

**Psychoanalytic Approach In The Novel Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock***

**DR. S. SOBANA**

Assistant Professor of English

Department of English

The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi

dr.s.sobana@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*The focal point of the research study is to explore the Indian women's experiences in the novel of Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock. Based on the exploration of women's experiences in the two major spheres that are the personal or domestic and the public sphere, it examines how their spatial existence and movement are constrained by the patriarchal ideologies enforced by men in the community. Also, this research investigates on the Psycho Analytical Method of Desai's writings. With the psychoanalytical research methods, this research highlights the peculiar behavior of the protagonist as a result of the identity crisis caused by the upsetting experiences. We can examine how intricate a human mind is and how diverse her characters react to the identical situations.*

*Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock is in fact Maya's story, the story of her married life with Gautam and the entire story is a 'remembrance of things past', by Maya herself. Maya's neurotic brain leads to the ghastly disclosure that she is reluctant not to leave Gautam, but to this pulsating world. The gradual disintegration of Maya's world is narrated through her own words. Desai evokes the right atmosphere through the rich imagery characteristic of her style and the apt use of symbols. The psychological issue in Maya's life attains the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the essential loneliness that corrodes her being and makes it impossible for her to find meaning in an arid existence.*

**Keywords:** Individual, Neurotic, Society, Patriarchal. Psychological.

Anita Desai can be considered the writer of the psychological novel since she writes about the interior motives of characters and psychological effects of actions. Anita Desai has contributed a lot in making Indian English fiction popular the world over by shifting the domain of her fiction from outer to inner reality and by carrying of the flow of mental experience of its characters.

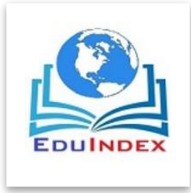


Anita Desai brings something new to the Indian English novel. Instead of portraying character in terms of the environment, or defining an individual in terms of his social or caste functions, Anita Desai creates character and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character. Moreover, as a true artist, Desai presents each character as an unsolved mystery. It gives to the Indian English novel a psychological sophistication which was lacking. Most of the other Indian English novelists are not interested in their characters. Too often, they present an outsider's view of human nature.

Anita Desai's world is very restricted. It excludes much that is authentically Indian. Her characters are from the well-to-do sections of Indian society. Their problems are psychological or spiritual, not social, or economical. They passionately discuss issues like conformity and rebellion, attachment and detachment. But the ordinary problems of everyday life are never really touched upon. Since Desai's characters belong to the affluent section of Indian society they never really have to face the problem of the struggle for existence. Hunger, starvation, poverty, the mute misery of the millions of Indians is never touched upon by Anita Desai. Professor Alan Lightman said "She is one of the world's most distinguished novelists in English". Her novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalized in Indian fiction, children and the elderly "She is a novelist of the human psyche and she approaches her subjects quietly and delicately".

Anita Desai dives deeply, darkly and silently tries to work out the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the virgin territories of modern lifestyle. 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. It is imperative on our part to discuss her technique of articulating such experiences of inner and outer realities. It seems that the imagination of the novelist is horrified by the emptiness of modern life, a sense of insecurity surrounds the milieu of her fiction. Being a woman novelist she sides more intensely with the heroines of her novels, yet very honestly she studies the heroes too. She does not associate with any feminist movement as she makes it clear that her concern as an artist is with individual man and woman. But she is chiefly interested in exploration of psychic depths of her characters.

Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963 and can be considered a psychological novel as it deals with the explored recesses of a man's heart and his inner psyche. *Cry, The Peacock* is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of Maya. By exploring Maya's mind through images, conscious, unconscious, the author Anita Desai has firmly established the psychological novel in the annals of Indo – English fiction.



