
Maya's Materialistic Longings Resulting in Alienation and Frustration: A Feminist Reading of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

Anita Mazumdar Desai occupies a much privileged place in the Indian Writing in English. She is known as an acclaimed Indian woman novelist who deals with the psychological problems of her women characters. She was born in 24 June 1937 in Mussoorie. Her father D.N. Majumdar was a Bengali businessman and her mother Toni Nime was a German immigrant. Anita Desai is working as Emeritus John E. Buchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Anita Desai got a congenial environment to learn different languages in her own home and neighbourhood. She learnt Hindi from her neighbourhood. They used to speak German, Bengali, Urdu and English at their home. She learnt English at her school. She attended Queens Mary Higher Senior Secondary School in Delhi and she did her B.A. in 1957 from the Miranda House of the University of Delhi. So far is Anita Desai literary career is concerned, she wrote her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. With the help of P. Lal, they founded the publishing firm Writers Workshop. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is her most autobiographical work. Her novel *In Custody* was enlisted for the Booker Prize. She became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1993. When she published her novel *Fasting Feasting* and it won the Booker Prize in 1999, she came to the limelight. She was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times in 1980, 1984 and 1999 for her novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting Feasting* (1999) respectively. She received Padma Bhushan in 2014 also. She has received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1937 for her well-known novel *Fire on the Mountain*. The present paper analyses the central female protagonist Maya's materialistic pursuits which turn in a great catastrophe for her in the novel *Cry, the Peacock*.

Keywords- Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal Society, Resistance, Frustration, Human Psychology, Liberty,

Anita Desai holds a great niche in the contemporary women novelists of Indian women writers. Her female protagonists are seen combating with the social taboos made by the masculine community in order to assert their own identities and places in the world. Her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* deals with the psychological turmoils and the inner world of a female character Maya who demonstrates her insecurity, fear and depression after her marriage. G. Aruna and V. Peruvalluthi write about this novel:

Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock* reveals the inner realities and psychic reverberations in the minds of her characters. In this novel Desai explores the hysterical mind of an Indian housewife, Maya. Her novel faithfully captures the contemporary Indian reality, especially the domestic life. (18).

Anita Desai has depicted the theme of alienation, depression and frustration in this novel. The novel has been written in seven parts. There is not a good order in the novel and the incidences have been depicted from the stream of consciousness point of view. Maya's father Rai Saheb is a well-known advocate in Lucknow and his family is very rich. Maya also has a brother named Arjun. Maya is Rai Saheb's only daughter. Her brother lives in America, so Rai Saheb used to spend most of his time with Maya. She was brought up very dotingly and her father tried to fulfill every wish of his daughter. That's why one day she mutters when her husband goes to the bathroom, "No one, no one else, loves me as my father does" (43).

Maya has never lacked anything in her life but she could not get the love of a mother because her mother is not in this world. Maya was Rai Saheb's only daughter and that's why she gets full support and attention from her father. Gautama is Rai Saheb's friend and he is also a lawyer but Gautama proves a mismatch for Maya. There is much difference in their age and his thinking is completely different than that of Maya.

Maya and Gautama get married, but there was not a single thing in Gautama for which Maya may remain happy in her life. He fails to give her psychological or physical satisfaction and Maya feels that she has been entrapped in this marriage.

Maya started feeling very sad. Before marriage, she was getting full love of Rai Saheb, but after marriage, Gautama neither loved her nor paid any attention to her. Because of this, she becomes a victim of depression. Gautama's mother was a social worker. She has done many things for the society. When Gautama's mother and his sister would come to Gautama's house, then Maya would feel less frustrated but she would feel lonely and alienated when they would leave again. It used to happen with her because Gautama never understood her feelings. He would keep working and Maya would wait for him, "Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body of the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed" (9).

The novel opens with the incidence of death of Maya's dog. Maya had a dog Toto and she loved it very much and she becomes very sad and cries a lot when it dies. Gautama tells her that she must not make her sad for this petty incidence as he can bring her another dog. He says to her:

You need a cup of tea, he said, I cried, yes, it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. 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. (6)

There are other shades of life. When Maya's dog dies, her husband uses soothing words also to her. He says, "Maya, Do sit down. You look so hot and worn out. You need a cup of tea" (9). In fact, he brings a cat for her but it does not change Maya's life so much. The novel has been written from the point of first person narrative. Anita Desai writes, "Gautama gave me a cat. She was white and had hair like tassels of silk" (33). Gautama was a serious man and he did not have time for these kinds of stupid acts. He would focus on his life and career while Maya was a woman who did nothing and had high dreams but worked nothing to realize them.

One more thing comes to the fore. Maya is childless even after four years of her marriage. There is an empty space in her life and she finds nobody to fill this space. Her mourning for her dog shows how lonely she was feeling. The death of her pet and her excessive attachment with her dog shows her abnormal behaviour in the novel. She feels lost, frustrated, neglected and shattered to pieces. Gautama's lack of care and attention towards her also adds further distresses and tensions between the two, and it makes Maya drift even

more away from him. She is unable to strike a balance between her inner self and the realities of the outer world.

