CHAPTER II

CRY, THE PEACOCK:
“ALIENATION AND EXPLOSION”
Anita Desai’s first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* begins: “All day long the body lay rotting in the sun.”¹ This is conventional for any post-war novel, but it has none of the implications of any war save the one perpetually raging within every sensitive human being. In this novel, the style had a curious compatibility with her theme because the narrator of *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, is a hypersensitive young woman, tense, and over-wrought. The manner of narration reveals elements of her personality. The narrator’s slow advance towards insanity and then death is the theme of the novel, and the main pattern is “the contrast between this woman’s response to the world through her senses, and her husband’s response through his intellect.”²

The novel seeks to explore the metaphysical conflict between two different approaches to life manifest in the story of Maya and Gautama. Daughter of a wealthy father, Maya is married to Gautama who is very senior to her in age, a friend of her father. While Maya is interested in all good things of life - in nature, in its ever-changing beauty, in the life of birds and animals, in poetry and in dance - Gautama is a dry, matter-of-fact, and prosaic personality. Maya’s love for the good things of
life is looked upon by him as nothing more than sentimentalism. Gautama looks down upon Maya's thoughts and musings as trivial and describes the cultural atmosphere of her father as decadent. At the root of Maya's psychic retrogression lies the disparity between their dispositions: "she experiences the world through the senses while Gautama looks at it through reason."3 There are a number of other differences between Maya and her husband but all these could have been endured by her, provided her emotional needs could be gratified.

The novel begins with the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog. Its death causes a great fear in her mind: "she sat there, sobbing, and waiting for her husband to come home. Now and then she went out onto verandah, and looked to see if he were coming up." (5) On the other hand, Gautama's reaction to the incident is that of intellectual detachment; he views it as a minor incident. He returns from office and very efficiently, precisely disposes off the matter: I sent it away to be cremated ... It is all over. Come, won't you pour out my tea? (6)
Maya is a weak character easily swayed by emotions while Gautama is stronger because of his pragmatic approach. Maya is sensitive and her moments of illumination throw light on fossilized ways of being, but she lacks the knowledge and the strength to overcome her alienation and despondency.

Something slipped into my tear-hazed vision, a shadowy something, that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone and I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not ever experienced, and filled me with this despair. (7)

It is the confrontation with death that disturbs her and not just the callousness of Gautama:

I crept into a corner of the bed, crouched there, thinking that it was perhaps because of Gautama not understanding. 'It is allover,' he had said as calmly as the meditator beneath the Sal tree. 'You need a cup of tea,' he had said, showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. (8-9)
The alienation of Maya is not related to the reality of her circumstances. It is a product of her own consciousness. It is in part linked to the process of her growing up, from self-alienation to self-identification. In the development of the problem of alienation between Gautama and Maya, there is a perpetual seesaw movement between facticity and transcendence. The citing of the Gita and the manner in which Gautama preaches it with philosophical detachment is a sure and positive indication of his commitment to a higher and transcendental kind of love. On the other hand, Maya pines for a life of sensations, a tender touch of his hand and for an exchange of laughter with him. Her attachment to him is but a physical one. It is this polarity between these two kinds of love that leaves her in the lurch. Alienated, she feels uncertain of her stance in the socio-psychic world. Hence she starts searching for her identity around her. The facts of life and the fiction of imagination are seen to be battling against each other in her split-self. The conflict is more psychological than moral. Gautama is not totally alienated from Maya. He tries to comfort her with a cup of tea. He helps her by attending to the needs of the dead Toto and sees to it that “they lifted him with
care" (6). She feels that she is lonely and abandoned and none understands her and that her isolation and aloofness is of his making. In her own words,

*I was alone. Yes, I whimpered, it is that I am alone, and then gave myself up to a fit of furious pillow-beating, kicking, everything but crying. From childhood experience, I knew this to be sweetly exhausting.* (9)

Critics have tried to diagnose her mental break down and its pattern: "The thematic development of mental experience ... through the three stages of self-delusion, fragmentation and Schizophrenia and finally visionary intuition ... Maya is definitely pronounced mad and ... at the end of the novel, awaiting transfer to a mental asylum."4