In the novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, the sequencing is more psychological and presentational than chronological. The first part of the novel reveals the inherent qualities of the protagonists and however the reader is not told anything about their identities. In other words, the death of a pet is all that the novel reveals in the beginning at a point of least supposition and ends on a point where the reader feels that he knows all about Maya and Gautam, hence he is not shocked by the end. The interior monologue, the conversation between Maya and Gautam, the hallucinations of Maya, are all detailed psychological analysis of the innermost self of Maya and though chronologically we feel that time has moved, Desai's deft presentational sequencing patterns it all in flashbacks and dramatic modes of soliloquy, giving us the impression of a life story.

Maya, the central character of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with the gloomy prophecy of the albino astrologer. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. Obeying his wish Maya keeps the prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautam enters the fourth year. Now triggered off by the death of her pet dog, Toto, it assumes during the course of the novel the shape of an obsessional neurosis and keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on a tender leaf.

It is strange that Maya should so superstitiously believe in the veracity of the prophecy although she knows that Gautam and his family "hoot with derision at the mention of superstition" (CTP 75-76). In the beginning, she frequently tells herself that it was she herself who was fated to die. But she is in ardent love with life. So she soon begins to wonder whether it was not "Gautam's life that was threatened" (CTP 164). Taking this line of reasoning further she fears for her life and would keep the secret for herself at any cost. Not very long after she is almost convinced that Gautam is certainly fated to die and the thought makes her more and more secretive.

I glanced at him now, slyly, for sly I had grown with such a load of secrets that had to be hidden from him, such evil and awful secrets. (CTP 165)

It has been suggested in the novel and later harped on by critics that Maya is obsessed with the prophecy because of the romance involved in it. But the knowledge of depth psychology holds the promise of examining her irrational and superstitious belief from an entirely new angle.

Maya is extremely faithful to her instincts which, as is their nature, crave for unqualified and wild satisfaction. According to Freudian tenets normal people in her circumstances would have affected a withdrawal by influencing the instinctual urges at



the psychic level. But tragically for Maya her very life appears to be intricately woven with and highly dependent on her instincts. Given her instinctually Maya expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both of them are denied to her, one by Gautam's cold intellectuality and the other by his age. Maya's longing for the sensuous enjoyment of life is dampened by liberal doses of the Gita philosophy of non-attachment. Her effusive emotionality is always counter-balanced by Gautam's analytical mind. While he views "nothing subjectively, nothing with passion", (CTP 150) she is "flooded with tenderness and gratitude" (CTP 11) when he merely touches her hair, falls "into soft, velvet well of the primordium or original instinct, of first-formed love" (CTP 11) when he draws a finger down her cheek, and take to hating her own pretty face for failing to make any impact on him. She has to thus continually contend with unreciprocated emotionality and feels terrible on that score.

Inspite of her total frustration, Maya's moral scrupulosity does not allow her to cross the bounds of marital morality. Nor is she able to sublimate this powerful biological urge in the manner of her friend Leila who selflessly serves her tuberculous husband. Her married life ends up being emotionally and socially sterile.

A healthy emotional and sexual life would have given her a sense of security and stopped her psyche from decaying. Freud comments from his *Sexual Morality*:

The more strictly a woman has been brought up and the more sternly she has submitted to the demands of civilizations, the more she is afraid of taking this way out; and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty, she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis. Nothing protects her virtue as securely as illness. (47)

Maya too seeks a neurotic solution but only to find it inadequate. Something more drastic than neurosis needs to be considered by her psyche.

Secondly, Maya perceives that eventually she will lose herself as a result of a long experience of eventlessness. Her life appears to her as an endless tedium with nothing significant taking place at any time. She is never the centre of importance nor is she instrumental in any event. The sphere of her social activities is so severely restricted that she seems to feel suffocated within it. But by Indian standards her life situation appears to be ideal. She has a secure home, earning husband and a well-defined future. These seemingly ideal external conditions are however not acceptable to her unconscious where her desire for unbridled freedom is hidden.

The fact of Maya's constricted life comes most vividly alive in the scene of all make party. Charmed by the vibrating rich Urdu poetry recited by these cultured wine-drinking gentlemen, Maya breaks an age old rule and joins them. While the other men politely, but uneasily, respond to her presence Gautam not only shatters her hope of



participating in her pulsating and poetry-charged atmosphere but also subtly drives home to her the truth that she does not belong there.

