



# **NEW DIRECTIONS IN POST COLONIAL LITERATURE**

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## Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*: An Overview

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### **Abstract:**

Anita Desai, a very popular Indian novelist, is known as the Mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. She has secured her a place of honour in the pantheon of Indian authors through her meticulous depictions Desai has of modern Indian life. She was the Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, and has authored as many as sixteen works of fiction. Her distinct style of writing, her original characters and her realistic subject-line made her writings so endearing. Over the years, Desai won many awards and recognition for her works. She was shortlisted for the Booker Prize thrice. Besides writing, Anita has been actively involved in teaching as well. For many young aspiring writers today, she continues to be an inspiration.

**Key Words:** v neurotic, hypersensitive, artistic sensibility etc.

Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, published in 1963, has been written through the stream of consciousness method with very little conventional episodes. The subjects of this novel were the suppression and oppression of Indian women. This work immediately made her as a major voice in Indian literature in English. *Cry, the Peacock*, made Anita Desai a debut as a novelist. In this novel, there are three sections: a short introduction and conclusion in objective, third-person narrative, and a long subjective middle section narrated by the neurotic heroine, Maya. Desai's protagonists usually possess a neurotic, hypersensitive, artistic sensibility and they are dissatisfied with their routine existence which made them search for a more meaningful life. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, the neurotic heroine, kills her husband, thereby

fulfilling the prophecy of an albino sorcerer. This contains a deep-rooted, philosophical concern also.

Most of Anita's protagonists, from Maya to Matteo, have a spiritual orientation reminding us of similar concerns in novels such as E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941). In Maya's narrative, the stream of consciousness is employed in order to chronicle the progressive deterioration of both Maya's relationships with her husband, Gautama, and her own mental poise and sanity. As Dr. G Ratan Bhattacharjee has said, "Maya with her sensitiveness and love of beauty suffers the agony in the worst way. the flowers and fruits in the garden, the trees and plants, the sky and the seasons, her pets and other animals everything she takes care. On the other hand, her husband is insensitive and concerned only with the absolute. The irreconcilability between them is clear" (Dr.Ratan Bhattacharjee, 2015).

*Cry the Peacock* is a good, poetic book which evokes feminine fancy and reality with a blend of silky smoothness and coarse roughness. The protagonist, Maya is smooth and silky whereas her husband, Gautam is rough and coarse. This book makes one feel, perceive and then act. Anita Desai has a tragic vision of woman's life, and with the quintessence of reality, she has combined an intricate and sensitive style of her own. Gladys dsouza was right in saying, "The book explores the turbulent and emotional life of Maya, the character, and 'Maya' the illusion itself. Maya the character bends and breaks whereas illusion stays."

Maya is a sensitive daughter of a well-to-do father. She is seen as a neurotic introvert and a famished character, a victim of the inadequacy of human relationships. Desai brought out Maya's loneliness and frustration are effectively. Maya's ineffectual lonely struggle drives her to homicide, insanity and finally to suicide. She got married to Gautama and their marriage was never successful; in fact, this marriage gradually turned her into a

psychopath as her emotional needs could not be satisfied by her husband, who was too practical. A sensitive and sensuous Maya rebels against the rationalism of Gautama and against his Vedanta philosophy of detachment. Her anxiety, fear and insecurity, lead her to insanity, violence and self-destructiveness. Maya is unable to understand her husband and it is the main cause of her suffering. His practical approach to situations in contrast with her emotional approach, is unable to relate to her world, he cannot understand her extreme sensitiveness, her quest for the simple pleasures of life, to be true to herself.

As they were distanced by their different sensibilities and attitudes, Maya's restlessness and anxiety is about the realization that her quest for a fulfilling life with Gautama was impossible. Gautama involved is unresponsive to her desperate calls for intimacy and she realizes the futility of their relationship. The novel is essentially a dream-stuff of the doom-haunted Maya and there is also an element of tragic pathos in her expressions, varying from one moment to another according to her anxiety-ridden moods. Thus, one finds dreaminess in what she expresses and to what she reacts.

Rather than the physical aspects, the novel deals with the mental aspects of its characters. Maya is a hypersensitive young lady married to Gautama who is a rational advocate. Maya needs a beloved spouse with broad understanding which qualities Gautama lacks. Maya's intense involvement in her own inner world of phantasm is the reason for the alienation between Maya and Gautama

Maya is deeply attached to past, lives almost in the world of memories while Because of his rational nature, Gautama values the importance of action. Maya had lived a protected life that hinders her freedom of growing as an individual. The father's over protective love does not permit her any independence to grow, think and act as an entity. Maya feels Gautama is entirely different from

her father. He is cold and preoccupied with his work, efficient but indifferent to her presence.

