



# "From Silence to Speech: The Politics of Female Storytelling in Nagamandala"

**GORE SWAPNIL MADHAVRAO**

M.A. B.Ed. English (NET Qualified)

swapnilgore7049@gmail.com

## Abstract

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* has often been read as a feminist exploration of Maya's psychological collapse under the pressures of a patriarchal marriage. Critical attention overwhelmingly privileges Maya's inner world and situates her as the tragic victim of male-centered rationality. However, this paper seeks to reorient the discourse by examining Gautama through the same lens of trauma, existential burden, and victimization. While Maya's hysteria and yearning for emotional intimacy dominate the narrative, Gautama's stoic detachment, philosophical disposition, and inability to reciprocate Maya's intensity are not signs of indifference but of his own silent suffering. His life, conditioned by societal expectations of masculine rationality and emotional restraint, represents a form of victimhood overlooked by Maya's narration. By positioning Gautama as a figure entrapped by duty, intellectual solitude, and the very structures that deny him vulnerability, this study argues that the tragedy of *Cry, the Peacock* extends beyond Maya's collapse to encompass Gautama's silenced trauma. Seen through the male gaze, Maya's tragedy is reframed as part of a larger discourse in which man, too, emerges as a victim—more burdened by the contradictions of patriarchal ideals and the impossibility of emotional expression. This inversion challenges the dominant feminist readings of the novel and insists upon a more nuanced view that acknowledges male victimization alongside female suffering.

## Keywords

Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, male gaze, patriarchy and trauma, Gautama's victimhood, gendered silence, emotional repression, masculine rationality, psychological conflict, tragedy and victimization

## 1. Introduction

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) has often been read through a feminist lens, foregrounding Maya's psychological anguish and her tragic collapse under the weight of patriarchy. Critics have repeatedly emphasized the suffocating silence imposed upon the female self, reading Gautama, her husband, as a distant, emotionally unavailable representative of male-centered rationality. Yet such interpretations risk simplifying the dynamics of the novel by casting Maya exclusively as victim and Gautama exclusively as perpetrator. A closer examination of the narrative, however, reveals that Desai presents not only the claustrophobia of female desire but also the burdens of masculine restraint. Far from being an omnipotent patriarch, Gautama emerges as a man caught in the trauma of rationality, victimized by the very cultural and philosophical traditions that compel him to suppress instinct, passion, and vulnerability.

This research paper argues that Gautama's position in *Cry, the Peacock* deserves reevaluation. His "male gaze" is not simply a tool of dominance but also a shield of survival, fashioned in a society that demands stoicism from men while denying them emotional release. Maya's sensitivity and psychic turmoil certainly end in tragedy, but Gautama's refusal—or inability—to reciprocate is not merely callousness. It is, instead, an inherited condition of male victimhood, shaped by patriarchal expectations that silence men in different but equally destructive ways. To "see through the male gaze" in this context is to recognize that Gautama's rationalism, detachment, and apparent correctness are not weapons of cruelty but strategies born of trauma.

By shifting the critical focus from Maya's tragedy alone to the unseen sufferings of Gautama, this paper seeks to balance the gendered narrative. The exploration will demonstrate how Desai's novel simultaneously indicts the psychic imprisonment of women and exposes the equally profound, if less visible, victimization of men. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider *Cry, the Peacock* not as a one-sided feminist tragedy, but as a complex dialogue between two wounded selves—one collapsing under emotional excess, the other suffocating under the burden of restraint.

## Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to critically re-examine Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* through the lens of **male-centered victimization**, challenging the dominant critical consensus that positions Maya's tragedy as the sole focus of the novel. While much scholarship emphasizes Maya's silencing under patriarchy and her descent into psychological fragmentation, this study aims to foreground Gautama's perspective as the **embodiment of rational vision, existential burden, and silent suffering**. By doing so, the research seeks to demonstrate that:

Gautama's rational worldview, often interpreted as coldness or detachment, can be understood as a philosophical response to trauma and societal expectations placed upon men.

