CHAPTER-II
ENGIMATIC ALIENATION: CRY, THE PEACOCK

Anita Desai’s works mark a new and mature phase in Indian English fiction. She gives a new dimension through her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) which shifted the focus to the unexplored realm of the female psyche. The hallmark of Desai’s fiction is “to focus on the inner experience of life” (Dodiya 6). Her novels present social conditions but she lays greater stress on the exploration of the inner self, because it is the inner self, which decides the character of a person. Desai’s protagonists reject the unquestioning acceptance of a traditional female role. She portrays their rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. The protagonists who are unhappy, unfilled and neurotic women prove to be attractive and finely tuned beings. Desai’s portrayal of feminine personality and feminine psyche is different from other Indian novelists. N.R. Gopal notices that: “Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal woman” (21). Her novels are probe into the dark interiors of the human psyche and a description of the various forms loneliness.

Anita Desai’s novels reveal her persistent concern for the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adoption necessitated by the threats to the individual’s identity and relation to her artistic skill primarily lies in the reality. G.Raj called Desai as "a writer with an original voice” (Dodiya 107). The women characters in her novels live a dual life - the inner and the outer. She delves deep into the inner psychic lives of her
characters. She shows how they suffer internally by the torture of the family and society. Desai’s protagonists are lonely creatures. They have different stages in life and they are all fragile introverts and their emotional traumas sometimes lead to violent death.

The most predominant theme in the Anita Desai’s novels is the complexity of human relationships, particularly man-woman relationship. Madhusudan Prasad observes, “In Cry, the Peacock, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discard and verges on a curious insanity” (3). Her women are not ordinary women, but sensitive beings. They possess refined sensibilities with the complexion of aesthetics. Her male characters are rational, pragmatic and logical. This temperamental incompatibility triggers a sense of frustration and alienation among her women characters. They live as emotionally unfulfilled souls. A common trait in all major women characters is their longing to be free of all kinds of social and familial involvement. Their expectation from their family and society leads to final disaster. Anita Desai in her academic discourse explains that “it has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novel...” (Srivastava 3). Desai’s presentation of the inner experience is authentic and expressive. She provides adequate motivation for feelings and response.

*Cry, the Peacock* is one of the most poetic and evocative novels in Indian English literature. D.S. Maini says, “*Cry, the Peacock* is an extended ode in prose” (123). It deals with a narrow aspect of Indian culture and setting. It can be considered a trend-setting
novel. The structure of *Cry, the Peacock* is intended to underscore the mystery. The story is divided into three-fold divisions namely a prologue, main narrative and epilogue. Further in the novel, sub-divisions are divided between the phases of sanity and insanity. The first part serves as prologue to both sections. The beginning and the end of the novel are conventional. In the second part, Desai uses the technique of stream of consciousness. Here, she has described the feminine psyche of neurotic woman. It gives expression to the protagonist who faces the dilemma of self-alienation and its consequences. It has been described exclusively as a story about Maya’s relationship with her husband. The epilogue and the prologue outline the outer approaches to the Gautama-Maya relationship. It provides an account of the main events of Maya’s life, described in the form of a first-person narrative. There is a report of the consequences of the dog’s death at the beginning and that of the husband’s death at the end of the novel. The first and second parts are brief and part II forms the core of the novel. The opening and the concluding parts described Maya’s excited conditions and they are given in third person narration.
Cry, the Peacock introduces a theme that would remain constant in Anita Desai’s fiction which is the lonely suppression and oppression of Indian women. This novel is mainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between Gautama and his wife Maya. It portrays the inner emotional world of the protagonist, her mental upheavals, her inner struggle, her desire for warmth, love and companionship and her obsession with death. The central image is the confrontation between life and death. It gives expression to the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the protagonist herself. Her psychological consciousness is aptly illustrated with a lot of detail images, monologues and flashbacks.

The plot moves with the modulations of memory. The scenes from Maya’s childhood alternate with her present condition and her concern for the future mingles with death of the tattoo and albino astrologer’s predictions. Maya is a passive purveyor of visions whose awareness of self is merged with objects surrounding her. The novel has hardly any action and the reader gets the feeling of movement in the plot due to the progression of images one after the other. The names of the characters do not reveal till the end of the novel and the readers can identify the names through description of the characters. Desai beautifully describes the characters by using imagery and the readers unconsciously feel the inner world of Maya’s psyche. The symbolic self-portrait of Maya is painted step by step with juxtaposition of other characters like Gautama, Lila, Pom, Maya’s father, Gautama’s mother and sister, the image scenes, viz, the scene in the end, which intensify Maya’s inner state of turmoil.
Cry, the Peacock is considered a ‘Poetry Novel’ by Times Literary Supplement, London. Desai delineates the self-alienation, despair, death, desolation and socio-psychic fragmentation of the protagonist. She presents the stillness, seclusion, gloomy world of shadows in Maya’s life. She reveals the grim psychological battle fought in the mind of Maya. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and shows little inclination to take up adult responsibilities even though she has been married for four years to Gautama.

