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**Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*: The Role of Deprivation of Husbandly Love and Adoration in Hastening Maya's Tragic Downfall**

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**ABSTRACT**

What love and adoration can do can never be done by money, wealth or other valuable and treasured materials. Love can defeat a violent enemy who is arrogant even to kill his opponent. And above all in the Darwinian sense of 'Struggle for existence', all creatures- lower as well as higher-, male as well as female- put their effort to exist i.e. to live. Whosoever is born is born with the right to live. Living doesn't include mere inhaling and exhaling, eating and drinking, sleeping and procreating. To live means to lead a respectful life. Woman being a tender creation of the creator, (tenderness doesn't imply weakness) has to undergo sufferings trusted upon her by the complex male dominating society. She also has to put more of a mental or spiritual labour to meet her egoistic nature. From the very beginning to the end of the novel *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya is observed to scuffle with a view to ensuring how to live a happy life. This paper, besides showing how Maya struggles to live and craves for husbandly love and adoration, also delineates how the female protagonist is ignored to enjoy the basic rights of a wife in her family.

**Keywords:** Adoration, deprivation, feministic, husbandly, love, male-chauvinism, misogynistic.

**Introduction**

Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, *Cry, the Peacock* is Anita Desai's first work. The contemporary India is aptly illustrated in Anita Desai's write-ups. The patriarchal culture, the personal conflict of identity of the Anglicized women of the Indian society gains a dimension in the hands of Anita Desai, the storyteller of the contemporary India. In her first novel, *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai portrays the psychic tumult of a young and sensitive married girl Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. She is the daughter of a rich advocate in Lucknow. Being alone in the family, her mother being dead and brother having gone to America to carve his own independent destiny, she gets the most of her father's affection and attention and in her moments of affliction exclaims to herself: "No one, no one else, loves me as my father does". The excessive love Maya gets from her father makes her have a lop-sided view of life. She feels the world to be a toy made especially for her, painted in her favourite colours and set moving according to her tunes.

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**Literature Review**

It seems that women are born to suffer from the indescribable rude, brutal and cruel reality of male dominated society. Most of the world famous philosophers and literati who have immensely contributed to the existing values of life have paradoxically treated woman as an object to be used by man: she is God's second mistake, said Nietzsche. To Aristotle, she is an inferior man. He again says that the female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities. Machiavelli chooses to identify woman with fortune: fortune is a woman, and if you wish to master her, you must strike and beat her. Schopenhauer says woman is by nature meant to obey. Shakespeare too refers it as, Frailty thy name is woman, and the same idea is mentioned in *The Taming of the Shrew* e.g., Thy husband is thy lord, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign. (R.K.Gupta 06)

Indian Vedic age Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns woman a subordinate position to man: During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband, her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes. (Bader 148)

Thus all the definitions about women's conduct, behavior and existence, were given by men. These aphorisms of a few of the great philosophers indicate the status of women in male-chauvinistic society. The old conventional notions of male-dominated society were so rude, unbearable, suppressive, oppressive and depressive that women's discourse takes a shape of movement. Their consciousness seeks to analyze and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies of literature. And its result is that the strong wave of feminism in 1960s and 1970s took place for women's liberation.

In this way, so many literary articles attempted by various erudite critics are found on this particular novel.

**Key Points of the Study:**

Anita Desai is the first Indian English women novelist who has raised the issue of feminism through her novels. Most of the Desai's works deal with the complexities of the modern Indian culture from the feminine perspectives. Many of her novels reveal woman's strife to maintain self-identity as an individual woman. (Patel 01)

*Cry, the Peacock* is a story of a female whose own world collides with her husband's practical world thus making her feel dejected, lonely and demoralized. Having lived a carefree life under the indulgent attentions of her loving father, Maya desires to have similar attentions from her husband Gautama, a father surrogate. When Gautama, a busy, prosperous lawyer, too much engrossed in his own vocational affairs, fails to meet her demands, she feels neglected and miserable. Seeing her morbidity, her husband warns her of her turning neurotic and blames her father for spoiling her.

