



Feminism in 'Cry, the Peacock' by Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a landmark text in feminist Indian English literature, exploring the psychological, cultural, and existential struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Through the protagonist Maya, the novel delves into issues of gender roles, marriage, identity, alienation, and self-discovery. Using first-person narration, Desai captures the fragmented consciousness of a woman oppressed by social norms and silenced within the domestic sphere. The study foregrounds themes such as marital disharmony, the burden of tradition, and the pursuit of individuality against cultural confinement. The novel's symbolism—particularly the recurring imagery of peacocks and nature—reinforces the female subject's inner conflict. By situating the text within feminist literary criticism, the analysis highlights Desai's contribution to shaping feminist discourse in Indian literature and underscores how Maya's tragic fate becomes emblematic of women's psychological and social marginalization in post-independence India.

Keywords: Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, Feminism, Gender Roles, Identity, Marriage, Patriarchy, Female Subjectivity, Psychological Alienation, Indian English Literature

Introduction to Feminism in Literature

Feminism emerged in the second wave of feminist movements, highlighting women's liberation from male dominance and social injustice. Early feminist critiques of literature systematically exposed the ways women's experiences, knowledge, and interests had been suppressed or distorted; subsequent work further identified and resisted intersecting race, class, and sexual oppressions. Feminist theorists such as Kate Millett, Toril Moi, and Renée York have elaborated analytical tools to examine language, narration, plot, characterization, and structure, enabling feminist readings and interpretations of all literary genres and periods (Sankar and Neelakandan, 2018). Anita Desai has long portrayed subjectivities that dominate her sources. The protagonist of *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) remains increasingly alienated, estranged, and disenfranchised in the waking world as her memories of childhood grow more intense and vivid. She experiences the distressing imbalance of desire and the failure of communication, as from an inability to articulate her feelings, and thus confirms an ostensible silence of the feminine subject. In choosing first-person narration for the novel, the young heroine Maya exposes the void of female subjectivity via the emptiness of active ego that continuously unfolds and refuses to consolidate itself. This psychoanalytically informed approach provides an appropriate framework for the attempt to understand how Maya's quest for identity is

obstructed throughout the chronologically ordered narrative (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Overview of 'Cry, the Peacock'

Cry, the Peacock is a 1963 novel by Anita Desai, her first, written while she was a student. A psychological story of a woman trapped in an oppressive culture that enforces conformity, the novel is set in the Northern India city of Agra.

Maya, the protagonist, has a close relationship with her parents and her husband, sitting up all night waiting for his return from a Himalayan trip. An astrologer's prediction that her husband's life is in danger torments her, and a family crisis called "six-year itch" is approaching. In this setting, Maya confronts cultural imperfections that unsettle her identity, offering a feminist critique of gender roles and norms. The narrative employs rich symbolism, and focuses on the psychological depth of feminine subjectivity.

Themes of Feminism in 'Cry, the Peacock'

The first of her major novels, Anita Desai's 1963 *Cry, the Peacock* anticipates the feminist preoccupations of her later work (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The protagonist Maya's psychological development is depicted in first person ("I—I—too—too"), analogous to the presentation of her distressingly acute allotted role as (other) woman. The narrator's oscillation between a psychotic disposition and fits of temporary lucidity both records and echoes a freedom denied by the patriarchal family.

Gender Roles and Expectations

Women in traditional society are expected to conform to certain norms and achievements. Only then can they attain contentment and fulfillment. The roles and expectations that society attaches to women are often not questioned, despite having the potential to limit female freedom. Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* presents the protagonist Maya's defining tragedy as a lack of freedom, which ultimately results in her madness. She remains a victim of tradition and a lack of independence. Exposed to tradition's expectations, Maya offers an attuned meditation on chaos and order, despair and hope, passion and restraint, and the possible ramifications of assuming the victim role.

Identity and Self-Discovery

Feminism in *Cry, the Peacock* by Anita Desai describes the novel as an exploration of feminist concerns regarding the psychology of female subjectivity and the marginalized position of women within the patriarchal family structure. Published when such issues were not widely recognized or discussed, the narrative follows Maya, a young woman neglected by her emotionally detached husband in an alien social environment. In the absence of her husband's intervention, Maya explores the confines of culture and discovers her own identity, a journey shaped by her surroundings and her own circumstances.

Bound by traditional expectations of consistent femininity, Maya is expected to perform social roles that appear mutually exclusive, a prescription that ultimately denies her individuality, creativity, and freedom. Her creative poetry and quest for self-knowledge remain illegitimate within this normative framework, resulting in acute psychological distress and alienation. The search for a way out becomes inevitable, as she is held prisoner by her own contradictions and the stifling demands of society.