Thus her alienation is more mythical and illusive than real. It is however in the symbolism of the peacocks that Maya's estrangement is fully articulated. She discerns her identity in the monsoon-tormented peacocks pining for love and it is this self-identification that generates anguish in her.
The death of Toto stands symbolically for her own psychic death, a fact which her husband is obvious of. Lack of communication, contact and relatedness is the chief cause of her anguish. Her affinity with Gautama is marked by loneliness and lack of communication. Alienation of Maya is existential for it centres round her hard and impassioned existence in an isolated world in which even her husband remains aloof from her emotional and sexual urges. Her predicament is indeed the fate of the alienated individual spirit craving for contact and companionship.

In her childhood, Maya had been brought up by her father who had prevented her from seeing the ugliness and sorrows of the world. Having been brought up in a protected atmosphere, she is unaware of the unpleasant realities of life. In her own words:

my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was a pretty one. (89)
This has made her an extremely sensitive character with a lot of imagination bordering on the hysterical. She had lust for life, finding pagan pleasure in nature and world; she had "sensual pleasure in living." Her sensuous pleasure is so acute that she can readily and instinctively identify herself with natural objects and animals but not with human beings which demand the exercise of commonsense. One incident from her childhood makes it clear. A bear-trainer gets a bear to her house and Maya gets sentimental pleasure from watching the bear's "lavish delight" as it strips the bananas given by her "neatly and deftly and swallows them quickly, quickly" (87). But she feels anxious that the trainer probably does not give much food to the bear and this haunts her so much that on that night she dreams of hungry bears "grabbing and gesticulating" and subsequently falls very ill. This focusses on her partial vision of the world, a world devoid of human beings and perceived only through the senses. Her husband blames her father for her immaturity and inability to cope with the realities of life which is more often than not unpleasant:

He is the one responsible for this - for making you believe that all that is important!
in the world is to possess, possess-riches, comforts, posies, dollys, loyal retainers - all the luxuries of the fairy tales you were brought upon. Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man. You won't find it in your picture-books. And that was all you were ever shown - picture books. What wickedness to raise a child like that .... And here you are, capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real. How prettily you stroll in your garden, dreaming of the fairies that sleep in the buds. (115)

This subjective and partial vision constitutes her illusion and she admits that as a child she had “enjoyed, princess like ... the fantasies of Arabian nights, the glories and bravado of Indian Mythology” (43). Here is a fairy tale world and it is no wonder that she fails to establish rapport with real human beings in her adult life. Her inability to communicate with Gautama proves sinister for her, for in the process of suppressing her emotions she grows insane:
In a sudden, impulsive longing to be with him, be close to him, I leapt up ... preparing myself, then joining him at last .... But when I went to rouse him from the couch, with a touch, I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep .... I hesitated, wishing to summon him to me, yet knowing he could never join me. It was of no use. After all I sighed - and once more, was sad. (93)

This shows the deep frustration in her married life, her inability to express herself. It is also suggestive of the wide chasm between her illusions and the reality of others, between what she expects and what happens. Maya is constantly obsessed with the prediction by the albino astrologer of death either for her or her husband within four years of her marriage. "In Maya, the death-wish surfaces when in her flight from the shades, she indulges in a riot of funeral fears and musings. At the same time, she is achingly responsive to the beauty and poetry of life. The tension thus built up defines the misery of her being."5 She becomes so obsessed with the predicted disaster that every trivial thing
becomes an intimation of the impending danger and she is frightened by the prospect of death:

> I knew the time had come. It was now to be either Gautama or I. (33)

Maya’s reminiscential excursions draw back the curtains of time, allowing the past to flood into the present and become a part and parcel of it. It is this psychic and reminiscential confrontation with the pale albino that generates the feel of alienation in her. She identifies herself with the myriad stars in the sky which are separated from one another by darkness. The infinite stars remind her of her own identity, of her loneliness. She sets up a melancholy yell, “what is the use? I am alone.” (22)