Although the reason for Maya's neurosis is, however, not her father fixation though it aids to hasten her tragedy, but persistent obsession of the prediction by the albino astrologer of death either for her or her husband within four years of their marriage. The terrifying words of the prediction, like the drumbeats of the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, ring in her ears and unnerve her. She knows that she is haunted by "a black and evil shadow"- her fate and the time has come: and four years it was now. It was now to be either Gautama or she. The story ideally deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonist and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The female character Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* envelops the reader as she unfolds the growth, development and climax of her neurosis. Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much married her off to his own lawyer friend - Gautama who was middle aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband. The climax of the story lies when Maya's attachment with her father further develops into an 'Electra complex' which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her

marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated, Maya then looks back to the days of her childhood spent with her father. This reminiscence of those long lost days serves as the defense mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflicts. As a result of being deprived of what she is supposed to receive from her husband, Maya suffers from inner conflicts and agony. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly remarks:

'In Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lures or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography of the visible action. Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility. (Iyengar 464)

The loving attention of her father makes Maya oblivious of the deadly shadow; but as her husband Gautama fails to satisfy her intense longing for love and life, she is left to the solitude and silence of the house which prey upon her. She muses over her husband's lack of love for her and once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight to his face: 'Oh, you know nothing of me and of how can I love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me. . . .' Temperamentally there is no compatibility between Maya and Gautama. Maya has romantic love for the beautiful, the colourful and the sensuous; Gautama is not romantic and has no use for flowers. Maya is creature of instincts or a wayward and high stung child. As symbolized by her name she stands for the world of sensations. Gautama's name on the other hand, symbolizes asceticism, detachment from life. He is realistic and rational. He has philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagwad Gita. Such irreconcilably different temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony.

Thus, Had Gautama shown an understanding towards and been attentive to Maya, he would have saved her from the haunting fears of "shadows and drums and drums and shadows." So, it can be said that the root cause behind Maya's being haunted by the fear of death is being deprived of what she deserves to get as a wife from her husband, Gautama.

The gap of communication between them leaves her lonely to brood over the morbid thoughts of the albino astrologer's prophecy. Her attempts to divert herself by visits to her friend Leila and Pom or Mrs. Lal's party or the restaurant and the cabaret, prove powerless to dispel the creeping terror. The visit of Gautama's mother and sister Nila brings a brief respite to her and she enjoys her busy life in their company. But once they are gone, she finds the house empty and herself alone with her horrors and nightmares. Horrors and nightmares become her only company during her loneliness only for the fact that she is deprived of husbandly love and adoration. Using Maya and Gautama's life-incidents as her mouthpiece, Desai has messaged the world about her scornful disparagement to the discriminating attitudes towards women, and supported her struggle for women's autonomy.

Maya is so much possessed by the vision of the albino astrologer that she recalls his talk about the myth surrounding the peacock's cry. Listening to the cries of peacock in the rainy season, she realizes that she should never sleep in peace. She is caught in the net of inescapable. 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 savior? I am in a need of one. 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 anymore- only death and waiting."

Being bereft of husbandly love and adoration, Maya seems to be suffering from existential crises. An existential crises is a stage of development at which individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether their life has any meaning, purpose or value; whether their parents, teachers, and loved ones truly act in their best interest; whether the values they have been taught have any merit, and whether their religious upbringing may or may not be founded in reality. An existential crises is often provoked by a significant event in person's life-marriage, separation, major loss, the death of a loved one, a life threatening experience; psycho active drug use; adult children leaving home; reaching a personally significant age. (Patel 02-03) Maya's existential crises is thus provoked by a life threatening experience i.e. being totally deprived of marital love, adoration, elation, affection, esteem, admiration, adulation etc.