The title of the novel is highly symbolic. It symbolizes the agony of an unfulfilled desire. Peacocks know their death before hand and they also enjoy their last day with dance, “Peacocks are wise. Living, they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life” (CP 83). They gaze at the sky to see the approaching death in the form of dark clouds and thus they are never free from the fear of death throughout their lives. It is used as the symbol of Maya who is obsessed with childhood prophecy. She loves her life when she knows about her death. It is the ultimate reality that peacocks will die when it rains. When they gaze at the clouds loaded with water, they cry out of pain, “pia, pia... Lover, lover, Mio, Mio, I die, I die” (82). Even though they know their death, they enjoy their fullness of life in a short period. Maya is in a similar situation. She knows her death when an astrologer foretold that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of their marriage. So, she is deep in love with life. At first, peacocks fight. Then they mate and they die soon. The same process happens in the life of Maya. Gautama also knows her from childhood onwards. She deeply remembers the astrologer’s prophecy in the
fourth year of their marriage. Then she listens to peacock’s cry and terribly experiences the fear and agony of death: “Now that I understood their call, I wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine” (84). The title, Cry, the Peacock suggests Maya’s cries for love and relationship with her loveless husband. It is saga of destructive love, where mistrust, misunderstanding and compromising attitude lead to marital discord. Maya’s tragedy occurs because she is too demanding Gautama’s attention.

Generally, Desai’s protagonists are basically tragic characters and they fail to cope up with their surroundings and are cut off from their families and society. Solanki rightly says, “Alienation acquires a broad significance and range of meaning in Desai’s novels. In sociological terms, it means loneliness, the absence of relationships, the feeling of dissatisfaction or the explicit rejection of social values and norms. Existential categories indicate alienation from the self, the failure which experience oneself may come from excess of conformity to a lack of individuality and spontaneity” (12). In this novel, Maya lives in her own world and searches her identity in her family and also in society. She clings to fantasy because she is unable to clings to reality. “Maya is an unusual woman, introverted and childlike, totally lacking the virtues of grace and self-possession” (Weir 16). However, Desai deals deep into the mysteries of the mind of abnormal character and she makes an attempt at fusing fantasy with perceptual novel.

Maya is an existential character. In Hindi Literature, Maya means affection or illusion and according to her name, she has Maya(affection) towards her life. Maya says, “Only a dream, An illusion, Maya-my very name means, Nothing, is nothing but an
illusion” (144). It implies worldly pleasures and temptations which kill a person who comes in contact with them. Gautama’s contact with Maya kills him. She also lives in the world of illusion (maya). So, she also dies at the end. She is the symbol of dream, imagination and illusion. She tries to lead a positive life with hope and expectation. But, both are not fulfilled by her practical husband. She meets death because she has gone against life. Desai portrays different types of personalities in this novel. Here, the writer does not reveal the name of the protagonist but highlights the qualities possessed by her.

Maya is portrayed as an anguished soul who marries Gautama, quite senior to her in age and their temperament and emotional responses never match. It is, of course, a mis-matched marriage. The marriage between Gautama and Maya symbolizes the marriage in 1960s. At that time women obey the words of father or husband. An innocent Maya obeys the words of her father and marries Gautama. She says, “Our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men” (39). Maya and Gautama are enveloped by a silence that offers no scope for dialogue. There are only misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Marriage appears like a vicious circle that leads to the pathetic derangement of Maya. She wants to possess Gautama as illusion captures reality. Lorna Sage says, “In Cry, the Peacock, the sharp Maya-Gautama polarization and the double force of the prophecy and the symbolism of the peacock’s love-death cry manage admirably to hold the novel together” (Sanga 470). It leads to marital discard between Gautama and Maya.
Gautama is, for Maya, the ‘mediator beneath the Bo tree’. His name symbolizes the name of Gautama Buddha who shuts all desires. Like Buddha, Gautama never gives importance to physical desires and he believes in logic and reality. He is a practical man, a promising, prosperous, typical husband and much too busy practitioner of law. He is a detached person and he has no place for sentiments in his life. Even his legal profession symbolizes his logic vision of his life. He lives in the real world unlike Maya who lives in illusion. But Maya wants Gautama to love her intensely for his love would give meaning to her existence and help her to fulfill her desires. It would be an extension of her ego. She asks him: “Is there nothing, I whispered: is there nothing in you that would be touched, ever so slightly, if I told you I live my life for you?” (102). The violent desire of killing her husband arises from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impassiveness of her husband.

