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## The Gendered Malaise in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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### Abstract

The objective of the paper is to focus on the feminist message as articulated in Desai's novel, *Cry, the Peacock*. The intent is to examine critically how in the post-modern era Indian women writers in English have highlighted women's questions. The paper also traces the rise of the feminist movement and scrutinizes the concerns of the 'second sex' as presented in Desai's novel foregrounding the need of feminism in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** feminism, second sex, patriarchy

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### Introduction

Women have been bearing the brunt of discrimination since times immemorial. Advancements in the field of arts particularly literature has brought the condition of women, under scrutiny. They remain relegated to the margins labeled as the "Second sex". The treatment meted out to them denigrated as par-human has been bestial. The cultural and intellectual domains remained beyond their reach for centuries. Writers like Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf have remarked on the condition of women, especially gifted ones, who had to let their talents wither and shrivel out rather than letting it flourish. They were indeed "cruel butterflies trapped in evil honey", As Virginia Woolf states in her famous essay *A Room of One's Own*, "Any women born with a great gift in sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (Woolf 5). For centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. In patriarchal bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been 'humiliated', 'afflicted', 'silenced' and 'tortured' socially and economically. With the dawn of the new age, in the twentieth century, a new worldview was born one in which women began to see the universe with their own eyes and not through the male gaze. In India too the effects of feminist movement were felt which found ground in Indian literature as well, especially women's writings. Anita Desai is one such prominent figure whose works chronicle around the dilemma and struggles of womanhood.

*Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.*

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

Feminism is one of the top most issues of Desai's fictional world; she has pictured a paradigm of the whole women community with a view to spreading the message of the second sex. Desai's female protagonists are, generally, caught in a web of painful circumstances, their struggle and the outcome of which is usually

the basis of the novel. Her novel *Cry, the Peacock* presents one such story of the traumatic experiences and mental tensions that the protagonist, Maya, undergoes.

The *Cry, the Peacock* tells the story of a woman who has been repeatedly made to stifle her desires, compromise with her values so much that she gives in to insanity and eventually jumps to her death leaving behind the chains of patriarchal that had haunted her throughout her life, dodging her steps. Literally made to live in a claustrophobic situation where her dreams are mercilessly squelched and her voice stifled she is left no other choice than to slip into the blissful embrace of insanity, a terrible price to pay for freedom.

The novel deals in depth with the failure of the central character Maya to have a meaningful and sustaining relationship with the members of family as well as with her husband Gautama. The novel is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmonious and unfulfilled family relationship. Maya, born in an orthodox family and brought up under the protection, attention and kindly care of her father, suffers from a father-fixation. Being a motherless child she transforms into a hypersensitive and neurotic woman and as a result even after her marriage, she looks for the father image in her husband. A rebel Maya, fails to identify herself with her husband's world and as a result finds herself being alienated from the affection she enjoyed from her father. It is as M. Mani Meitei remarks, "Lack of mutual concern leads to apathy which causes the total breakdown of husband-wife relationship". (Desai 46) Maya's marriage is afflicted with an almost paralyzing indifference between the spouses. Maya's marriage to Gautama is more or less a marriage of convenience. It was a match between two different temperaments and there was not a single link in the physical or mental outlooks to bring them to close. She faces a totally different code of conduct in her husband's house and finds that her feelings are not cared for and feels neglected, isolated and alienated there. Gautama attributes Maya's behavior to her father-fixation. The death of Toto, the dog makes the situation worse. Toto's death was intolerable to her, as for childless Maya, Toto was like a child. Maya feels alienated and badly disturbed by the indifference and carelessness of her husband towards the

death of her dog. Both of them have different views about death. Gautama thinks death to be a normal event while Maya is disturbed by it. Husband's love or sexual gratification in a normal course would have been compensated to overcome the loss of childhood world. On the contrary, Maya's surrounding does not help compensate the loss, instead allows her to drift. Maya's childhood prophecy of a disaster becomes an obvious point of fixation in Maya's unconscious.