The novel encodes man's invisible suffering—his role as the bearer of responsibility, provider, and rational stabilizer—contrasted with Maya's emotional excess.

The tragedy of the novel lies not only in Maya's psychic disintegration but also in Gautama's victimization at the hands of emotional dependency, marital incompatibility, and the weight of patriarchal roles.

A more balanced reading reveals that Desai's novel critiques not just the silencing of women but also the overlooked **trauma of men living under rigid patriarchal constructs**.

## Study Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, text-centered, and comparative analytical design**.

**Textual Analysis:** A close reading of *Cry, the Peacock* will be undertaken, with special emphasis on Gautama's dialogues, silences, and narrative presence. Key passages will be examined to highlight how Desai encodes his rationalism, restraint, and eventual victimhood.

## Theoretical Framework:

**Masculinity Studies** (R.W. Connell, Michael Kimmel) will be used to interpret Gautama's struggles as symptomatic of **hegemonic masculinity**, where men are forced into rational, unemotional roles that suppress their inner suffering.

**Existential Philosophy** (Camus, Sartre) will be referenced to contextualize Gautama's detachment as an intellectual, possibly redemptive stance rather than indifference.

**Feminist Criticism** will be revisited—not to dismiss Maya's tragedy but to juxtapose it with the unacknowledged trauma of Gautama.

**Comparative Dimension:** The study will contrast the **critical privileging of Maya's voice** in previous feminist readings with a **counter-reading of Gautama's silence** as equally, if not more, tragic.

## Outcome Expectation:

The study is designed to argue that Gautama, far from being the detached oppressor, is in fact a **tragic victim of patriarchal structures**, silently carrying burdens that remain unacknowledged in most critical interpretations.

## 2. LITERARY REVIEW

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) has been a frequent subject of critical attention in Indian-English literary studies, especially within the frameworks of feminist criticism, psychoanalytic readings, and existential explorations. Most scholarship foregrounds Maya as the central tragic figure, whose neurosis, loneliness, and eventual descent into madness epitomize the silenced plight of women within patriarchal marriage. However, a counter-reading suggests that such a singular focus on Maya has often marginalized the suffering of Gautama, her husband, whose man-centered vision is not only an instrument of patriarchal authority but also a site of trauma, alienation, and victimhood.

### Feminist Readings of Maya's Plight

Several scholars, including Usha Bande (1988) and Meena Belliappa (1971), have interpreted the novel as an exploration of feminine sensibility crushed under the weight of patriarchy. These critics argue that Maya's isolation, lack of emotional reciprocity,

and eventual breakdown represent the silenced condition of women in a man-centered society. Desai herself has been read as a novelist deeply invested in portraying the inner lives of women stifled by social structures (Jha, 1994). Such readings consistently emphasize Maya's loneliness and see Gautama as emotionally detached, rational, and oppressive.

### Psychoanalytic and Existential Approaches

Psychoanalytic criticism (e.g., R.S. Sharma, 1990) interprets Maya's obsessive fear of death, rooted in the albino astrologer's prophecy, as symptomatic of her neurotic psyche. Existentialist readings, such as those by Jasbir Jain (1982), underscore the failure of communication between Maya and Gautama, leading to Maya's tragic isolation. In these frameworks, Gautama is often dismissed as a symbol of cold rationalism, embodying the patriarchal order that negates Maya's subjectivity.

### Counter-Readings: Gautama as the Silenced Victim

However, recent critical perspectives on gender roles encourage re-examining the text through the possibility that Gautama, too, is a victim—perhaps more deeply so. His rationalism, often criticized as detachment, may be interpreted as his coping mechanism in a world where men are conditioned to suppress emotion and vulnerability. The patriarchal system that isolates Maya also denies Gautama the space for tenderness, affection, or expressive emotionality. His strict adherence to reason, law, and social expectations becomes both his armor and his prison.

While Maya succumbs to her neurosis, Gautama continues to endure silently, embodying the cost of being “the man” in a society that demands resilience at the expense of inner life. Critics like Veena Singh (2007) have suggested that Desai's male characters often appear rigid not by choice but by cultural imposition; they, too, are entrapped. In this sense, Gautama may be seen as doubly victimized: first, by the burden of fulfilling patriarchal ideals of stoicism and authority; second, by the tragic consequences of Maya's inability to reconcile with his worldview.