Gautama has no faith in astrological prophecies. Moreover, being extremely involved in his profession, he hardly has any time for his wife. Gautama wants his wife to be traditional, submissive, patient, tolerant, compromising and undemanding. Jasbir Jain rightly observes that, “Maya’s unhappiness in her married life is an outcome of her own consciousness and is related to the process of her growing up” (Prasad 24). At first, Maya tries her level best to be a duty-conscious Indian wife living up to the expectations of her husband. The rift between the two intensifies Maya’s neurosis especially as they have entered the fourth year of marriage. When she finds that her physical and emotional
needs are left unattended she becomes an easy prey to solitude and silence. Gautama often calls her a ‘neurotic’, ‘mad woman’.

Gautama is unable to recognize and understand the female sensibility. He is totally indifferent and insensitive to natural beauty, smells, colours and sounds. Gautama is more logical but he does not create a sense of faith in Maya. She is unable to extricate her thoughts from these fears of death and her sensuous love for life and her desire for self-preservation make her shift the burden of the prophecy to Gautama’s life. There is no place for Maya in the world of Gautama. He neither understands her nor wishes her to enter into his world. Thus, his world is totally strange to Maya and “on his part, understanding was scant, love was meager” (93). For him, action is greater that inaction and therefore one should perform one’s task in life.

Maya is a daughter and wife but she is not a mother. She feels, “unfulfilled” (23). So, her pet dog is a child to her and she shows her love and affection to it. She thinks, “childless women do develop fanatic attachment to their pets… It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child” (15). Unfortunately, her pet dog dies and it symbolizes the constant presence of death in human life. Sensitive Maya is terribly upset about the death of her dog that she loses her mental peace. Gautama neglects the emotional yearning of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. This mechanical behavior makes Maya brood over Gautama’s insensitive nature. It makes more akin to the delirium, “showing how little he knew of my misery or how to comfort me… he did not give another thought to me… No, no, not hard the distance he coldly
keeps from me” (14). Here, the conflict is between involvement and detachment. Gautama’s insensitive approach to the pet dog symbolizes his unawareness of the feeling of his wife.

Maya wants to share her feelings with her husband and expects that her husband will convince her, but he simply says, “I sent it away to be cremated. It is all over, come won’t you pour out my tea?” (8) This is a very good example for the temperamental differences between Gautama and Maya. Gautama takes the death of pet dog as a natural event and he is also fully aware of the realities of life. He is unaware of the death and he does not fear of it. But Maya loves her life very much. She is also aware of death and fear of it. An innocent girl, Maya does not have courage to face hard realities in life. So, Maya’s too much expectation cuts her from the world of reality and pushes her into world of illusion. She lives in her own world and loses her identity. “The opening scene of the novel wherein Maya is shown to be washing her eyes in order to wash off the sight of Toto’s dead body, gives a glimpse of Maya’s obsessive compulsive neurosis” (Bose 5). Toto’s death in the beginning of the novel symbolizes the tragic death in the end of the novel.

Maya requires Gautama’s closest understanding. She looks at the mirror and describes her silken skin and her sweet face. Finally she tells that everyone loves her face except Gautama. He never gets any impression upon her. Even the Gautama’s family members never discuss any serious matter with her. They would talk to her only about household, non-serious matters such as babies, meals, shopping and marriages. She feels
that she is their toy. Her efforts to create a family atmosphere failed completely. The whole family is emotionless. They could talk on any topic under the sun but not on love or emotions. She feels lonely and worries that no one is near to console her crying soul. She is lonely not only in the living room but also in the bedroom. She is waiting in the bed for him but he is working with his papers. In the novel, city places a crucial role. Gautama is a money-minded man and he needs more money to lead a luxurious life in the city. So, he concentrates on his work and he does not understand the feelings of Maya. He preaches only about detachment as portrayed in Gita. She is filled with neurotic anxiety and realizes that it is not only “my pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair” (8). She fails to have contact with the outer world and she drags herself into complete darkness of the world of insanity. Sashi Paul in her article titled Alienation to Existentialism: A Study of Anita Desai’s Novels states:

Desai’s protagonists are highly sensitive and terribly bewildered by the burden of living helplessly in the society with absurd realities. Therefore, her fictional world is full of imperfection and unfulfilment, hankering and helplessness, agony and anger, struggle and surrender. She is essentially a novelist of existential concerns” (Misra 96-97).

There exists a terrible communication gap between the husband and the wife as both of them seem to live in the different worlds. The hypersensitiveness of Maya is
responsible for the divided or alienated self that leads to an ever widening gap in communication between her and her husband. There is no attempt on her part of self-analysis to apprehend her demands. Just as stars appear to be isolated from one another at night, Maya is isolated from her husband at night. Here, the `darkness speaks of distance, separation and loneliness. Sudhakar T. Sali, in his book titled _Anita Desai’s Female Protagonists_ quotes, “The incompatibility of character reveals Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels without touching” (11). She fails to get proper answers to her queries and hence she retreats within the vastness of the self only to discover the truth she does not even know herself.