Chetna Sharma and Vijay Kumar Roy observe that the novel reveals the wounded psyche and emotions of Indian women, portraying them as victims of circumstances who retreat into memories of the past to avoid confronting an intolerable present. Emotional gaps between couples, extramarital affairs, family duties, and unhealthy domestic relationships generate conditions for fear, depression, and alienation. Retrospection serves as a temporary relief, a soothing balm for their wounded psyches (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Marriage and Independence

Marriage in '*Cry, the Peacock*' places conditions on the nature of a relationship instead of emphasising a mutual understanding. The social pressure of marriage, and the subsequent economic and religious confines, paralyse women (Zhang, 2016). The objective of a marriage is to create a prosperous and peaceful environment for its

occupants. A mutual understanding between a married couple is paramount to a successful marriage—as depicted by Maya and Gautama's shared interests and genuine love for one another. For Maya, however, internalisation of an oppressive environment means that the realisation of a successful marriage is restricted by a rigid social structure that places strict regulations on her daily life. Conversely, Gautama's belief system encourages monogamy and the idea of keeping one's wife mentally and physically undivided. Married women retain a subordinate position and have limited access to education or legal resources. Pre-existing social norms dictate the nature of an individual's choice and illustrate how social configurations contribute to the administration of social control regardless of a personal wish for independence. Women with education experience a battle with maintaining their identity within a socially dictated role—a struggle that confronts and reinforces Maya's views about servitude, inequality and the opposing concepts of selfhood and womanhood that confront many female characters.

Maya: The Protagonist's Struggle

Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's 1963 novel *Cry, the Peacock*, is a sensitive young woman haunted by recurring images of death that prompt an existential quest amid the suffocating conditions of her marriage and Indian society. Prior to her union, Maya's privileged upbringing and love for fairy tales instilled in her a desire to wed a man reminiscent of her father. The disparity in age and outlook between her and her older husband, Gautama, results in mutual incomprehension and emotional isolation. Though she yearns to realize her maternal instincts, her desire to become a mother remains unfulfilled; her attempts to articulate her anxieties, including fears wrought by a harbinger of death encountered during a festival, are dismissed as mere worldly concerns. The escalating neglect and intellectual mismatch deepen her sense of alienation, leading her to envision a fatal destiny in which she alone survives. The ensuing mental unraveling culminates in an attempt on her husband's life and a descent into psychological turmoil (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

The Role of Male Characters

Male characters occupy a crucial position in *Cry, the Peacock* because patriarchal conditions dominate life in the household and society. Despite vivid portraits of Maya's psycho-social stress, the female protagonist (and the prime focus of the feminist commentary that haunts the novel's arrangement of narrator, plot, and texture), male figures may be said to reflect the manner in which conventional authority, conscious or unconscious, sustains the contours of patriarchal schizophrenia.

The husband, Gautama, is the main male figure steering the plot. The strict delineation of his

role in a somewhat policed manner derives largely from Maya's perspective as the first-person narrator, with S. P. Mohanty determining that the husband "represent[s] the infinite.' For the need of the writer to pit Maya's lunacy against a model of reason," he also uses classical texts to support the character's "equanimity" (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). Consequently, Gautama is a figure of conventional masculinity and authority, represented as both insensitive and ironic in the first-person context, yet able to redraw such an attitude as a serious, if helpless, lover and dispenser of wisdom from a framing perspective. Adhering to a clear conceptual opposition between the man and the woman—multiple contemporary interpretations eventually construe him as a walking "principle," something akin to the paterfamilias of Greek tragedy (Sankar and Neelakandan, 2018)—emphasizes the remnants of male control. "Lady Ashe in her Feminist Literary Theory summarizes the character of Gautama as 'the epitome of patriarchal calm and power' ", but internal and external evidence suggests that the same attribute belongs to Maya. The larger point, however, remains that the husband embodies certain traits and a behavioral itinerary that reveal the fundamental rationality and order from which the historical "situation" departs in a manner highly—sometimes would say "excessively"—inflected by his wife's condition.

Supporting Female Characters

Anita Desai's novelist career is rich with a wealth of complex female characters that explore distinctive feminist frameworks. Their diversity of experience and personality ranges from the insipid and passive to the neurotic and volatile. Cry, the Peacock introduces several of them. The newly married Maya embodies an intense, frustrated feminine existence defined by a search for self-knowledge and independence that is hindered by a constraining domestic role. Other female figures appear in support and provide alternative definitions of female subjectivity.