The insight of the albino astrologer also haunts Maya who portends that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of their marriage. This childhood prophecy remains deeply rooted in her mind and becomes one of the reason for her abnormal behavior. After this marriage she is unable to forget this incidence:

The astrologer, that creeping sly magician of my fantasies, no of course they were not hallucinations. Arjun had proved them to me and yet said they be real? Had never said anything to suggest that it was I who has to die, unnatural and unviolently for years after my marriage, nothing to suggest that he even thought that. (12)

Having been neglected on Gautama's part and being a childless woman, she feels frustration and becomes psychic. Their relationship goes through a catastrophe and neither of the two makes any sincere efforts to save their marriage. Both of them share a difference of opinion about their life and they do not wish to see things beyond their perspectives.

Maya experiences rages of revolt, insecurity and terror. She has visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her. Her dark house seems like a tomb to her and she feels entrapped in her house. She feels as if someone has put her there as an imprisoned. She was feeling just like a caged bird.

Maya's name also means "worldly things" and she seems to be engrossed in the worldly affairs. There are many things which have been used as symbols in this novel. Maya hopes to get many things in her life but in fact; she does not work for it. Like every young girl, Maya too had many dreams, she had a lot of expectations from her husband, but all those expectations are broken when her husband does not pay attention to her emotions.

Whenever it is rainy season and peacock cries loudly to summon the rain, Maya also sees her pain in that scene. She relates her own life with a peacock. The crying of the peacock for the rain brings some romantic feelings in her mind. The peacock cries for the rain and Maya craves for the love of her life partner. A peacock dances to attract the attention of its partner, and Maya also wants the attention of her husband. Thus, Maya's thrust for love has been shown in these lines. She fails to get that love from her husband.

If Maya's dreams are seen from the ground of reality, we come to know that Maya's dreams are just like a child's dream to play with different toys for amusement. In fact, human

life is so complicated and we need so many things in our lives. Her husband was working to realize their dream but Maya was just thinking to realize her dreams without doing anything. Her father has done everything for her in her parents' home and she over-expects it from her husband also that becomes the cause of her sufferings.

Anita Desai has tried to project that a girl can get all the love and affection in her own house and after her marriage; she is burdened with the bundles of responsibilities. Everybody expects from her and it becomes very difficult for a girl to change herself accordingly. That's why many marriages are broken these days. Anita Desai has depicted the true pictures of a mismatched Indian couple and its diabolic consequences in this novel.

Maya could not get the affection of her mother and only a woman can better understand another woman's feelings. Maya was feeling alone just because she had nobody to share her feelings. Although she was attached to her father, but there are many things that a woman cannot share with her father.

The albino astrologer's words also keep haunting her. She keeps thinking that her death is approaching near just because astrologer told her that one of the couple will die after four years of their marriage. She is unable to come out of this thought also.

Then a strange idea strikes her mind. She thinks that the astrologer had said that after four years one person is supposed to die. She thinks that it may be possible that her husband may die. She wants to save her life somehow and she makes a plan to execute a heinous act.

She calls Gautama on the roof one night and tells about the pleasant environment of the night. She says that night is beautiful. She pushes Gautama from the terrace and he dies. This is how she escapes herself from her own death. Thus, this step turns her into a criminal.

From this entire act, we can say that Maya was not mentally stable and she was mad also because no woman can kill her husband mercilessly like this. It shows that Maya was not in the good state of mind. Gautama's mother and sister come and leave Maya at her father's house from where she is sent to the mental asylum. The ending of the novel remain ambiguous and a white shadow is seen which may be inkling about Maya's death also.

In the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya has received excessive love and affection from her father which creates many problems in her life after her marriage just because she starts behaving abnormally with her husband. She expects that her husband Gautama may give her love and attention but he remains occupied with his own works and does not spare time for

his wife and neglects her feelings and this negligence makes Maya wild, rebellious and violent. But Maya's step of killing her husband in this manner is really condemnable. She should not have taken such step.

Conclusively, Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, on the one side deals with the feminist theme but on the other it also gives a wonderful message to young girls that they must not hanker after the dreams without doing any hard work otherwise they may find themselves in the situation of Maya. The real life is quite different and there are so many important things in life except romance. Gautama's negligence towards his wife takes his life. He could have lived happily but he does not think so. Thus, the novel deals the feminist stance and the problems of married women. J. Judi Punitha Elavarasi writes about this novel:

Desai prefers to explore the private to the public world. Her real concern is the exploration of the human psyche, inner climate and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters like that of Maya. Her female protagonists are alienated from the world, society and family because they think of themselves as individuals. Her characters are self-centered who want to change either the situation or things around themselves. (138)

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