Desai uses the imagery to objectify the psyche of characters in the novel. Maya’s dark house expresses her inner emotional world. Maya is painfully aware of her loneliness in the house and whispers, “I am alone” (25). Except the routine work, she is free to sit in her room and live a totally lonely and passive life. Gautama is too busy with his papers and continues to ignore Maya’s needs, remaining callously immune even to her physical desires. She is emotionally starved and passionately unsatisfied. Though peaceful outside, a volcano erupts inside her mind. She is romantic and thirsty for love while Gautama is realistic and cold. Meena Belliappa feels, “It is against a background of frustrated married life that the haunting sense of death obsesses her. The fatal distance between Gautama and Maya is basis to the theme of psychic disintegration…. ” (10). They are like the two sides of a coin and they are unable to communicate physically and psychologically.
Maya expects her identity in the house, among the family members and in her husband. She experiences the mental agony and restlessness in the mind when she is conscious of the end. Anita Desai uses interior monologues and soliloquies to express the feelings of Maya. She terribly feels her pain in her heart: “I am dying and I am in love with living. I am in love 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” (84). Maya becomes a highly disturbed woman and Desai uses the symbol of peacock to show the anguish of Maya.

Maya always thinks about love, relationship and affair. She talks about love with her husband but he preaches only detachment citing phrases from Gita. She suffers from father-fixation. Her father Raisahib leads a life of Victorian style and progressively disposes in many respects. On the other side Maya’s father feels that he is a Brahmin and believes in fatalism. So, he exaggerates the albino astrologer’s prophecy which predicted that in the fourth year of her marriage Maya or her husband would die. Then he had sent the foolish astrologer out of the town for his fraud. Apart from his philosophy of life, his wife’s premature death and Maya’s submissive nature, he understood Maya’s psychic conditions and had special attachment to his daughter. He evokes his feelings of protection rather than showing of maturity and independence. Maya is a pampered daughter to her father. In her childhood, she lived in her own world and she was, “a toy princes in a toy world” (78). She loved her father very much and her father also loved her dearly. Every summer, they went to different hill stations. Now, Maya expects the father
substitute of Gautama. She unconsciously searches her father in Gautama and constantly thinks about her father. Their marriage makes her to remember her father.

Search of her identity gives her a chance to remember her innocent days in the past which was full of pleasure and enjoyment. But she fails to get love and affection in the present life. There is a conflict between the past and the present. She is longing for love but no one in Gautama’s family shows affection for her. So, she is disenchanted with her married life. She observes life and death like peacocks and she wants to achieve the interpersonal fusion with her husband. She identifies herself with the peacocks crying for their mates:
I heard their cry and a echoed it, I felt their thirst as they
gazed at the rain-clouds, their passion as they hunted for
their mates with them. I trembled and panted and paced their
burning rocks. Agony, agony, the moral agony of their cry
for lover and for death (83).

Maya is a “creature of instincts” (16) and a “a wayward and high-strung child”
(48). She feels that nobody in the world cares for her. She always remembers her father’s
lovable words whenever she gets any disappointment. Her father has consoled her that
everything would be solved soon. Her father has trained to get love and affection from
everyone and she also has got the same not only from her father but also from everyone
around her in the past. But she is shocked to see unlovable persons around her in the
present. She recalls her father’s soothing words which are like “a stream of cold water
that tumbled through the ferns of Darjeeling or like the cold pearls mist that crept over
the blue hills and poured into valley” (48). In the present, Maya is a lonely creature. She
does not interact even with her only brother Arjuna. Because he is not a father’s pet like
Maya. He is an independent individual who does not like his father’s domineering and
possessive attitude. His father dislikes him because both are poles apart in their attitude
and they also had less and less communication. Finally, he decides to leave his father and
flies to America and then he pours all his affection on Maya. This is also a deep
psychological impact on Maya. But she follows the words of her father and he dislikes
her brother. However, she understands that she cannot go against her father as if she will also lose her father’s affection like her brother.

Maya’s position is like a trapped bird and she cannot escape from her present life. She is also a prisoner of the past. She is always under the shade of her past memories and this painful past is throbbing in her inner consciousness. Her father deeply involved in Gandhi’s movement and discussed only political problems with her. A legal lawyer, her husband Gautama talks about legal case and his argument in court. Gautama’s family members also discuss worldly matters except love and affection. It has taken the shape of permanent fixation. Unable to establish a rapport with her husband and find a meaning in her, ‘arid existence’, Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature in this helpless and indifferent world.