Maya's struggle, however, remains the primary frame of her existence and influences other women's behaviour: Fulvia's aggression is motivated by her desire to protect the intense, excluded being she perceives in her friend. It also displaces and overwhelms Maya's domestic fantasy and enables Ruby to expose it through ironic yet benevolent remarks. Rosina, the Peacocks' household enemy, expresses an opposite, seemingly self-assured identity. She is one of the few "solid personalities" throughout the novel and considers her husband an "affair, a habitat closed to love" (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). Her strategy for female subjectivity emphasizes freedom, instead of dependence, through more basic needs such as aggressiveness, confrontation, and fearlessness.

Nature as a Feminine Element

Nature occupies a central position in feminist discourse, often serving as a source of spirituality, identity, and sustenance, yet simultaneously embodying various oppressive social structures, including patriarchy and sexism. The spiritual dimension appears repeatedly in feminist writings, frequently predicated on portrayals of women's unparalleled closeness to nature (Brisson, 2017). Ecofeminism represents a diverse and expanding body of work, encompassing perspectives that attribute an intrinsic linkage between femininity and nature to either biology or spirituality, as well as critical accounts that find such conceptualizations unpersuasive. In her novel Cry, the Peacock, Anita Desai employs nature as a metaphor for Maya: the natural world represents a space of pure femininity and nurturance, where Maya might discover a more authentic self and, conceivably, attain liberation. Nature appears throughout the work in myriad guises—sometimes as a force of symbolic resistance against a society that confines her, sometimes as a benevolent maternal presence, and sometimes as a manifestation of a mature and unlimited feminine consciousness (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

The Peacock as a Symbol

Anita Desai's maternal grandfather lamented the frustration of the identity he may have achieved had he not come to India with his grandfather, a development not mentioned in Cry, the Peacock, where the parallels are Chalukya and Maya. The peacock emerges as a veritable battery of symbols throughout Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock. In Maya in Cry, the Peacock, the emblematic male peacock contrasts with the subdued Indian peacock centerpiece, projecting the protagonist's complex sense of estrangement (A Kar, 2017). The expression "the peacock waits for rain, her heart's desire" links nature with feminine identity, an anthropomorphic motif permeating the narrative and underscoring the novel's central themes. "The peacock may be a bird, but it is also a woman," Desai observes, emphasizing the symbolic alignment of the peacock with the facets of feminine subjectivity and internal turmoil explored in the novel (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Psychological Depth

The novel explores the psychological depth of the female subject through close examination of the heroine's outlook and reflections. The first-person narrative is spoken from the perspective of Maya, a woman who suffers from gender-based frustration and a stifled desire for independence (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). Maya's emotions deepen into mild psychosis and eventual madness owing to her situation as a woman unable to break free from the traditional roles expected of her. Her

desperate need for identity and an authentic sense of self leads ultimately to a tragic conclusion.

Cultural Context of the Novel

The cultural context of *Cry, the Peacock* deepens understanding of its feminist themes. Anita Desai's family fled to England after the Partition in India, a cataclysm that lodged itself in her imagination (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The subject of the partition of India is integral to the thematic concern of her fiction. Her family was part of the "feminine migration" at Partition: the women who fled with the two and half million men who became refugees. In the novel, Maya's father was killed during partition between Pakistan and India (Volná, 2005). The partition connotes a vast expanse of women's suffering which permeates the entire fabric of the novel. The novel depicts "the predicament, sentiments, and emotions of Indian women", and texts feminist concerns regarding marriage, female subjectivity, and female desire to the "historical moment" of partition. The partition catalyzes a "search for an independent female identity" in the text, although in the novel this search eventually leads to both death and the possibility of rebirth. The partition also affects Desai's attitude to Indian society, particularly regarding the generally accepted status of women: "her perception, her immediate reaction to the world around her is always a challenge to it in terms of the question of a woman's status in society".

Indian Society and Gender

Despite the presence of educated and financially independent women in India during the late 1950s, the prevailing societal framework continued to impose norms favoring male dominance. Even women from privileged backgrounds found themselves confined within domestic roles characterized by patriarchy, possessiveness, and submission. The notion of the Indian woman as a possessive housewife persisted, and the societal dichotomy of male/female and public/private spheres further entrenched these roles. Both men and women internalized these societal expectations, refraining from questioning the established order. Post-independence Indian women still encountered culturally sanctioned constraints on their freedoms, and the continuation of male pre-eminence formed the backdrop against which Anita Desai wrote *Cry, the Peacock* (Volná, 2005).