Maya suffers from headaches and experiences rages of rebellion and terror. As she moves towards insanity, she sees the visions of rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas creeping over her, slipping their club-like tongues in and out. Her dark house appears to her like her tomb and she contemplates in it over the horror of all that is to come. Then suddenly, during her interval of sanity, an idea hopefully dawns in her mind that since the albino had predicted death to either of them, it may be Gautama and not she whose life is threatened. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks that as he is detached and indifferent to life, it will not matter for him if he misses life. In her perversity she is even haunted by the word 'murder'. Gautama remains so much lost in his work that Maya finds him even oblivious of the dust storm that has raged earlier in the afternoon. When she asks him to accompany her to the roof of the house to enjoy cool air, he accompanies her, lost in his own thoughts. Passing out of the room, Maya catches sight of bronze Shiva dancing and prays to the Lord of Dance to protect them. Climbing the stairs she finds her cat suddenly speeding past them in a state of great alarm. They walk towards the terraced end, Maya looking enraptured at the pale hushed glow of the rising moon. As Gautama moves in front of her, hiding the moon from her view, she in a fit of frenzy pushes him over the parapet to "pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom". It remains in the end for Gautama's mother and sister to take away completely insane Maya from the scene of tragedy of the house of her father.

This dark state of affair is again totally unacceptable by the conscious mind of Maya. She therefore relaxes her tension, eases her frustration by pondering unconsciously on how 'peacocks breaks their bodies' in order to relieve their own pain. Here comes the sense of violence, the feeling of killing or get killed which engulfs Maya. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impassiveness and indifferences weaves the story of *Cry, the Peacock*.

The very concept that women need something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in this novel. The hyper sensitive mind of the women is illustrated by Desai in the tenderest way where the atmosphere of tension is set ideally against the backdrop of a sultry Indian summer. The oppression and depression, the anxiety and fear, the frustration and foiling of the female protagonist set against a typical Indian scenario brings out the very best of the writer in a coherent way.

*Cry, the Peacock* by Anita Desai is thus also an excellent Novel about the marital disharmony. The married life of Maya and Gautama is mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her, sexual satisfaction is a necessity and the total denial of it may give mental disturbance. She is interested in all the good things of life – nature, birds and animals, poetry and dance. She loses herself in the enjoyment of beautiful sights and sounds. The cries of birds evoke a sympathetic chord in her. She is presented in the novel as a woman who longs for pleasures of life.

Gautama is a friend of Maya's father, prosperous middle-aged lawyer, very much older than Maya and married her. He always accused his wife. While Maya is longing for love and affection, her husband Gautama is incapable of understanding her genuine feelings and emotions. She is not seeking a fulfillment of the mundane love but of archetypal love.

After marriage Maya has to leave her father. Not only he pampered her but also fed her infant brain with fairy tales because the doctor had advised him not to make her anxious or sad. That was probably the time when Maya first began to reveal signs of her neurosis, and her father's awareness of it made him even more attached to her. This pampering spoils Maya and makes her crave for attention all the time.

After marriage she expects her husband to play as father with her. Maya does not grow up mentally which results in suffering. Gautama expects Maya to behave like a mature person. But this increases Maya's sense of insecurity further, causing mental imbalance and acute psychic tension.

Maya's father is, no doubt, partly to blame for bringing up his daughter the way he did. He approved of whatever she did or said, never differed from her, even when she was wrong.

At every step she compares Gautama with her father to the disadvantage of the former because she fails to realize that a father-daughter relationship is different from a husband-wife relationship.

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Maya feels unsatisfied, unfulfilled with her marital relationship. Something was lacking somewhere in her life. Shanta Krishna swami aptly remarks:

‘Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of ‘husbanding’ her in his traditional masculine role.’ (Krishnaswami 250)

Maya was imprisoned within the four walls of her own private hell. The four walls formed of torture, guilt, dread, and imprisonment is a place where no one could survive in long. She knew ‘Death was certain’. As the albino astrologer has predicted death to either of the partners, it may be Gautama or she whose life is threatened and finally she decided that Gautama is doomed to death. This is a self-assertive aggression which she adopts as a means of survival. And simultaneously this is her tragic flaw also. In a state of frenzy, Maya is driven by the passion to destroy Gautama and satisfied her existential needs. Here we can hold Maya responsible for her final downfall. But it is also true that her aggression had been intensified by Gautama’s sense of indifference towards her. She wanted to win Gautama physically and mentally but failed. The detached attitude of her husband shatters her totally. She is filled by an echoed and tune of ‘Death.’ She felt ‘Gautama had never lived, and never would.’ (Desai 208)

He must die so that she can live. But alas! Even Gautama’s death does not condition her existence. All her efforts are proved futile. His life or death hardly makes any difference in her life now. Ultimately she decides to retreat herself in that dark hole where man becomes free and is redeemed of his doings.