Traditionally man has been regarded as a protector, a master, a guardian of women. The modern educated woman has however started resenting this attitude. For instance, Gautama treats Maya as a child and she resents it. At one point both of them are walking together and Maya refers to the beauty of a flower, Gautama plucks it and hands it to Maya saying, “who should deny you that?” he said “and smiled at me as to a
winsome child" (121). Then in a debate Maya says: And you will think me a tiresome child for it, for showing what you once called my third-rate poetess' mind. (113)

Thus all of a sudden Maya behaves like the present-day woman who finally realized that she is not as helpless and dependent as a child. She is as much competent as man. But then the old samskaras shake her new faith and she is struggles to come out of the shackles of such old samskaras.

Maya is genuinely interested in Kathakali dances, the ballet, etc. So she requests Gautama to take her to the south. To this he says,

If that is your only reason for wanting to go all the way to south, I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give performance in Delhi.... It will be less expensive. (43)

In such a milieu, Maya feels herself an alien and an outsider in Gautama's family. Her feel of alienation is intensified and she reverts to childhood memories as an escape but there too she feels estranged since the image of the pale and tenebrific albino is still haunting her psyche. Similarly the pet's death
shatters Maya beyond measure. And she tells Gautama: Oh, Gautama, pets mightn't mean anything to you, and yet mean a world to me. (16) This irks him and he says, You go chattering like a monkey I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking. (16)

The anguish in Maya's life may be traced to the fact that she believes surrender of self to be subtraction from her personal freedom and wholeness. Maya's unhappiness can be traced in part to external circumstances - her over-protected childhood and adolescence which makes it difficult for her to face the realities of adult life - and the Oedipus complex - excessive love and dependence on her father which makes her seek a father substitute in her husband Gautama which obviously is not possible. This complex prevents her from achieving a satisfactory sexual relationship with her husband. The father in the unconscious impinges on the husband-in-the conscious, thereby creating martial discord in her conjugal life. Then there is her superstitious belief in the albino astrologer's prophecy - which predicted death after four years of marital life. More than prophecy itself, her father's handling of the episode, the dismissal 24
of the ayah, the hounding out of the astrologer - make Maya push the disagreeable prophecy deep into her subconscious. The death of her pet dog Toto triggers her memory and once again she is caught up in the horror of the possibility of her imminent death. The utter lack of communication between the husband and the wife add to her inner suffering and she becomes habituated to brooding over her miserable condition:

Being intensely in love with life she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death: “Am I gone insane? Father: Brother: Husband: who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep, again. There is no rest any more - only death and waiting. (98)

It is not only the memory of the albino astrologer’s prophecy which pushes her towards insanity but her brother Arjuna’s letter which mentions the horoscope. The tension within her gives rise to a severe headache symptomatic of her desire to elude issues.
Maya's mother-in-law is highly active, social and concerned with many social causes. As is the case with such women, she is defeminized. She is more concerned with her social work than the crying need of lonely Maya who asks to stay for some more time with her. If Maya's voice is soft and lilting, hers is "a voice at once soft and broken with harshness, so that I could not tell whether she said this out of affection or had some motive far removed from any personal feeling" (47). She is the ascetic type born to serve the world with immense energy, busy with her many preoccupations. Her asceticism is symbolized through her meagre and dull coloured clothes: In that stark room, I was the only one who wore a sari of a bright colour. The rest wore colours that no one could care about. (49)