Turning his back to me, he stood talking to a friend, a glass in his hand, and his voice rose, in order that I might hear, when he said, 'Blissful, yes, because it is unrelated to our day, unclouded by the vulgarity of ill-educated men, or of overbearing women...' (CTP 104)

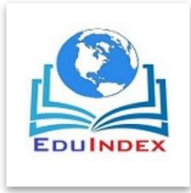
To add to her problems stemming from inactivity she remains childless. The birth of a child would have given her a sense of achievement and her creative urge would have got focused on a helplessly dependent human being instead of getting diffused over nature.

Three plus year of married life and the prospect of a passionless and unchallenging life for the next forty or fifty years, during which she would continue to be obedient to her husband and face neither choices nor challenges, comes as a shocking revelation to her hyper-active mind. Her repeated confession that she or Gautam will surely die, in a way, indicates that the opposite would be true – that especially Gautam will not die before her. So according to this logic if she is to live and find the happiness that is her due Gautam will have to go. And the focal point of her thought, day in and day out, becomes the albino's prophecy which appears to justify and dramatize her wish. But she allows herself considerable time before she does anything drastic. All through the novel, Maya keeps her wish hidden in her unconscious and the prophecy itself shrouded in secrecy.

This is because as a neurotic she is still aware of the moral sanctions against such wishes. Indoctrinated to be faithful to her husband, she feels her hand held back by an invisible force. The neurotic defense mechanisms such as sleep rituals, hallucinatory visions and nightmares, experience of split personality, adverse somatic symptoms and religious avoidance of violence woefully fail to blunt the edge of her unconscious wish. At most places she appears to reel under the pressure and break into pieces as a result of the struggle within. She is aware of the unseemly consequences and she is scared of not only society but her own conscience. Madhusudhan Prasad in his *Anita Desai: The Novelist* briefly alludes to Maya as a neurotic figure:

In *Cry, The Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from martial discord, and verges on a curious insanity. (03)

In order to be done with Gautam without antagonising the social imperatives and her super-ego the only way that is still open to her is psychosis. Once a human organism is entrusted to psychosis nature takes its own course. The preservation of its physical integrity becomes more important than the protection of its social image. In fact, in



psychotics the super-ego, the moral agency, becomes completely inactive. Psychosis would thus help Maya to carry out her wish without earning disapproval. She therefore progressively moves towards a psychotic solution to her struggle.

Maya's shutting herself in as a measure of protection from the raging dust-storm is symbolic of her total withdrawal from the world of purposeful action and meaningful. The exact point of her plunging into the abysmal depths of psychosis, however, is her act of violence itself. Maya's pushing Gautam off the parapet of their house is not fortuitous. There are simply no accidents in psychic life. Behind Maya's final indulgence in violence there has been a prolonged psychic struggle which she has not known herself. Having done the deed and having taken recourse to psychosis she relaxes and openly declares that unlike her, Gautam has not been in love with life and so according to the prophecy he had to die.

Her superstitious belief thus helped her immensely in the process of unconsciously identifying her problems and their source. From a shadowy figure the albino sprang to life and has come to mean much to her during her neurotic struggle. Governed by the primary process thinking she does not camouflage her thoughts by drawing on her linguistic resources any more. Her adult life with all its responsibilities and anxieties has become a sealed book for Maya. She is faithful to herself and the social moral consequences of her actions do not matter to her any more.

To conclude, the essence of the novel's development is to be found not in the gradual unfolding of the protagonist's consciousness, but of her neurosis. Out of this arises an encounter of the self and the world outside. The novel deals with the problematical rather than the comfortable answer to the question of neurosis, nightmare and the subconscious world. Maya's attempt to liberate herself from fear of death becomes writing down of the star this week, horoscopes, blind superstitions, that many of us make a hell of our lives. In the ultimate analysis Maya's fear is for death and so her choice of flight and consequently, that leads to death and destruction of life.

