

# A Psychological Conflict in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*

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## Abstract

Anita Desai has a deep insight in the psychological and societal problem of modern life. Desai's novels show psychological motivations through retrospection, self-analysis through introspection, in revolts and in compromises. Desai's characters have firm basis of convictions and faiths. She has presented a grim view of life. None of her characters live a happy life. All of them are struggling against the odds, some of whom suffer because they are not happily married. For them marriages are not made in heaven. They are afflicted with the sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism due to dislocation in life and morbidity of temperament. She probes deep in the social conditions which are the ultimate causes of the sufferings of man. In her opinion, the social conditions are the main causes behind warped dispositions. This paper exclusively discusses about how the conditions of life turned woman into neurotic.

Key Words: Retrospection, Introspection, Loneliness, Alienation, Social Conditions, Psychological State.

## Introduction

Anita Desai was born in 1937 of a German mother and a Bengali father. Anita Desai is one of the prominent Indo-Anglican novelists. She is a prolific author. She has written them novel and a dozen of short stories within a short period of about thirty years. Desai's earlier novels are a study of women's depression that comes out of their inability to grapple with the issues related to women's education, their aspiration to obtain self-sufficiency and a meaningful existence. Anita Desai's childhood days serve as a major theme in her novels. Her writing style is often poetic and descriptive, revolving around fiction and fantasy and the use of symbols and flashbacks. Many of her novels explore the state of middle-class women and the tensions that exist in these families. The characters in her novels are quite beautifully written and expressed and a special emphasis is given to female protagonists. The themes of her books are often associated with her own personal life experiences. Her style is remarkable for

her poetic images she has used to communicate her feelings. References to the *Cry, the Peacock* is made to express Maya's desire for love of her husband. And as the characters speak in first person, the style is straight, direct and without any involvement. These salient features of her novels make her a unique figure among the host of Indo-Anglian novelists of the modern times. In some respects, she shows relationship with the famous novelist, Virginia Woolf. Her work is well-appreciated, and the major awards received were the Padma Bhushan in 2014, Sahitya Academy Fellowship in 2007, and shortlist for the Booker Prize in 1980, 1984 and 1999. She has also received the Royal Society of literature Winifred Holtby Prize in 1978.

Anita Desai's works explore the psychological state of her characters, because she thinks that the inner life of a man or a woman decides his or her character more than the external conditions of her life. Anita Desai views that the inner life of a man or a woman largely decides the fate of that person. *Cry, the Peacock* charts out the psychological state of both the main characters, Maya and Gautama. Maya is the central character of this novel.

### **A Psychological Conflict in Maya's Life**

Anita Desai has presented a pen portrait of Maya. The main problem of Maya is that her father had rendered her unfit to live in a middle-class society. Maya remembers that her father had pampered her by treating her as a princess. Maya was a motherless child. So, her father showered all his love on her. She had the best of life that one could imagine. Her father had kept her away from all harsh and unpleasant realities of life. To save her from the heat of the summer, he would take her to Darjeeling or any other hill station of her choice. Her father had given her full freedom to do whatever she liked to keep herself happy. As her father treated her with utmost love and care, she also thought that she had the best of a father under the sky. She observes that,

his thoughts, his life, his attitude, his learning and his career assume a similar pattern - formal as a Moghul Garden, gracious and exact, where breeding culture, leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art ..... As the streams in Moghul Garden flow musically through channels of carved marble and sandstone, so his thoughts, his life flow, broken into small, exquisite patterns by the carving, played upon by altering nuances of light and shade, but never overstepping their limitations, never breaking their bounds, always moving onwards with the same graceful cadence. (Desai 39,40)

This poetic outflow in the description of her father indicates that father-daughter relationship was on the highest pitch, bordering on an obsession.

It is not difficult to presume that a princess like her will find it difficult to be at peace with the world, more so in the family of Gautama. Maya was married to Gautama who was a protege of her father, who admired him. Her father proposed that she should marry with Gautama. He was a knowledgeable friend of her father. Maya thinks that her marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men and the mutual respect they held for each other. She also met her father's proposal half way with a quickening passion. In this new life with her husband, Maya finds the most searing pain in the first year of their marriage. She was further disconcerted to see that Gautama is bereft of the emotion of love, while her father had inured her to love. She is shocked to find that love has no place in the family of Gautama. She observes in Gautama's family, one did not speak of love, far less of affection. The discussions in the family were held on the proceedings in the parliament, prevailing corruption, editorials in the newspapers and so on but none talked of personal feelings, love or affection. Gautama's father was engrossed in freedom movement, and his mother had dedicated herself to such social activities as taking care of pariah pups, a creche, a dispensary, gathering funds, keeping accounts, etc. They considered Maya as a toy. As she compares her life in her husband's house with that which she had in her father's house, she is greatly distressed. She said in anguish that she will never go there again. When she said that wanted to go to see her father Gautama's towel with which he was wiping hands fell down like a limp dead bird thrown down. Her father appeared before her because she had never witnessed such violence from her father. The situation became unbearable when her fatalist father said with a deep sigh of sorrow that she will learn one day that these things she must put up with. If one cannot do anything about them, we have to accept it. Her father could not realize that his daughter was in a great distress.