As Maya belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family, she trusts in astrology. The astrologer prophesized that one of the couple would die soon in an abnormal way. She cannot forget the thought of astrologer and quickly slips into insanity. Gautama's family comprise the intellectual face of living. Maya is not able to face the trivial truths of living. Thus, her character exposes the psychological problems of an Indian woman.

Maya is poetic, intuitive, and unstable and is extremely sensitive to the beauty around her. Gautama, on the other hand, is concerned only with absolutes. The characters' names themselves symbolize their irreconcilability: Maya is illusion and Gautama is the Buddha who was able to rend the veil of Maya. Thus, while Maya lives in the world of the senses, Gautama rejects it entirely. Unable to resolve her conflict with Gautama, Maya pushes him from a terrace, thereby terminates her struggle. The novel concludes with the demise of Maya. The mental retrogression of Maya proposes that she was not able to adapt her in the world of fact.

Hence, through the role of Maya, Anita Desai has showed the feminine mind of both a girl and a woman. The hot subject of feminism is addressed by Anita Desai with sensitiveness and by Maya's role, Anita Desai carries a new aspect of feminist publishing. Maya appears separate from every female character in the novel. Among whole Anita Desai's female characters, Maya is the most exciting and psychologically amazing. By staging Maya a sort of woman who silently abide from the men, the novelist has spot lit the feminine predicament in several prospects.

Maya's psychological disturbances, her neurotic and intensive obsession with death are effectively portrayed. The women protest and rebel against the existing power structure when the existential crisis becomes unbearable. The conflict in

Maya is brought out by Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude to Maya. Maya's love for her protective father and her rebellious brother, her inconsolable grief at the death of her pet dog are envisioned as indexes of her sensitive and sensuous temperament and present a natural foil to the dry intellectualism of Gautama.

Almost all the characters in the novel have a well defined attitude to life. Maya's father was satisfied to base his life on the fatalistic creed of acceptance. Gautama has belief in detachment while Arjun thrives on 'protest' and rebellion, Maya has no such creed to lean on which could satisfy her yearning to love and be loved intensely and totally. She blames her husband for her problems, for her loneliness and suffering. As he prevents her from doing what she wants to do, she harbours an unconscious, unreasonable desire to kill him so that he does not interfere in her life

According to Kierkegaard's philosophy of alienation individuals are alienated from themselves and their surroundings which are unfavourable and hostile. This existential alienation was also discussed by philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre. Sartre states that we are responsible for our own actions and when we refuse to take responsibility for our actions, we experience a sense of alienation. This realization leads one to anxiety and anguish, which subsequently leads to alienation and loneliness. Anita Desai in her *Cry the Peacock* intricately portrays the sense of loneliness and anguish in Maya's mind, her trauma of being caught in two simultaneous worlds, of past and present and her inability to resolve to the realities of life.

Maya's existential dilemma and her search for self-identity are very systematically and gradually portrayed by Desai. The conflict between her aspirations and the harsh reality of existence has a crumpling effect on Maya's inner being. Her constant pursuit



to be true to her inner self is the cause of her suffering. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and does not show any inclination to take up adult responsibilities even though she has been married for four years to Gautama, a successful and prosperous lawyer. Moreover she is haunted by the prediction of the albino astrologer about the death of her husband or herself in the fourth year of her marriage. It gradually gains ascendancy in her mind and it becomes an obsessive fear. Maya is afraid to share her fears with her husband and at the same time she cannot adjust with the practical world of her husband and feels dejected, lonely and demoralized. Her life is full of tensions, disappointments, anxieties and fears. As a result, her mental condition deteriorates as her psychological suffering intensifies in the four years of marriage.

Maya's psychic condition is conveyed to the readers by using several symbolic incidents. The lack of understanding between Gautama and Maya is clearly highlighted by Maya's inconsolable agony at the death of her pet dog and Gautama's mechanical response that he would bring her another dog. It also brings out the disparity in their characters. Her hyper sensitive mind is shown by her extreme sorrow at the death of her pet dog. In contrast, her husband, Gautam, was unable to understand the extent of the trauma in her mind. When Maya requested her husband to take her to see the Kathakali dancers, he abruptly refused to do. Even her husband considers her great love for music inappropriate.

All these minor conflicts have a lasting impression on Maya's psychology. She feels her husband responsible for standing between her and her aspirations, a hindrance to the fulfilment of her desires. Maya constantly compares Gautama's character to that of her father and this further enhances her despair. With her emotional cravings, Maya cannot understand her husband's involvement in his world of work.