The reminiscence of past memories serves her to be free from her mental agony and inner conflicts. She relaxes her tension, eases her inner frustration and gives relief to her mind for a short time. Unconsciously, it is like peacocks which break their bodies in order to relieve their own pain. Her husband’s indifferent attitude and her frustration in life lead to the violent desire to kill her husband. It is a kind of revenge against her husband. Her pet dog Toto’s sudden death makes her lose emotional balance. Maya believes in astrology. The frightening words of albino ring in her ears and she gets nervous because of the prediction, either she or Gautama would die after four years of their marriage. It is also one of the reasons of Maya’s mental disorder. “Four years after
your marriage, so, the stars prophecy and the space between your eyes, he mark these support this prophecy? she thought that time has come for one of them” (31-32).

In the four years of their married life, they fail to understand each other. They do not share their joys and sorrows. It is the lack of communication which makes their married life becomes complete failure. Gautama accesses to only the outward manifestation of her thoughts. His practical way of life does not save her from the fears of death and insanity. He is unable to help her to relieve from her worries. Maya’s fear, insecurity and anxiety result in neurotic effect upon her mind. She knows the demands of matured world. She tries to grapple with the realities of life and her desire is to understand her husband and in-laws. However, these desires to experience the realities are too feeble to last longer. Maya is left to the solitude and silence of the house that prey upon her. She muses over her husband’s lack of love and understanding and once in a fit of intense despair, she tells him, “Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing, not will you ever understand. You know nothing of me and of how I can love, how I want to love. How it is important to me. And you don’t love me” (102). Loneliness and unreality become her permanent companions. During the phase, she is at times reminded of the dread prophecy and peacock’s cries for death. The images of pit, corridor and well indicate her alienation and darkness, “Upon this bed of hot, itching sand, I summoned up again the vision of the terrific albino… I fled down…” (138). Maya becomes more and more frantic and psychic.
Maya is a broken image in the world of illusion. She is too self-centered, over-demanding and possessive in her attitude to relationships. In her loneliness, Maya is forever on a quest for meaning in life, “Dared I go in? Beg for comfort? Confess to my loneliness and my terror of loneliness? Useless, hopeless…A grain of sand itching, itching upon the tender infant skin of new sorrow…” (28). She is overpowered by a sense of betrayal. Many a time, she indulges in self-introspection to find out where the fault lies.

Maya is burning with guilt and haunted by self-accusation and self-hate and she inevitably moves towards murder and self-destruction. She performs the act of murder out of her fear of self-extinction, fear of forecast about the death of one of them. It is, in fact, an act of self-defence. In the end, Maya pushes Gautama from balcony and she commits suicide. Her self-destruction is a symbol of nemesis. Besides the prophecy of the astrologer another factor that influenced the psyche of Maya is about the peacock’s cry. The peacocks are said to fight before they mate. The prophecy and the myth are juxtaposed in the mind of Maya causing nightmarish uncertainty in her life. Maya, childless woman and having no vacation to pursue, finds herself in utter suffocating loneliness. She always longs to be with her husband. Gautama’s mother and sister Nila give her support. They realize that Maya is alone, condemn and doom to pass her days within the four walls of her house without any interaction with the outside world and they take her for shopping, but this support is only transitory. She breaks down under the pressures of circumstances.
There is no place for Maya in the world of Gautama. He neither understands her nor wishes her to enter his world. Thus, his world is totally strange to Maya and “on his part, understanding was scant, love was meager” (93). Gautama likes to live as an independent individual but Maya expects her father’s possessive environment. She compares her mental condition with the birds and creepers, leaves and clouds of dust. At several places, Anita Desai uses the symbol of peacock and she gives beautiful description of the thrilling dance of peacocks at the advent of the monsoon and call for mating: “Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes on their tails have seen the truth of love and death. Dying, they are in love with life...Living, they are aware of death” (83). The majestic image of peacock uses to describe Maya’s world of fantasy.

The cry in the title suggests the ecstasy of love which leads to the finality of death. It conveys Maya’s mental upheavals, her agony and death. It symbolically substantiates the agonized cry of the peacocks. B. Ramachandra Rao finds “the dance of peacock as both the dance of life and dance of death” (Rao 17). The novel presents a number of symbols of binary oppositions, ‘Day’ stands for knowledge while ‘Night’ represents the darkness of ignorance which always surrounds us. Furthermore ‘star’ stands for the bright and joyous side of the life while ‘shooting star’ symbolizes death. Maya always compares herself with the moon which is full of life and does not care for other stars. She does not care for Gautama’s family members and she identifies herself with the moon. No one in the family gives importance to such things but they discuss worldly matters. She never feels that she is one among the family members. When she fears death, she realizes that
Gautama’s family members are the symbols of death and unemotional. There is always a conflict between life and death, her conscious and subconscious mind.

Maya craves for identity, sympathy and understanding, endeavoring in her own way to make her husband respond to it. The husband, on his part, is totally blind to her emotional problems. She is, in fact, not asking for attachment with the worldly things which clouded the vision. She says, “I want you, Because I insist on being with you being allowed to touch you and know you. You can’t bear it, can you? No, you are afraid, you might perish” (15). Solanki feels.