Maya was so dejected and desperate in the beginning of her married life. Gautama is no company for Maya. They are mis-matched. A peasant is married to a princess as far as the tastes are concerned. Maya had a desire like other women for sex and also for a child. She had several images of man-woman relationship in her mind. A man winked to a woman who followed him to a shuttered house. She had heard the peacocks and peahens crying "Pia, Pia", lover, lover. But Gautama was fast asleep invulnerably before she came to him after

changing her dress. This summoned the vision of the tenebrific Albinocc, who had caught her in the net spread for her. As she was motherless, she remained childless all her life. Incidents after incidents occur to shock the fine sensibilities of Maya.

She had the desire to attend the Mushaiyra going on outside her room, but a woman had no place among men, no matter she had greater capability to appreciate the Urdu couplets. She found that Gautama in particular had asked her by his gestures that she should not stay. She was shocked as if she had truly found a blemish in her unscarred skin". She felt that Gautama had no love for her because she didn't have the longish face of a learned woman. To add insult to injury, he made a long speech against the sentiment of love, laced with the quotations from the Gita, to tell Maya that she should not expect love which he calls attachment, from him. He did not know that Krishna had love for all, even for those whom he had to kill to make them free from their vicious lives of sin.

Maya was already disenchanted by Gautama's lack of emotions, manners, and tastes when she received a letter from her brother, Arjuna, who had left the house at the age of twenty-two. When he was at home he had no interest in the life of ease and comfort that his father and Maya were living. He refreshed her memory of the horoscope which was once cast for her. She was also reminded of the prediction that one of them would die within four years of their marriage. She found that Arjuna's letter had in a way endorsed Gautama's view point about love. As Gautama was bereft of love, she feared that he would kill her if he came to know that one of them was to die within four years of their marriage. She became so nervous that she got fierce husband and the image of albino astrologer.

Gautama's continued indifference to her advances exasperated her to the degree that she thought, Gautama had no contact with the world or with Maya. She cried with the peacocks for a mate but Gautama did not hear it. This situation agitated her so much that she started feeling the pressure of circumstances on her mind. In her state of desperation, she saw her past life in her mind, and bade good bye to her father. When Gautama met her in the evening, she felt that she would not meet him again. After a long time, she felt that Toto was dead, but to her chagrin, Gautama asked, who was Toto? Maya thought that her marriage was not an empty one. Gautama taught her pain, "for there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so

much” (Desai 173). At times she felt why should she love Gautama. In the final moments, she and Gautama went up the stairs to have a stroll. Gautama did not notice the odour of limes, the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, did not have time to count the stars, he was lost in a case. As he started explaining the case, Gautama made a mistake. Maya felt he had come between her and her moon that she was almost worshipping. As Gautama lost the balance, she could not get hold of him. Thus, Gautama died. Since Maya had already some uncharitable ideas about him, she thought she was responsible for his death. Maya was a noble woman Therefore the sense of guilt weighed very heavy upon her mind and soul. She lost the equilibrium and was brought to the house of her father. Nila and her mother came to take care of her in the absence of her husband and her father, and both the ladies had love and admiration for Maya. The servants and Maya had given their own version of the story of Gautama’s death, but Nila discounted the story, saying that it was an accident, since she had observed that Maya was an affectionate child who met them at the door when they came to her in that still, secretive house of death. Finally old lady went to Maya upstairs and both of them disappeared into the dark quiet.

## Conclusion

The story of Maya is not the story of a neurotic woman. It is the story of sufferings of a noble woman, who was subjected to several psychological jolts which finally threw her off the balance. It was the tragic end of a grief-stricken woman. Her father had inured her to a very decent living, but married to a man who was bereft of emotion of love, devoid of such human values as kindness to animals, and lacked in good tastes, yet the father tragically advised his princess daughter to put up with the peasant. All this caused the tragedy.

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