Maya and Gautama are poles apart. There is complete lack of communication between the two. This is clear from the attitude of her husband towards her after the death of Toto. For Gautama it is "all over" and she simply needed "a cup of tea". He fails to realize her "misery" and does not know how to "comfort" her. Insensitivity of the husband becomes clear as Maya remarks, "...he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me..." (Desai 9)

The cold and unresponsive attitude of husband becomes further clear as he asks Maya to go to sleep, 'while he worked at papers'. Maya is a victim of emotional as well as physical depression. She says, "...He did not give another thought to me, to either soft willing body or the lonely waiting mind that waited near the bed..."(Desai 9) Though Gautama in his own way is indulgent and affectionate enough for Maya but it is the inner spiritual contact that fails to click. He has a cool, analytical attitude towards Maya's zest for life. His error lies in rigidity. He wants to change Maya as he thinks she 'ought' to be instead of understanding her as she 'actually' is. Maya was very much loved with Gautama and needed his companionship and understanding; but these were very much missing in their marriage.

Maya begs Gautama not to demand her to join him in his world which is so different from her own. By marriage a man twice her age, she probably had already minimized her chances for a good husband-wife relationship. Maya herself reflects upon marriage which has become a misalliance,

It was discouraging to reflect as how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon as from outside and therefore, neither true or lasting. It was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon with which out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (Desai 45)

The incompatibility and lack of communication between the two characters are repeated many times in the story. Because of their different mental make-ups there is a total alienation between husband and wife and they share nothing and disagree even over trifles. Both of them have a fanatic adherence to their belief and their ideas and neither is prepared to relent. Although their marriage has been a complete failure, they continue to be together, leading a mechanical life. To make life possible, Maya looks for point of communication however contrary to her expectations, her husband has a mechanical attitude towards life. There is always an air of detachment about whatever he does. They live in a loveless cage of marriage in which Maya's emotional urges usually get defeated by Gautama's rudely philosophical gibberish. Due to communication gap she hesitates to lay bare mind to Gautama and is driven towards insanity which

becomes the cause of tragic end of both of them. Sudhakar T Sali in his book *Anita Desai's Female Protagonist* quotes, "The incompatibility of character stands revealed Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels even without touching". (Web)

Gautama tries to satisfy Maya's appetite for love with logic, rationality and material things but neglects her beauty and the longing to be loved. The physical, mental and emotional separation between them torments Maya who struggles in a pursuit to relate to Gautama. Gautama detaches himself so much that he does not get involved in any physical contact with his wife. On the other hand, Maya involves herself in sensual life to such an extent that her past romantic life becomes an obsession. She feels that he is not concerned about her misery, her physical and psychological demands, "Engrossed in his busy schedule, Gautama continues to ignore Maya's needs remaining callously immune even to her physical desire. This is how Maya usually suffers the agony of her unfulfilled desires". (Kumar 23)

Maya's attitude to nature and physical world also shows her obsessive love of life. She gives highly sensuous account of the world of nature –of flowers and fruits, forms and colors. She has the deep sensitivity, quite deeply inclined by the sights and sounds, forms and colors of the natural world. She is infuriated when she finds that her husband fails to notice the dust storm. This indicates his insensitiveness to life. Gautama for her is representative of male-centered materialistic civilization and culture. Her poignant cry is a passionate urge to express herself and to be understood by her husband. But Gautama never feels the necessity of interaction slowly the events and the tensions pile up leading to final catastrophe. Maya's obsession with death drives her to a curious insanity which prevails over her common sense and in a fit of madness she pushes Gautama over the parapet who falls down to death. Her giggles of laughter are partly due to her idea that now she is free to enjoy life but in her insanity she also jumps out of the open balcony and meets the same end as Gautama did.