Mrs.Desai digs deeper into the unconscious level of her mind and tries to project her inner fear and anxieties through the medium of Toto’s death. Indeed, the fear of death is the main problem of her existence which is brought to surface by Toto’s demise. It is the fear, lurking in the innermost recesses of her mind and heart which cripples her thinking, her being and her living (27).
Maya’s rootlessness keeps on increasing every day. It culminates in a kind of schizophrenia “a body without a heart, a heart without a body”. Ultimately, Gautama begins to appear to her as a ‘ghost who might never be encountered again’ and as an ‘unreal ghost. Maya’s alienation leads her on to utter desolation: “All order is gone out of my life… Strangers surround me”(36). Desai spotlights an extremely complex nature of inner reality and plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche, the inner turmoil and the chaos inside the mind. There is a clash between her childhood world of fantasies and adult world of realities and it produces more imbalances in her life. Though she is a married woman, she behaves like a child.

The title of the novel symbolizes the agony of an unfulfilled desire. Maya’s conflict arises out of the gratifying matrimonial bonds which are characterized by a lack of contact, relatedness and communion. She believes in involvement whereas Gautama is the “preacher of detachment on every count” (17). All through the novel, her wishes are rejected by her husband. It is also hidden in her subconscious mind like albino’s words. Her mind is filled with desires, expectations and love with life. It leads to her mental disorder and she becomes a neurotic woman. Madhusudan Prasad in his Anita Desai: The Novelist, briefly alludes to Maya as a neurotic figure and claims that “In Cry, the Peacock, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist Maya who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord and verges on a curious insanity”(Prasad 22). Maya expects Gautama’s affection, but Gautama expects, “when will your father send me another cheque, Maya? Tell him I need it urgently- the
nurses in the crèches have not been paid this month? (44) Her physical needs are never known by Gautama.

Maya hungers for his companionship and spends sleepless nights, craving for satisfaction of her consumed with this hunger. Her father taught her only to accept life. She would lie awake at night stifled by the hunger. She felt hungry not only for Gautama but for all that life represented. She begins to look her relationship with Gautama like a relationship with death. It is Gautama’s detachment that comes in the way of her involvement. Maya is highly sensitive creature who was brought up in an illusory world of romantic faith. She fails to adjust with her practical and down to earth husband. Jena says, “Maya is a person gifted with highly poetic but slightly neurotic sensibility” (Jena 22). In her married life, she urges for sexual union with Gautama. Whenever she awakens in the night, Gautama is far-off from her to work with his papers, who cannot be one with her senses. She always compares herself with lifeless rose and carnations on her dressing table, ‘belonging to yesterday, corpses of today’ are very much like her desires. Maya expects her husband to fulfill her emotional and physical desires in her married life but both of them are denied by him. His cold intellectuality and his age interrupt his contact with Maya. Maya is emotionally starved and passionately unsatisfied. She is romantic and thirsty for love while Gautama is realistic and cold.

Maya’s life appears to her as an endless tedium with nothing significant taking place at any time. She has everything in her life, secured home, earning husband and affectionate mother-in-law except her emotionally unfulfilled desires. In her childhood,
she had a freedom of enjoyment with her father who had accepted her desires of going outdoor places. As a child, she had enjoyed the scenic beauty and climate of Darjeeling and now she longs to go there with Gautama. She is also attracted by kathakali ballets, performed at night in parts of South India: “I want… to see the kathakali dances. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages…and it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight” (40). Maya expects Gautama to take her to the South to see their performance. But Gautama simply suggests that she will wait till kathakali troupe comes to Delhi.

Maya’s life thus reveals a journey from a state of expectation to that of depression. Maya’s unique temperament, her peculiar relationship with her father, unfulfilling matrimonial ties, Toto’s death, the albino astrologer’s prophecy, her childlessness and her loneliness push her slowly and surely to a state of mental disorder. No one is near to console the crying soul of Maya. She feels, “Father? Brother? Husband? Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am love with living (84). Maya expects anyone to share her feelings.