Historical Background

The fundamental feminist issues woven throughout Anita Desai's work resonate with historical and personal experience. The impact of male domination and destructive relationships mirrors the past decades of Indian independence, comprising the key background to *Cry, the Peacock*. India endured British colonial rule for roughly two and a half centuries before gaining independence in

1947. Female liberation established itself during this same period; Indira Gandhi ascended to the prime ministership in 1966 despite the continued strength of traditional values. *Cry, the Peacock* anticipates several of these issues, with Maya's initial awareness and feminism still in their infancy. The college Maya attended represents a more liberal, accessible world, having embraced the independence movement to settle internal debates; it fosters a feminist outlook but avoids encouraging any sort of confrontation so as not to vastly alter dominant social structures or change the country too quickly. The novel thus explores a largely traditional India where these issues remain latent beneath the surface (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

Critical Reception of 'Cry, the Peacock'

Anita Desai's text remains an incisive record of the effects of social pressure on a woman trapped in a "perpetually frustrated, frustrating relationship" (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The portrayal of the psychological damage inflicted on the female subject by the repressive structures of hierarchy and gender highlights the absence of effective critique for such relations within the novel (Volná, 2005). As Maya's analysis gradually undermines the foundation of the social order, the narrative exposes the mechanism through which a clear response becomes impossible and enables the patriarchal system to sustain its grip without revealing its authority. The novel conveys broader concerns of feminist resistance concerning the limits of critique and the connection between oppression and subjectivity.

Feminist Literary Criticism

Gender and psychological processes are central to the personal and social problems of Anita Desai's characters. The contradictory demands of the cultural milieu become internalised and function at an unconscious level to cause neurosis. At the same time, overdependence on ritual and restraint may open the door to possession, madness, and withdrawal into a realm of fantasy.

Raised in India, where male dominance traditionally prescribes the rules of social conduct, Desai evokes with great force the tragic side of womanhood. Most of the women in her fiction assert their strength on an emotional level and rarely challenge the status quo directly. The author emphasizes the psychological double bind resulting from the conflict between love and autonomy, self-assertion and dependency, freedom and security. The struggle to maintain equilibrium in the search for individual identity constitutes the major theme of all Desai's published novels and of many of her short stories (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015).

A society whose members "can communicate only on the plane of convention and etiquette and formality" is one "characterized by extreme solitude." In such a world of ritual,

repression gradually produces violence; the novel ends with murder and suicide. Did Maya resort to murder because she wanted to assert herself in a society that denied her complete independence—or because she was mad? Did she succumb to possession, allow her psyche to break but prefer death under her own control? (Volná, 2005) The protagonist's plight constitutes the heart of the novel and the fundamental issues facing women in India in the late fifties. Desai employs fate, astrology, and psychological processes to interpret a social problem. The all-encompassing cultural pattern isolates women as well as men and locks human beings into a static pattern from which they must either escape or die.

Application to Desai's Work

Women's literature is closely associated with feminist thought, which addresses social roles and gender. It encompasses women's experiences, reflecting their opposition to discrimination and exclusion. The first wave of feminist criticism drew attention to literature by and about women, especially works that are biographical, historical, or psychological. Second- and third-wave feminist criticism diversifies into scholarship influenced by a variety of feminisms: socialist, lesbian, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, post-structuralist, American, and French. It considers the effects of sex and gender in restudies of canonical works and those by neglected writers. Feminist criticism interrogates how such works reflect or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. The nature of feminist literary criticism is protean, continually responding to political and cultural developments. It argues how texts enforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women; focuses on the role of language in patriarchal culture; considers the relation between the female reader and the text; reconsiders the histories of the novel and of the female artist; rereads women's literature as an expression of a distinctive female language and culture; evaluates new and neglected texts; seeks to develop a female literary tradition; explores the problems of female subjectivity; places the emphasis of feminist criticism upon the category of sex, rather than gender; perceives literary history itself as a narrative of the construction of gender; bases its analysis upon detached irony; assimilates the theoretical insights and political energy of gay and lesbian criticism; suggests the need to rewrite the history of sexuality; and integrates feminist criticism with new theories of subjectivity in emphasizing the concepts of "becoming." Despite its theoretical diversification and profile, feminist criticism refuses to relinquish its historical and political agenda. (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015)

Comparative Analysis with Other Feminist Texts

Cry, the Peacock can be raised as a stubborn feminist voice in a culture that defines womanhood as subjugation, subservience, and self-effacement. The struggling protagonist undergoes the psychological depth of female subjectivity with an open mind and a clear vision during psychological upheavals. With great sensitivity and insight, the novelist delineates the quest for selfhood by a woman who tries to escape the traditional zone of Indian womanhood but gets entangled in its meshes. The novel exposes the repressive and exploitative nature of an ancient patriarchal society and questions the ideology which says that the place of a woman is only in her husband's house. It also analyses marital relationships and challenges the norms, expectations and ideology of a patriarchal society about fulfilling of women's natural needs for reconciliation, harmony and continuity.