Maya is pushed to the limits of her emotional tether by the actively cruel environment that Gautama aspires as a result of his twisted idea of renunciation. All that is left of this marriage is pity, regret and a want of taste. The only string that had, kept them tied were the norms of society. Yet the tragedy could have been averted with a little bit of communication, a touch of accommodation on the Gautama's part. There is no doubt she kills her husband due to her obsessive love of life. The act of murder is a revolt against callous materialistic social order. Maya believes that she is not fit to live in this world based on male-centered wisdom, reason and order. She doesn't like the civilization based on logic and normality. She wants to be free from the chains of slavery based on customs and established norms of the society. Her revolt against the social order is an aesthetic revolt- the revolt of sensibility against the logic of the so called normality that seeks to colonize desire through a network of institutional mechanisms, "... All order is gone out of my life, all formality, there is no plan, no peace nothing to keep me with the pattern of familiar, everything living and doing..." (Desai 195)

Some critics like Som P. Sharma and Kamal N. Awasthi point out that Maya despite her over-protective childhood does not seem to be a spoilt woman. She has the capacity to differentiate between her childhood friends, the indulgence of a doting father and

clamorous demands of her lawyer husband who often withdrew in asking her for a cup of tea; Maya feels destabilized even after four year of marriage, Gautama had failed to fecundate, “no young are two young” (Desai 22) - perhaps of the bareness Maya had developed a slightly greater capacity for philosophy that she was born with. She blames Gautama for his grossness, for his concern with the fundamental and basic prosaic life in terms of money, “...it’s always money or property-never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exiting things-like Toto dying” (Desai 24).

*Cry the Peacock* is a story of a highly emotional, sensitive and imaginative woman with the added advantage of being told by a women novelist. Maya is shown to be fast disintegrating under the pressures of marital discord. Married to an unresponsive and insensitive husband Gautama, she is driven from emotional instability in the beginning to madness, insanity and murder towards the end. Even though Anita Desai owes no explicit allegiance to feminist cause, she is preoccupied with plight of women in the male-dominated oppressive order. Her *Cry, the Peacock* is a unique example of or an illusion of the feminist point of view. The novel has almost all the features of women’s writing. Anita Desai defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reactions and responses of the heroine to the events and situation in the novel.

It is apparent from Maya’s own account of her relationship with her husband that their marriage was broken from the very start it is clear that while Maya is extremely sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous, her husband is materialistic, practical, paradigmatic and unresponsive. It is difficult to agree with the critics who consider Maya to be neurotic. She is perfectly normal and healthy women. Her only sin is perhaps she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous. These are in fact the characteristics of normal female with reasonably good social status and upbringing. Maya in her view is driven to emotional instability, insanity and even murder under the pressures of marital discord disharmony. It is clear from the following statement regarding their marriage, “...It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of sacred iron with which out of the prettiest superstition, we could not bear to part...” (Desai 40)

Maya represents the disturbed psyche of modern Indian woman. She tries to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this crucial act, she is further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is brought before her. When she experiences loneliness and lack of communication she finds herself in mental crisis. Feminist studies shows that Indian woman-passive or aggressive, traditional or modern –serves to reflect the writer’s sense of isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability. She evokes continuous discussion of social values. She is the focal point of contact between the writer’s consciousness and the alien world, her experience of reality and hope for salvation. As a symbol not only of growth, life and fertility, but of withdrawal, regression, decay and death, she is powerful figure indeed as a protester against social and sexual inequalities and discrimination.

The awakening of women’s consciousness establishes a new set of values in the fictive system. The typological experiences of the women have constant elements like the abrupt awakening, intense introspections and an abrupt ending with conscious

decisions. The ending does not lead her to resolution of her problems, but the fictional shaping of very specific kind of crisis seen through her eyes is rewarding, for it leads to inner enrichment, a sense of exhilaration and vicarious achievement as she fights to harsh reality. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* reveals the patriarchal politics, whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the women. She shows the dichotomy of femininity as a cultural bias. Sex is biological and gender is social imposition. She asserts that patriarchal authority has given women a minority status that inflicts on her a “self-hatred and self rejection, a contempt both herself and for her fellows”. (Millett 55) Desai in *Cry, the Peacock* has depicted not only the conflict in man-women relationship of Maya and Gautama but the other characters are included in her spectrum too. Nila, Gautama’s sister is not leading a happy married life either. She and her husband are incompatible and she takes divorce from him after ten years of marriage. Leila, Maya’s friend, had a love marriage and her husband suffers from tuberculosis. She feels satisfied and they love each other until death. Pom, another friend, though satisfied with her husband, does not want to live with her in-law. The dominant theme of male-female dichotomy and the marginalization of women have been dealt with successfully by the novelist in *Cry the Peacock*.

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