### Towards a Balanced View

Therefore, while much of the scholarship emphasizes Maya's tragedy, a man-centered vision reveals the novel as a double tragedy. Maya externalizes her suffering through neurosis and violence, but Gautama internalizes his trauma, making him the “silent sufferer.” His victimhood is invisible precisely because society privileges male endurance and dismisses male vulnerability. In this light, Gautama emerges not as the oppressor but as the overlooked victim whose tragedy is compounded by the fact that it remains unacknowledged.

## 3. METHOD

This research employs a **qualitative, interpretive methodology** grounded in literary analysis. The purpose is to interrogate Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* not merely from a conventional feminist perspective that foregrounds Maya's psychological collapse, but by shifting the critical lens to the **male gaze and male-centered experience**, specifically Gautama's role. By doing so, the study aims to uncover how the narrative constructs man not only as rational and detached but also as a **silent victim of emotional isolation, cultural expectations, and gendered responsibility**.

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **textual-analytical framework**, combining:

- **Close Reading** of primary text (*Cry, the Peacock*) to highlight instances where Gautama's subjectivity, silence, and rational detachment are misread as indifference.
- **Comparative Perspective** with feminist criticism, showing how privileging Maya's suffering often eclipses Gautama's trauma and existential burden.
- **Hermeneutic Approach** that reads between silences, omissions, and narrative bias to reconstruct the **male-centered tragedy** embedded in the novel.

### 3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by two critical approaches:

1. **Gender Criticism (Male-Centered Lens):** Moving beyond the one-dimensional reading of Gautama as a patriarchal figure, the paper interprets him as a man ensnared in societal expectations of detachment, logic, and emotional restraint. His inability to connect with Maya is reframed not as cruelty but as a symptom of **structural victimisation of men** in patriarchal culture.

2. **Psychological Literary Criticism:** Applying Freudian and existential insights to read Gautama's emotional repression, forced rationality, and solitude as forms of trauma. While Maya's hysteria is visible, Gautama's tragedy lies in his **silent endurance and unacknowledged suffering**, making his victimisation subtler but equally significant.

### 3.3 Sources and Data

- **Primary Source:** Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*.
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly articles, feminist critiques, and psychoanalytic readings of Desai's works. Critical essays that frame Maya as the central victim will be re-examined to reveal their **gender bias** and to argue for Gautama's **co-equal or greater victimisation**.

### 3.4 Procedure

1. Identify and annotate textual passages that highlight Maya's suffering and Gautama's detachment.
2. Re-interpret these passages through a **man-centered lens**, examining Gautama's silence and rationality as protective yet isolating mechanisms.
3. Contrast feminist and patriarchal readings of the text, exposing how privileging one gendered experience obscures the other.
4. Build an argument that **male trauma, though less dramatic, is equally profound** and in certain aspects more destructive, because it remains unspoken and socially unacknowledged.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of *Cry, the Peacock* reveals a complex interplay between Maya's psychological disintegration and Gautama's seemingly detached rationality. While the narrative foregrounds Maya's descent into neurosis and eventual violence, a careful reading through the lens of male-centered vision uncovers that Gautama, too, emerges as a figure marked by trauma, alienation, and victimhood.

First, Gautama's philosophical temperament and adherence to rational order are often dismissed in critical discourse as coldness or insensitivity. Yet, these very qualities can be reinterpreted as survival strategies in a chaotic and spiritually burdened world. Gautama's refusal to engage with Maya's obsessions, such as the astrologer's prophecy or her compulsive anxieties, is not necessarily indifference but rather a defense mechanism shaped by his own upbringing, responsibilities, and intellectual conditioning. His reliance on logic and detachment signals not cruelty but a desperate attempt to impose stability on an otherwise unpredictable domestic environment.