One of the most remarkable things about this novel is the building up of the tension of presenting the hideous transformation of a sensitive poetic young woman into insane individual. Gautama’s death is not calculated murder or accident but a result of sudden impulse. Maya feels that she has right to live as she loves life. Finally, the image of the dust-storm in the novel denotes not only the fierce turmoil raging in her subconscious mind but it also reflects her desire for release from bondage, from fate, from death and from dreariness.
The dust-storm image is an important extension of dance imagery. It symbolizes Maya’s internal upheavals, her inner struggle and her expectation to be close to her husband. She welcomes the storm with the pleasure of a dancer and notices in it the source of both agony and ecstasy. The most significant image of the albino astrologer appears repeatedly almost with frightening frequency creating terrible commotion in Maya’s consciousness. Meenakshi Mukherjee believes that imagery reveals the author’s natural mode of awareness, commends Anita Desai for her distinctive style which is marked by “sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness and love for the sound of words” (Mukherjee 54). The image surfaces in Maya’s consciousness at certain moment and helps a lot in developing the theme towards its climax. It is only a literary device used to manifest her hidden fear. It also symbolizes her violent resolve to extricate herself from her difficult situation. When the storm is over, there is a great stillness and peace broken only by a band of mynas. It proclaims their victory in having survived through its fury. Symbolically, Maya envisions her own projected victory in her survival and in Gautama’s death. She feels that all the things around her are waiting to listen to “that final, acute crash which might not sound louder than the barest whimper” (181). It is Gautama’s detachment which causes fear in her life and which makes her lose senses and argue that since Gautama is not involved in her life and it is immaterial to him whether she is alive or not. That is why she kills Gautama in a fit of madness and commits suicide.
The character of Maya symbolizes positive side of life with all its joys and beauties. After killing Gautama, she gets mentally deranged and thereafter dies because she has gone against life. Gautama does not like to be touched and he is perturbed by it. The one-sidedness of each of them is the cause of their death. None of them sees or feels life in its wholeness with its positive and negative sides. She identifies herself with the peacock’s agony of ecstasy of their fatal love experience.

The way in which Anita Desai has depicted the story gives more psychological touch to it. She has used different methods of narration like plain narrative (third person) and stream of consciousness technique and also conversation or first person narration. Throughout the novel, the story moves back and forth. Thus, there are ups and downs in Maya’s mental makeup. *Cry, the Peacock* is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Maya’s moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed very effectively in it. The novel is a profound study of human psychology. Especially, Desai is working out the configuration of the inner world. It is obvious both in the portrayal of the women protagonist and their kinship. Maya, the sterile and eccentric heroine of Desai’s novels, is also dominated by fear. Female characters in Desai’s novels are always growing and changing. They are confronted with the present, they look back to the past and they visualize the future also. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life.

Gautama’s mother is affectionate to everyone and guides her children very well. She never imposes her decision on them like Maya’s father. She stands for hope, hard
work and self-confidence. She feels that Maya is in the four walls. She insists Maya to accompany her for shopping. At first, Maya hesitates and it denotes that she does not like to come in contact with life. Then, she goes outside and feels relaxed and happy. Gautama’s mother is described as ‘pillar of life’ and Maya feels that her mother-in-law is a versatile lady with extraordinary strength and extra will power. She is gay with plenty of ideas, ambitions and occupations. She keeps herself quite engaged as a house wife, as a mother, and as a social worker. She gets impressed on her mother-in-law who is a symbol of life to her. When she jumps from the balcony, she takes the old lady with her. Maya is in conflict between her childhood world and adult responsibilities. Her life is in an imbalanced state and she needs to grapple with the realities of life. She is an innocent woman and she wants neither freedom nor responsibility of adult world. Her nostalgic memories help her to prolong her immaturity. Next Gautama’s sister Nila has the boldness to find solutions to her own problems. Her courage to find a lawyer for her divorce is contrasted with Maya’s blusterous life. Nila and her mother represent symbolically strength and vitality.

Maya gets friendship with Pom and Leila. Pom is the foil to Maya’s character. She is the typical culturally uprooted woman of India who swarms the big cities. In the context of the prophecy, Maya compares herself with Pom. Maya is traditional, refined and sensitive woman while Pom has none of these qualities. Maya’s another friend Leila has married a tuberculosis affected man against the wishes of her parents. Leila is a teacher of Persian in a girls’ school. She is gloomy and her attitude towards life is
fatalistic. She married a man knowing his disease of tuberculosis. She is opposite to Pom. The two friends of Maya are two different women but fatalism is common to both Maya and Leila. Maya is obsessed with albino astrologer's prediction while Leila has conceded to her destiny.

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* deprives of the affection of her mother. She longs for maternal protection. She is married to Gautama, a protégé of her father and a brilliant, ambitious and serious-minded lawyer. Perhaps their great difference in age works as a big gap in their lives. Even after four years of their marriage, they do not have children. This leads Maya towards her insanity. The death of her pet dog Toto aggravates her mental condition and makes her increasingly conscious of the mysterious working of destruction. She becomes the symbol of death in her own life and her mother-in-law's life. Thus, their death suggests that life and death are inseparable, death takes away life with it.

Sharma rightly tells, “The novel becomes a fascinating study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony” (24). Maya is able to view her husband as a protector and guide. She tries to analyse her feelings and examines her memories of the past in order to reach the source of this disturbance. She gropes for some kind of meaning and this comes to her in flashes, first during a conversation with Gautama. The tragedy begins in Maya’s life because her husband Gautama does not have
any sympathy. Gautama fails to penetrate the illusory world. He appears to her superficial and hollow.

