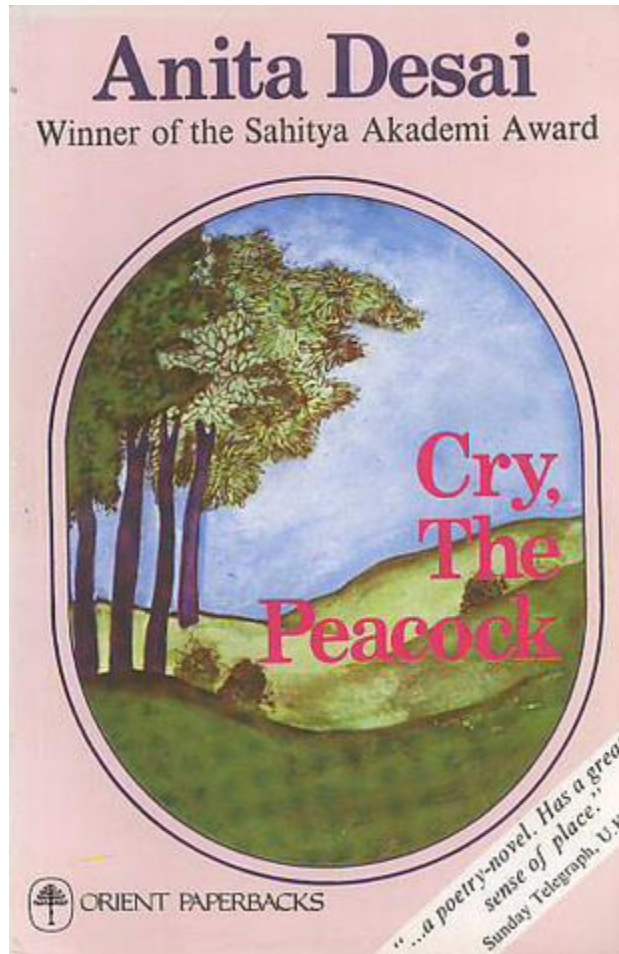


Women Identity Crisis in Anitha Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*
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Focus of Modern Women Writers

Women writers have moved from traditional depiction of enduring, female self-sacrificing and have presented strong female characters searching for an identity of their own. They no longer represent and define women simply in terms of their casualty status. Indian women writers have started questioning the high up old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of men. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively. Many Indian females' writers have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity of their own.

Anita Desai

Anita Desai is conclusively one of the celebrated Indian-English fiction writers. She holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India. Anita Desai's women characters in her novels rebel against masculine community in order to discover their own identity, to live life on their terms, regardless of the outcome that such a rebel may have on their lives. *Cry, the Peacock* her first novel has been considered to be a pioneer in the field of psychoanalytical realism. It explores the inner world of the main protagonist Maya, and demonstrates her fear, insecurity and strange behavior. Through Maya's character, Desai depicts a world of alienation, loneliness and suffering.

Women Identity Crisis in *Cry, the Peacock*

In the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, the female protagonist Maya, has been brought up under the excessive love, care and concern of her father. This extreme love on her father's part makes her behave abnormally in her later life. Maya's grief begins quite early in life with her marriage to Gautama, a middle-aged lawyer, and a responsibility of her father. There is a vast difference in their ages that contribute to further conflicts between the two. Gautama's insensitive behavior towards Maya makes her feel lonely, isolated, neglected and forced. She expects a little more attention from Gautama as her father sprinkled on her. In short, Maya wants Gautama to be her father-figure. She wants Gautama to not only take care of her childish needs but also always protect her from the outside world. Quite contrary to her expectations, Gautama is pre-occupied with his work and doesn't have a few moments to spare for his wife.