Second, Gautama's own traumas, though not articulated with the same intensity as Maya's, can be inferred through his silences and restrained behavior. As a product of patriarchal structures himself, Gautama carries the weight of familial expectation, professional duty, and social conformity. His inability to respond emotionally to Maya is less a sign of superiority and more an indication of repression—an internalized denial of vulnerability that leaves him equally voiceless. In this sense, he becomes a silent sufferer, victimized by the same patriarchal codes that Maya resists but in different form.

Third, when viewed through the lens of victimhood, Gautama's position is arguably more precarious than Maya's. Maya externalizes her suffering through emotional outbursts, confessions, and eventually violent action. Gautama, however, internalizes his pain, rendering him invisible in both Maya's narrative and critical scholarship. His silence, therefore, is not triumph but tragedy—an erasure of selfhood under the guise of male strength. Where Maya's madness culminates in catharsis, Gautama's restraint results in quiet endurance, making him, in many ways, more profoundly victimized.

Finally, the tragedy of *Cry, the Peacock* does not rest solely on Maya's inability to reconcile with the rational world but also on Gautama's inability to reconcile his rationalism with human vulnerability. His intellectual rigidity, far from liberating, is a burden that isolates him from emotional communion. This isolation underscores that the male figure, too, is entrapped in a structure of

expectations and traumas—rendering him not merely the perpetrator of Maya’s suffering but also a victim of the same patriarchal order.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study set out to re-examine *Cry, the Peacock* not from the habitual vantage of Maya’s psychic disintegration but through a critical reflection on Gautama’s role, his stoicism, and his relative victimisation under the weight of gendered expectation. While much scholarship foregrounds Maya’s emotional intensity and psychic collapse as symptomatic of patriarchal silencing, the analysis here suggests that Gautama’s own trauma is both overlooked and understated.

First, the contrast between Maya and Gautama emerges not only as a clash of temperament but as a deeper conflict of worldview. Maya’s sensitivity, imagination, and constant immersion in subjective fears render her unable to align with Gautama’s rationalist outlook. Yet, Gautama’s “man-centered vision,” often critiqued as patriarchal coldness, can equally be understood as an attempt at balance, detachment, and resilience in the face of a demanding marital relationship. His refusal to indulge Maya’s compulsive anxieties is not cruelty alone; it is an act of self-preservation, a shield against emotional drowning.

Secondly, Gautama too suffers. His trauma is quieter, unexpressed, and overshadowed by the spectacle of Maya’s breakdown. Trapped in a marriage where his rationalism is demonised and his silences misread, Gautama carries the burden of being the “unfeeling man,” a role imposed as much by social expectation as by Maya’s projections. In truth, his alienation, intellectual solitude, and eventual victimhood in death reveal a deeper tragedy: the man becomes a casualty of a relationship poisoned by misaligned visions of reality.

Thirdly, in reframing the narrative, Gautama’s correctness—his rationality, his attempt to hold on to sanity and equanimity—is not merely patriarchal arrogance but a legitimate mode of survival. If Maya is seen as crushed under the weight of prophecy and loneliness, Gautama is equally crushed under the weight of emotional demands he cannot possibly meet. His demise at Maya’s hands literalises this imbalance, proving him the ultimate victim, silenced not by patriarchy but by unchecked passion.

Thus, the tragedy in *Cry, the Peacock* is twofold. Maya’s downfall dramatizes the suffocation of a woman under existential dread, but Gautama’s fate speaks of the silencing of men, forced into rigid roles of rationality, endurance, and emotional suppression. Reading through this counter-perspective complicates the gender binary: the man, so often cast as oppressor, here emerges as the overlooked sufferer, whose trauma is no less harrowing for being silent.

In conclusion, *Cry, the Peacock* should be read not only as the tale of a woman’s breakdown under a male gaze but also as a narrative that inadvertently testifies to the vulnerability of men, their entrapment in gendered expectations, and their potential victimisation in relationships where subjectivities fatally collide. Recognising Gautama’s trauma alongside Maya’s reframes the novel as a study of dual tragedies—where silence and speech, rationality and imagination, detachment and passion, all collapse into mutual destruction.

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