Maya is highly sensitive creature. Brought up in an illusory world of romantic faith, she fails to adjust with her practical and down to earth husband. Maya feels that her husband is unperturbed by her sorrow. Maya identifies herself with the moon and she says, “look-look there is a moon in the sky!” (47). Maya does not like day because it denotes that death is near to her. Night is a symbol of coolness and it gives pleasant feeling to her. It also represents the ignorance of human beings. It hides all the shadows of fear. The inseparability of death and life represents Maya’s thoughts about life and death.

Maya suddenly remembers that Queen of the Night attracts snakes. Queen of the night is a beautiful plant but snakes are fascinated by it. It symbolizes the inevitable relationship between life and death. Life is beautiful but death is inalienable from it. It shows where there is a life, there is death. Maya’s life of vision attracts death. Anita Desai clarifies that she uses, “certain images again and again that although real, they acquire the significance of symbols. She says, “I imagine each writer ends by thus revealing his own mythology, a mythology that symbolizes his private morality and philosophy” (Srivastava 147). Maya suffers physically, mentally and psychologically and it leads to her fatal end.
Maya goes to Lal’s dinner party with her husband. There she looks at orchids to think about them. She tells Gautama, “There were orchids in a basket on the verandah…. But Mrs. Lal said they are not flowers. They are hill orchids, you see, they will soon be dead” (65). Desai pictures life of Maya through orchids. Hill orchids cannot survive in the different environment. Likewise, Maya comes from different life style and so she is unable to adjust herself in the present life. The orchids do not have flower and they denote Maya’s barrenness.

Anita Desai does not portray the household situation like a wife grumbling against an over busy husband who cannot spare time for his wife. It is a cry of an agonized and unfulfilled woman, feeling lonely and helpless. She feels fearful without any company. During the four years of their married life, Maya has been provided all her needs and comforts which she was used in her father’s house, except her emotional needs. Gautama fails to fulfill her emotional starvation. Though Gautama loves his wife, he is unable to express his feelings in correct way. Even Maya accepts this:

He touched my hairs soothing it down carefully as a nurse would,
I was flooded with tenderness and gratified… ‘Lying here in the dark?’
He said, and drew a finger down my cheek.

Fall, fall, long fall, into the soft, Velvet well of the primordial, of original instinct, of first-formed love. His tenderness was the cathartic I desired, and now at last I began to cry again, pressing my face against him. (15)
But such moments are few in her life. She craves for Gautama’s company as well as his understanding of her. He is unconcerned about her misery, her physical and psychological demands, as she says, “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 or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed” (14). Here, it is clearly seen that she has an unfulfilled sexual life with Gautama.

Maya searches for her identity in her husband. As a married woman, she expects her identity should be proved by her husband through fulfillment of her desires. She searches for her identity or her position in her in-laws’ house. There, she is only a trapped bird. She expects her identity should be proved as Gautama’s wife and also daughter-in-law of the house. Gautama accepts her as his wife but he is not aware of her needs. So, her expectation never reaches the mind of Gautama. A motherless child Maya becomes childless woman. She cannot understand adult world and its responsibilities.

There is no escape from the trap for Maya because now even in her conscious mind there is only the sick desire of worldly pleasures and the fear of death. So, she took Gautama for a stroll on the roof. On the roof she enjoys the beauty of nature around her, which does not seem to affect him at all. They walk on the roof immersed in their own thoughts. While walking they turn towards the end of the terrace and she sees “behind the line of trees that masked the horizon, the pale hushed glow of the rising moon” (172). She is deeply engrossed in watching the beautiful moon and so she cannot bear Gautama moving unknowingly in between her and the worshipped moon: “Gautama! I screamed in
fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom” (173). He comes in between Maya and her pursuit of pleasures. She pushes Gautama off the terrace and Gautama dies. Maya’s mental distress forces her maddening process of murdering Gautama. Thus, Anita Desai’s depicts the dissonance and disharmony that disturb the marital relationship between Maya and Gautama.

The novel can be summed up in the three words of Paul Sartre: “anguish, abandonment and despair” (Sartre 60). Desai takes great effort to describe the psychological problems of an alienated person. Maya’s moods, fears, obsession with death and resulting insanity are conveyed effectively. Her alienation, her search for identity and quest for meaning in life are presented meaningfully. Anita Desai indirectly attacks the inaction of Gautama who represents the male world. It is seen that the age difference between Maya and Gautama is so vast that it affects the young Maya who yearns for sexual union with her husband. Thus, through the traumatic world of Maya, one understands that frustration, alienation, agonized self, unfulfilled desires and despair will lead to disaster.