Maya

Maya is childless even after four years of her marriage. There is a space in her life which gets taken care of as she gets naturally close to her pet dog Tutto, though not for a very long time. It is said that childless women develop extreme affections to her pets. She showers all her motherly love on Tutto. In doing so she finds a way to escape from her indifferent husband and his cold behavior towards her. Tutto's death makes things worse for Maya. It creates an emotional confusion in her life. She becomes heartbroken after the loss of her pet. When Gautama sees Maya mourning at the loss of Tutto, he utters,

You need a cup of tea, he said, I cried, yes, it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house. (6)

Tutto's death is the first sign of Maya's abnormality that suggests a series of chain reactions in her life. She becomes hyper to worldly affairs. The agony of missing the pet lurks in the blank spaces of her mind making her restless day by day. She feels lost, frustrated, neglected and shattered to pieces. Gautama's lack of care and attention towards her too adds to further a distresses and tensions between the two and makes Maya drift even more away from him. She is unable to strike a balance between her inner self and the realities of the outer world. The insight of the albino astrologer also haunts Maya who portends that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of their marriage. This childhood prophecy remains deeply rooted in her mind and becomes one of the reason for her abnormal behavior:

The astrologer, that creeping sly magician of my fantasies, no of course they were not hallucinations. Arjun had proved them to me and yet said they be real? Had never said anything to suggest that it was I who has to die, unnatural and unviolently for years after my marriage, nothing to suggest that he even thought that. (12)

Maya has nothing to do in her idle time after Totto's death. She has nothing to do to kill the lonely hours. She feels isolated and neglected by her husband. She reflects, "Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body of the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed" (9). Neglect on Gautama's part and a childless life gives rise to her frustration and she becomes psychic. Their relationship goes through a catastrophe and neither of the two makes any sincere efforts to save their marriage. On the contrary, after Totto's death, Gautama advises Maya to practice detachment, as attachment leads to self – destruction. Both of them share a difference of opinion about life and do not wish to see things beyond their perspective.

Maya experiences rages of revolt and terror. As insanity overpowers her, she sees the vision of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her. Her dark house resembles nothing but a tomb to her. Maya is governed by strange obsessions. Over the time she becomes hypersensitive. She is in love with life and turns hysteric over the fear of death. She wants to live life and find a meaning to it, but at the same time she knows death is the only escape from all the problems and realities of life. Maya is confused over her own identity in life all the time. From being an over-protected daughter to becoming a childless woman who is just a piece of furniture to her husband, all of which just got the worst out of her. It is her desire to live and the fear of death that drives her mad to such an extent that even though she is lost and has been driven to insanity, instead of killing or hurting herself, she pushes Gautama down the parapet. Like Lady Macbeth she becomes a victim of hallucinations that disintegrate her consciousness.

Gautama's Death

Gautama's death takes away all her interest from life which should have been the other way around as she chose to end his life over hers. Gautama's detachment for more involvement in life and his inability to understand Maya's identity leads to the killing of her husband. According to Desai, Maya must love in order to live as peacocks do, and like peacocks she must tear the mate and be torn by him. *Cry, the Peacock* depicts Maya's neurosis. She becomes a pathetic and psychic figure who kills Gautama as she thinks he is the root cause for her suffering. Maya suffers from conjugal incompatibility. She fails to find her own self- identity that leaves her emotionally and psychologically shattered and lonely in the end.

Exploring the Private World

Desai prefers to explore the private to the public world. Her real concern is the exploration of the human psyche, inner climate and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters like that of Maya. Her female protagonists are alienated from the world, society and family because they think of themselves as individuals. Her characters are self-centered who want to change either the situation or things around themselves. When loneliness is force on such characters they became rebels. Tensions, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear

become their lot and they lose their sense of sanity. Her female characters project the battles that are fought and those left unsought. The psychological battle is fought against traditionally defined womanhood. The psychological suffering of finding themselves and their identity along with the pressures felt by women to fulfill the demands placed by the so-called ideal concept of womanhood, culminates in withdrawal, regression, neurosis, and suicide mania.

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