama is mystified at the thought of death in Maya’s words. Dropping down her rings of red rubies she asks Goutama what death means to him. He thinks why Maya should give such a thought. He feels it is a definitely new trend in her. He says “You have grown very thoughtful. When she gets intensely disturbed, he sits by her side, nursing her as best as he can (ibid 146).

According to fortune predictors she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. As she is in ardent love with her life and so she soon begins to wonder whether it was not “Goutama’s life that was threatened (ibid 164). She feels that Goutama is certainly fated to die and the thought makes her more secretive. She ponders on the death of Goutama She often questions herself if death disturbs him. She is in ardent love with her life and not prepared for her death.. She grows anxious on account of the threats to her self-preservation and neurotically perceives Goutama’s death as a solution, It is clear from the above lines that Maya broods on the death wish of Goutama. The owl, image of death is insistent in the novel. Before Maya pushes Goutama, she draws her attention to the owl “Listen, I said, stopping at a sound.”“Do you here that? It’s an owl” (ibid 178)

### **Peacock as a symbolism of neurotic behavior**

One more example of such implication is the peacock’s cry which is symbolic of her neurotic behaviour. “Do you not hear the peacock’s call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? ‘Pia pia’the cry. ‘Lover, lover Mio, mio, - I die, I die’” (ibid 83). Its cry is the image of her yearning for love. Maya feels, “Words tortured me now, as memories did, and Murder, that too, followed me, relentless as a well-aimed arrow, as I

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passed through avenues of thought, recollection, doubt and horror. And sometimes I passed to feel the arrow of that word, Murder, sink into my flesh, and to cry, Rajeswar observes Maya's neurotic trait of pushing Goutama as, "The exact point of her plunging into the abysmal depths of psychosis, however, is her act of violence itself. Maya's pushing Goutama off the parapet of their house is not forfeiteous. There are simply no accidents in psychic life. Behind Maya's final indulgence in violence. There has been a prolonged psychic struggle which she has not known herself. Having done the deed and having taken recourse to psychosis she relaxes and openly declares that unlike her, Goutama has not been in love with life and so according to the prophecy he had to die. (Rajeswar 20).

After Goutama's death Maya relaxes her tension and eases her frustration by pondering unconsciously just like how peacocks break their bodies in order to relieve their own pain. Though the sense of violence of feeling of killing or getting killed is subconscious. The violent act of pushing her husband off the parapet is highly unpardonable. It is surprising to note that she is free from any feeling of guilt.

### **Conclusion**

The novel has been praised for its sensitive portrayal of Maya's inner world and for its insights into the female psyche. Maya's inner turmoil intensifies as she struggles to balance her loyalty to her husband. She becomes increasingly obsessed with the prophecy of her death, and her mental state begins to deteriorate. The novel ends with the accidental death of Gouthama. Belief in horoscopes and blind superstitions cause the death of the innocent couple. The paper also throws light on the symbolism of animal imagery, influences of Bhagavad-Gita and Buddhism as reflected in the novel. *Cry, the Peacock* is a must-read for anyone interested in Indian literature or in the psychology of women. It is a timeless novel that continues to resonate with readers today.

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