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## Anita Desai and Cry, The Peacock

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### Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the prominent women novelists of India, pioneering the rights of women in the Indian society. Delineating the psyche of women she writes about the domestic life, subjugation, sacrifices and anxieties of a middle-class married woman who being within the family is alienated in it. Cry, The Peacock is one of the novels which best exemplifies the theme of agony and isolation in women.

**Keywords:** Agony, women, psyche, peacock, Desai

### Introduction

Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie on 24 June 1937, to a German mother Toni Nine and a Bengali father DN Majumdar. She spoke German and Bengali along with Urdu, Hindi and English at home making her a polygot. At the age of seven she began to write in English and at a young age of nine she published her first short story, a day from where she has never looked back. She has to her credit many novels and short stories and children's books. Some of her famous novels are: Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the City, Bye Bye Blackbird, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Fire On The Mountain and many more. Clear Light of the Day is her autobiographical work. She has received the prestigious Sahitya Academy award and also Padma Bhushan for her works and has been thrice shortlisted for the Booker prize. Presently she is Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Apart from being a few of the most prominent women writers in pre-independent and post-independent India, she is more renowned for her sensitivity towards women.

She herself says "I have been writing, since the age of seven, as instinctively as I breathe. It is a necessity to me: I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, feel, and realise at the highest pitch. Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth - the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring the underlying truth. That is why, in my novels, small objects, passing moods and attitudes acquire large importance. My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, that lack of design that drives one to despair and to mould it and impose on it a design, a certain composition and order that pleases me as an artist and also as a human being who longs for order".

She has very sensitively captured the internal conflict and life of her female characters and majority of her works examine family strife and alienation of a middle-class woman. She has also concentrated on the societal issues which hinder the Indian women from being liberated and who constantly strives for self-recognition, self-expression and self fulfillment because it is her predicament to lead a life of endless agony and subjugation in the Indian society. Madhumalti Adhikari writes " In Desai's novels, the moral values of women are conveniently adhered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their objects, possession to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity, nurtured in them through myths, culture and social discourses". Where other Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, RK Narayana and Raja Rao were writing for the common man and the oppressed class, they ironically overlooked the atrocities faced by women and barely referred them in their works.

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Women writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Nayanthara Sehgal concentrated on the struggles faced by white women in India to sexism in the patriarchal system, it was at this time it was Anita Desai who stood up and depicted women with exceptional sensitivity and understanding. Prof. Alan Lightman writes "Desai's novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalised in Indian fiction primarily women, children and the elderly". Jaya Shrivastava writes "Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observations, sensitiveness, penetrating analysis and a skill to paint with the word, Anita Desai created a rich gallery of characters both male and female".

### **Anita Desai's first novel**

*Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963. It carries the subject of suppression and oppression of a young Indian woman through the narration of the story of marital discord and incompatibility between the couple Maya and Gautama leading to the alienation of the protagonist Maya. Gautama's academic and detached nature along with insensitivity is a contrast to the romantic and temperamental nature of Maya. The novel also sensitively relates the spiritual pangs of Maya, the half child, half woman syndrome. The novel is a heart rending story of the broken heart and shattered dreams of a young married girl Maya because she is married to an insensitive Gautama who is twice as old as her and is responsible for her plight. In her married life Maya seeks emotional as well as romantic love and understanding from Gautama which she fails to. A reason was Gautama being an unemotional and practical man and also behind was the conflict in the mind of Maya with the prophecy made by the Albino astrologer regarding the death of either of the spouse. The major part of the novel is a first person account narrated by Maya spread over 160 pages. Part 1 of the novel deals with Maya's pet dog Toto whom she adores because she is gripped by a yearning for a child and showers all her affection on Toto and is shattered when Toto dies untimely. The last part 3 is narrated by the novelist herself and is concerned with the action of the death of Maya's husband leading to Maya's confinement and insanity. Gautama's inhuman attitude at the death of dog Toto makes Maya charge her husband of being insensitive towards animals as well as herself. Maya wants Gautama to be part of her world and unite with him physically as well as emotionally, she wants to communicate eye to eye with him but in the absence of all this Maya suffers mental agony and gradually drifts away from her husband.

The novel beautifully portrays the working of Maya's heart and mind. The symbol of the peacock and its cry runs for most of the part in the novel. Peacock represents an emotional and ideal Love and is symbolic of life -in death and death -in life concept. Maya identifies with the peacock in the agony of ecstasy of the birde fatal love experience. Desai deliberately uses live and kinetic motifs and symbols revealing their own mythology and being an integral part of the novel rather inseparable one. She believes in the qualitative writing which she makes distinct with the commanding use of the symbol of Peacock in this novel. The symbol of the peacock in the background of the novel as illusion of Maya's mind adds a special dramatic effect on the readers. And is highly relevant as Maya aligns her cry of the heart with the cry of the peacock in nature. During the rainy season, when the black clouds cluster in the sky the peacock's dance by spreading their wings and emitting the

mating sound "Pia, Pia they cry. Lover lover, mio mio - I die I die" (Desai 2006 page 24)<sup>[7]</sup>. The peacock's dance knowing it well that before the end of the monsoon they would die so sometimes Maya would become so self-obsessed that she would relate herself to the dancing peacock believing that the monsoon of her life will be short-lived and she would untimely die. This prophecy of the astrologer had so much ingrained in her psyche which led to her overthinking and obsession which leads to her insanity. She becomes utterly depressed and declines towards insanity losing her mental balance completely. She all the time visualises the crying of the peacocks around her, and the cry of the peacock and the peacock searching for the mate and then the agony at the death of love. Maya begins to believe that she is also one of those peacock who have the same fate as them.' Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and for myself, knowing their words to be mine '. She views the dance of the peacock as the dance of death. Over time Maya becomes so over-obsessed with the astrologer's prophecy coupled with the burden of loss and insanity that in a fit of rage she kills Gautama, in a way of fulfilling the prophecy and thus saving herself. Finally, Gautama dies and with the lack of family support, she goes into alienation. But she becomes so guilt-ridden that she becomes incurably insane and commits suicide. So Maya first kills her husband to liberate herself from him and later kills herself to liberate herself from the guilt.

The predicament of Maya to maintain her self-identity as an individual woman in a traditional society goes in vain. Though she has the courage to question the indifference of man, the society, *Cry, The Peacock* from beginning to end deals with Maya's loneliness, alienation and loss of identity of characters by strife created dramatically by Anita Desai to make the fiction appear real. To Desai's advantage in so expertly expressing her female characters by delving into their minds is that she herself is a woman. She has the quality and precision to permeate and delve deep into the mind of the depressed woman she writes about, that is why she has been successful in depicting the patriarchy and the inequality in relationships in *Cry, the Peacock*. This novel of Desai is an apt exploration of Maya's journey in search of her own self.

Anita being a feminist that she has very effectively portrayed the character of Maya, as a highly emotional sensitive and sensuous woman who loved life and is a very normal woman in that sense. But her imagination her sensitivity and passionate nature become her foe and her insanity thus reflects the insanity of the world circumscribing her.

To conclude Anita Desai's novels in general and *Cry, the Peacock* is a novel circumscribing around the inner awareness, conflict, suffering and alienation of its protagonist. In *Cry, the Peacock* Maya tries to search for the meaning of life within herself but fails, is betrayed and tragically slips into insanity and mental disorders, leading to an urge of death as a means of escapism. Thus Anita Desai has wonderfully composed her women characters depicting their suffering and plight in the Indian patriarchal society in question.

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