At the heart of the story fear exists by virtue of concrete facts of consciousness. This consciousness, as depicted by Anita Desai, is dependent upon the look, through which conflict in human relationship and domination of the object is also brought out in bold relief. Death as a theme has been one of her concern. Since fear of death is also fear of the unknown, the reflective emotional awareness of it is brilliantly dramatized in this novel. The psychological nature of the theme justifies the form speaking of her mode of narration, she remarks:

Writing is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting. It is the movement of the wing one tries to capture not the bird. That is, it



is the image that matters, the symbols, the myth, and the feat of associating them, of relating them, of constructing with them.

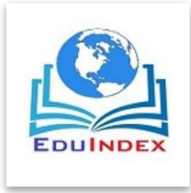
Anita Desai's purpose in writing is to discover for herself and then aesthetically convey the truth which for her is synonymous with art. She is remarkably successful in portraying the psyche of her sensitive, emotional and sensuous characters. Her language seems smooth and expresses an inner world of her select characters so impressively that the readers attention is rarely detracted by its few minor limitations. Desai has enormously contributed to the growth of Indian fiction in English by incorporating psychic aspects of her female characters. These salient features of her novels make Anita Desai an exceptionally unique novelist among the host of Indian English novelists. Meenakshi Mukerjee has aptly remarked from his *Twice Born Fiction* that,

Anita Desai is a rare example of an Indian English writer who achieves the difficult task of bending English language to her purpose without a self-conscious attempt at sounding Indian. (190)

The technique of 'free indirect discourse' (which means interweaving of characters' subjective feelings with author's account of the characters inner state) which has been freely used in the novel is a distinctive feature of psychological novel. Psychological analysis and concern with primeval issues, however valuable to our understanding of life are certainly not the choice of many a reader who picks up a work of literary art and especially a novel more for entertainment, rather than to be lured into thinking about serious problems of life. Incidentally these problems are the very theme of modern fiction.

Through the sensitive portrayal of the psychic conflicts and the psychological contours of helpless people the novelist seems to underline the importance of subverting the established values and replacing them with the values which are more amenable to human nature and which promote happiness. For this purpose the steely frame of the social machine, which forges and fosters the values, itself needs an overhaul. The women novelist brings home this point by subtly indicating that the society is often indifferent and vindictive towards sensitive and suffering people while actually it should be rushing to their help.

Psychoanalytic approach thus helps us with a better appreciation of the human situation of the characters of the novelist and sharpens our understanding of the characters and enhances our sympathy for them. At a time when the opinion that one has reached the limits of critical possibility in the field of Indian writing in English gradually sets, the endeavour to study the neurotic characters using psychoanalytic insights promises to reveal the new depths in the fiction of Indian English women writers.



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-07

### Two-Day National seminar on

**"Artificial Intelligence, Multimedia and ICT in Teaching,  
Learning and Acquisition"**

sponsored by

**Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi**  
on 23rd and 24th September 2019 at **Department of English,**  
**SRI S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur, Tamilnadu, India**



## References

- [1] Desai, Anita. *Cry, The Peacock*. Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi. 1980.
- [2] Rajeshwar, M. *Indian Women Novelists and Psychoanalysis*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. 2001.
- [3] Tiwari, Shubha. *Critical Responses To Anita Desai*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. 2004.
- [4] Chakranarayan, Mohini. *Style Studies in Anita Desai*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. 2000.
- [5] Bhatnagar, Manmohan K. *Indian Writing in English. Volume V*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. 1999.
- [6] Freud, Sigmund. *Sexual Morality and Modern Morality*. Paris Presses Univ, France. 1950.
- [7] Mukerjee, Meenakshi. *Twice Born Fiction: Indian Novel in English*. Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1972.
- [8] Prasad, Madhusudhan. *Anita Desai: The Novelist*. New Horizon, Allahabad. 1981.