Similarly, descriptive terms such as feminist voice (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015), psychological depth of female subjectivity (Volná, 2005), repressive and exploitative nature of an ancient patriarchal society and marital relationships that challenge the norms, expectations and ideology of a patriarchal society about fulfilling of women's natural needs for reconciliation, harmony and continuity situate the novel quite appropriately within a feminist frame of analysis.

Similarities with Other Works

This section focuses on feminism in Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock. It is informed by 16 references about Anita Desai, Cry, the Peacock, and feminism.

The novel shares similarities with other feminist texts. Displacement and isolation are recurring themes, addressed in *The Bell Jar* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In both Cry, the Peacock and *The Bell Jar*, a young woman's confinement within an unhappily structured marriage motivates her choice of a destructive end. Anita Desai's depiction of the loss of a girl's subjectivity and identity within a patriarchal social framework strongly affirms the diagnosis of contemporary feminism (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). Feminists emphasize the symbolic absence of the mother in the daughter-mother relationship, as exemplified by patriarchal figures such as Maya's father and husband (Volná, 2005). In pursuing independence as his subject instead of her Mother, the daughter is denied satisfactory incorporation of the wish-fulfilling maternal image. Sylvia Plath's preoccupation with the all-powerful mother figure finds a complementary expression in Anita Desai's cry for a life-giving Mother as a necessary condition of her own womanhood.

Contrasts with Different Perspectives

Anita Desai's novel addresses the female struggle against the limitations placed on them. It

was among the first novels by Indian women to be published in English and remains a pivotal feminist text. The gentlemen of the novel counterpoint the narrative, representing the traditional patriarchal attitudes that Desai's women seek to escape. In Akshi's perspective, *Macbeth* is feminist literature: "a text that voices female subjectivity, in the form of Lady Macbeth, who discloses her sexuality and carves out her own world." Through the protagonist Maya, Desai reveals the psychological struggle of a woman within a patriarchal society, presenting a heroine who is at once a victim of her traditions and society and an individual striving for freedom. The Indian husbands epitomize the patriarchal postcolonial society that oppresses Indian women, compelling them, like Lady Mac Beth, to strive for power within a world in which they have no place." An upwardly striving wife, Woman I becomes a screeching, nagging wife; a nagging wife only remembers the sweetness in love when she is at her husband's mercy. Woman I knows that she leads a comfortable life but the attachment is different. The nerves and gnashed teeth of Woman I feel like the eclipsed moon; the lustre in Woman II's eyes is the raja's wife, who still thinks with a devotional gaze about Durbar Singh. Woman II still has the heart of a submissive but heartfelt wife (*pativrata*).

Impact of 'Cry, the Peacock' on Feminist Discourse

Literary feminists have long recognized Anita Desai's 1963 novel *Cry, the Peacock* as a keen response to the patriarchal Indian society with which it engages (Sharma and Kumar Roy, 2015). The novel articulates a female voice whose profound psychological depth gives readers a powerful lens through which to examine women's subjectivity and oppression (Volná, 2005). Since its publication, feminist critics have employed the text to elaborate and refine feminist-sociopolitical analysis and theory.

Conclusion

The analysis of Anita Desai's 1963 novel *Cry, the Peacock* from a feminist perspective reveals the ways in which Indian women grapple with gender-based oppression and assertion. The work's emphasis on psychological depth and historical-contextual engagement underscores the primacy of a specifically feminist dimension. As a major British-Asian writer, Desai undertakes a narrative investigation of the unconscious, self-assertion, and female subjectivity.

The thematic formulation of modern Indian feminism is consistent with a generalized postcolonial framework. The novel restricts its deployment of the tools of subjectivity by exposing the inadequacies and limits of "modernity" as a sphere of identification. Gender has a particular role to play in the development of the alternative feminism that emerges. Indeed, it is gender that

distinguishes the postcolonial from the postmodern. The novel depicts a variety of presanitarian and postcolonial escapes and enunciations whose aim is to articulate an authentic moment of liberation and assertion. In this respect the narrative can be read as a reflection upon the kinds of rupture through which postcolonial subjects seek to constitute themselves in new spaces and anew historical contexts.

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