Maya earnestly needs her mother-in-law's company: If they stayed a while, they might help me, as my own father could not, by teaching me some of that marvellous indifference to everything that was not vital, immediate and present. I did not know how they could do this, but somehow it had to be done. (162) Being motherless, she craves for motherly tenderness and refuge from her mother-in-law: And yet I yearned for her to hold
me to her bosom. I could not remember my own mother at all. (163) Maya implores her to stay. When the mother-in-law says: How can I, child? She said, smiling and then frowning, 'It is impossible.' (163) She becomes searingly aware of her loneliness. Her desire for life turns into a death-wish and this abrupt metamorphosis is first communicated through the symbolism of the moon and later through the symbolism of the peacocks. The moon symbolically becomes a demonic entity tormenting her mind. Maya's aloofness is the result of polar motivation. Alienated equally from family and society she leads an anguished life. Her alienation is existential for it goes with the awareness of the loneliness of time and impossible vastness of space, issuing out of her morbid reaction to Toto. It is nostalgic and melancholic. The cooing of the dove irritates her. The doves in a mood for mating, cooed to each other. She was distracted. Their mating was to her an omen of ill fortune of estrangement, for their coo was a tedious repetition of the fatal words, "Go Away" (35). But the alienation for which the copulating doves stand for is not the alienation of Maya. Her's is a far more enduring one. Theirs is natural and instinctive whereas hers is though apparently natural
yet self-imposed and compulsive. Maya develops in herself a sense of abhorrence for the cooing doves, an apt objective correlative for her emotional attitudes and moods. It is her conjugal disharmony which engenders a sense of detachment towards the cooing and copulating doves she fails to “connect.” Her inability to connect makes her anguished on seeing the dove’s mate. Maya’s existentialist quest for identity and her desire for emancipating herself from the clutches of her anguished psyche has been very graphically ventilated by Anita Desai in the following words:

*The rolling cotton-balls, the flying yellow leaves, the surging clouds of dust, all seemed to flee, and yet could not ... and returned to continue struggle for escape. Something similar heaved inside me ... a longing, a dread, search for solution, despair.* (35)

Maya’s husband’s sister Nila wants to separate from her husband and seeks legal help from her brother Gautama. According to Gautama, the marriage fails because of Nila and hence, he says, “I haven’t time to waste on a case like hers - the mess she makes by
being too bossy and self-willed and bullying” (161-162). Her mother also dislikes the idea of divorce and believes that Nila has learnt everything “except lead a sensible life.” She says tartly, “for she hated this matter of a divorce in the family, and children going fatherless.” But Nila’s situation touches the right chord in Maya and she was “admiring” her. The similarity between the two is their marital discord.

Besides her father, Maya has some friends. One of them is Leila who is nursing her dying husband whom she had married knowing that he is consumptive:

*He had been dying of tuberculosis when she fell in love with him, and she had married the fatality of his disease as much as the charm of his childish personality or the elegance of his dark hair falling across his white brow.* (57)

For Maya, she has “wisdom combined with calm.” She is resigned and is a foil to Maya, for unlike her she has accepted the sick husband, one room house, and drudgery of life, never having fun, suffering a husband “teasing her parents who had
not seen her, written to her, or in any way communicated with her since the day of her elopement" (58). From the educated fatalist Leila, Maya's memory comes to "pom, the pink, plump, pretty pom who did not speak of fate, who had never been ill, or overworked or bitter" (60). She is described by Maya:

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\text{Logic, tact, diplomacy - nothing mattered to her who chattered so glibly and gaily all the day long, jumping up now and then to bring out a new pair of shoes, a new set of rings to show me, talking with eagerness and animation of anything that was new and bright, and never, referring to family, tradition, custom, superstition, all that I dreaded now. I was certain she hated such talk as much as I did, even if she had no reason to fear them. Such things simply did not step over the bright enamelled horizon of her painted world, for such things bore shadows, and shadows were alien to her. (61)}
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She is contrast to Maya and she is fed up with living with her-in-laws whereas Maya craves for the company of her mother-in-law and does not get it. In the midst of all these she looks for comfort in Gautama's company. He, for her is the "meditator"
beneath the 'bo' tree, who seems to have arrived at detachment like Buddha. She wants to fulfill her existence through his love. But Gautama aspires as near the goal of the *Gita* as is humanly possible. Maya's account, though not objective all along, sometimes acknowledges that Gautama is perturbed by her behaviour, by her apathy, by her lack of vocation and self control. And she sometimes feels that love rises above attachment. In such moments of sanity and control she wishes her death, a wish indicative of her desire to link her inner fears with the world of other reality.