Maya's memories of her past life, of her childhood

recollections that bring back to her the disturbed incidents of her life and crowd her mind and terrify her into insanity. Gautama is basically kind and genuinely fond of his wife and tries to reach out to his wife but fails to establish a satisfying emotional rapport because of the differences in their view points and temperaments. Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude show the conflict in Maya. Maya's interior monologue exposes Gautama's detached attitude: 'Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me.... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me...it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me.' (Anita Desai: *Cry, the Peacock*)

Anita Desai, a Trend-setter in Feminist Writing portrays a hyper-sensitive, and cultured Maya and dives deep into her trapped feminine psyche from childhood to her untimely death as a youth. The protagonist, Maya is the victim of many social and psychological predicaments.

We find Existential Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*. Existentialism is a philosophical movement emerged in the writings of several nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Some of the existential themes such as man's autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism.

The literary works of existentialism assert on actions-including acts of will as the determining things. From this viewpoint, there are no meanings or structures that precede one's

own existence, as one finds in organized religion. Hence, the individual must find or create meaning for it. What Albert Camus felt is right. He said that meaning in life is to be found in the struggle to be true to oneself and in collaborating with society's collective efforts for peace and prosperity. Absurdity or irrationality of life and the inevitability of death constitute the unavoidable torment or agony of the human condition. Writers like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky with their works, had also contributed greatly to the existential notions. Existentialist thought has been thought an unfair reputation for pessimism and even full-blown nihilism. But, nothing in the philosophical train of thought of existentialism dictates a negative view of humanity or reality.

In Indian English literature Existentialism has been explored to a great extent. Among the Indian English novelists, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, AnjanaAppachana, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, JhumpaLahiri, Kiran Desai are a few of the novelists who seriously concentrated on the tenets of existentialism. A study of their perceptions on existentialism provides insights into contemporary issues and themes of alienation, suffering, conflict, death, quest for self-identity, etc. Anita Desai dealt with relationships between oversensitive wives and insensitive husbands and highlighted the mental agony and existential anguish of her protagonists, mainly women characters.

As witnessed by Singh, Anita Desai dives deeply, darkly and silently, tries to work out the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the virgin territories of modern life style. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries, turmoil and chaos inside the mind of her characters. *Cry the Peacock* of Anita Desai is an interesting study from the existentialist's perspective. She displays a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. Particularly, she voices the silent miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist torment. Desai deals with the problem

of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment in *Cry the Peacock*

Maya's melancholy seems baseless in the face of her having the usual course of things. Self-analysis generally has a curative effect but in the mental processes of mind under neurotic stress, as it was in the case of Maya, even introspection ends up as a flight of fancy of the zigzag path of associations. As such it cannot be called 'analysis', it serves only to aggravate an already disturbed mind. Anita Desai powerfully portrays the inner conflicts of her women protagonists who are deprived of their basic rights by a male dominated society. Usually, women are compelled by societal norms to project an inauthentic self-image. However, the intense conflict in projecting that image leads to helplessness and desolation.

The very title of the novel, *Cry the Peacock* indicates the anguished mind of Maya. A clue to the irony of Maya's fate is implied in the title's reference to the 'cry' or the mating call of the peacock. Generally Peacocks are said to fight before they mate. Desai uses this connotation of life and death, their passion in the face of death symbolically in the case of Maya. Maya in a state of insanity, in a frantic state kills her husband resulting in the ultimate catastrophe. Later, in a complete state of insanity, she explains the episode very casually: 'And then Gautama made a mistake – his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshiped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. 'Gautama' I screamed in fury and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom.

Anita Desai's writings have generated enormous interest in scholars. Literary scholars have appreciated her handling of simple, everyday ordinary experiences in a manner which denotes their universal existential appeal. The depiction of Maya's character is so sensitive that readers sympathize with her helpless situation.

in her struggle to lead a life of meaningful existence. B. Chitra's aptly comments that, *Cry The Peacock* is a brilliant study of the abnormal psychology of its neurotic protagonist, Maya. She is an enigma. Her moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormalities are conveyed effectively by Desai. Anita Desai received critical approbation both in India and abroad. The western audience appreciated especially Desai's insights and attention to minute details. She expresses, as is said by Naik, a 'uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the West'. In the perspective of the concerns and themes of the women writers, Anita Desai occupies a major position. Unlike the other contemporary women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala or Nayantara Sehgal who focussed on the changing social scenario of Indian society, Desai took the lead in exploring the anxious sensibility of the modern women, in projecting the inner psyche of her protagonists and in bringing to the forefront the existential agony of women. Thus Desai uses appropriate images to bring out the emotional ethos of the novel and enhance its aesthetic appeal.

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