Maya internally rebels against Gautama for his autocratic and selfish behaviour. She knows the fact, "In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me and he couldn't understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me" (104). Maya's suffering emanates from her existential struggle to make her relationship with Gautama meaningful and her desire to experience life with all the pleasures it is capable or offering. Gautama admits, "we work for fame, name, money." (117)
In the midst of racking mental pains it occurs to her that since the albino has predicated death to either of them, it may be Gautama, and she whose life is threatened. Thus she transfers her death-wish to Gautama and thinks that as he is “detached” and indifferent to life, it will not matter much if he is made to lose life. Such is the disturbed condition of Maya that she is haunted by the word “murder.” Gautama remains so much lost in his work that he is oblivious of the dust-storm that has occurred earlier in the afternoon. However, he accompanies Maya to the roof of the house when she requests him to do so. While passing out of the room, Maya catches sight of the bronze Shiva dancing and she prays to the Lord of the Dance to protect her. While Maya and her husband are having a walk on the terrace she becomes enraptured by the pale hushed glow of the rising moon. As Gautama moves in front of her, the moon is hidden from her view. In a fit of frenzy, she pushes him over the parapet wall to pass through an immaturity of air down to the very bottom. Thus her husband’s life comes to a sudden and tragic end, and in a state of complete mental derangement, Maya is sent by Gautama’s mother and sister to the house of her father. Maya and
Gautama end up being two sides of the same coin, in each case the exclusiveness of the self makes it unable to accommodate the other. Unable to attain a dialectical synthesis the self is destroyed.

The final scene of death where Maya pushes Gautama is a poignant comment on Maya's retrogression into her own fantasy world. Maya's homicidal act is an accident even though she comes to the conclusion that she, and not Gautama, is destined to live. Her will to life and power rescues her from one way of dying, but paves the path to another:

At the parapet edge, I paused, made him pause, and his words were lost to me as I saw the moon's vast, pure surface ... so that it appeared a great, multifoliate, waxy white, virginal, chaste and absolute white, casting a light that was holy in the purity, a soft, suffusing glow of its chastity, casting its reflection upon the night with a vast, tender mother love. (179)

The mistake of Gautama was that he came between her and the worshipped moon, transgressing an inviolable law.
Explaining her stand to her husband's family members, she confesses: "It had to be one of us, you see, it was clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn't really matter. He didn't care, and I did" (185). Maya's mind had lost the divisions between reality and unreality.

"Alienation operates at two levels in the novel, the physical and the mental. Physical alienation which engenders an atmosphere of loneliness is lulled by psychic alienation which escalates the spiritual anguish of Maya." Maya's meditative frame of mind, her tender sensibility and her artistic vision is also in a large measure responsible for her alienation. The sense of her isolation from the milieu aggravates her feel of insecurity and incertitude, which in turn leads to her quest for identity. The father in the unconscious keeps on torturing her mind. In her father, she identifies a part of her self... the self that belonged to the halcyon days of the past. She regards Gautama not as husband but as a father substitute, as a lover, which leads to her alienation and detachment from him. Dwelling in a universe that seems to her alien and hostile, she retreats within the vastness of the self, only to discover that she does not know herself ...
Engaged in an interminable monologue, she develops the habit of introspection to such a degree that she comes to feel entirely alone, cut off from communication with others. Nothing real, learnt of all, herself.

In Part III of the novel, Maya is not seen through her own eyes but as an elfin spirit in the ancestral house in Lucknow awaiting her assignment to an asylum, with the strange peace of a soul that has crossed the border of terror. The victory of her child-like leanings through a description of events leading upto Gautama's death upto how her own mental breakdown has come about have been reported by Maya herself in Part II. When her child-self is released, the darkness within could suddenly overwhelm and blot out the universe. That is what happens. Maya's long alienation - both physical and temperamental - finally ends up in an explosion - an explosive death she designs for her self.
REFERENCES

1. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p.5. All further references to the text are to this edition.


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