Thus Maya’s life actually revolves round the needs and desires of her husband Gautama who is totally indifferent to her. It is here crystal clear that Maya did all these things only because of the fact that she was bereft and deprived of what she should have been provided with.

I agree with the fact that Anita Desai has portrayed the actual condition of husband-wife relationship of the time she lived in the society. The society she lived in was misogynistic and male-chauvinistic, and didn’t allow husbands to love and adore their wives the way they deserved since females were, at that time, regarded as The Second Sex and were not given what they deserved. But my point is—if Gautama had shown true love and adoration to his wife, Maya, at least, didn’t have to face her tragic downfall. That is what I have tried to focus on in this study. Thus, it is not the prophecy of the albino astrologer but the deprivation of love from her husband which brings her downfall. If Maya got what she longed for and cherished in her mind, she could easily forget what the albino astrologer prophesized her.

She is longing for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is a communication that she seeks – the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite – the sort which the peacock seeks when it shrieks out its inside in its shrill intense mating calls. The cries of peacocks in the novel represent her cries of love, which simultaneously invite their death. Like her, they are creatures of exotic wild and will not rest till they have danced the dance of death.

Both Maya and Gautama are ostensibly caught in the fundamental dilemma of human situation. The very emptiness, deadness, and coldness of their relation could easily be felt in this paragraph:

‘...how little he knew of my misery or of how to comfort me but then he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of the gold and jotted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it. 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 lovely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.’ (Desai 14)

And further Maya’s intense feeling of loneliness is expressed thus:

‘His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking, reveal myself. It is that—my loneliness in that house.’ And each time she tried to persuade herself with the situation, she felt rather dejected, lonely and demoralized. She thus feels alienated from the self and the world.

The indifferent behavior of the husband's family also increases her sense of loneliness which gradually develops into an actual sense of alienation. The solitude and silence of the house prey upon Maya. Also, the death of her pet dog starts a chain of reminiscence and reverie.

It is not only for the lack of love for her husband that she suffers, but also for too much of love for him. Maya feels helpless and she needs someone to offer her protection and consolation. Though Gautama and Maya are married, they do not really communicate with each other. What is real to her is shadow to him, what are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her. Her own house is presented as a prison in disguise. The colorful world has been presented to reveal a dark side of evil and ugliness.

Maya was childless. This always tormented her. Gautama didn't have the least concern about it. But when Toto (her pet dog) was alive, this gap was filled by its presence. After its death she feels unfulfilled for which Gautama had never shown any sympathy for Maya.

Maya needed 'contact, relationship, communion' (Desai 49) to soothe her agitated mind; and even at this demanding situation, her husband proves his inability to provide her the protective companionship she needed. This feels her heart with the intense loneliness. Usha Bande writes:

'Maya is a brilliantly documented figure, portraying an alienated consciousness, tortured by her own phobias and neurosis. In her earnest appeal for love, her childlike responses to life's problems and hypersensitivity, she is an inhabitant more of a fantastic realm than the world of everyday reality. (Bande 69)

Thus it is clear here that if Gautama behaved with Maya as like as a husband should do, she would not lose her hope of living a happy life in this world. She could easily forget what the albino astrologer told her.

There is not only an ageing gap but a communication gap as well with her husband. She always craved for getting true love and affection from her husband in hope of living a hilarious conjugal life. All her efforts to win Gautama's affection and to draw his attention towards her prove but a vain effort. Her life with an icy-cold husband becomes almost unbearable. There was no companionship between them. Maya felt 'like spending seventy years of one's life in a graveyard.' (Desai 91)

She feels separated from the world of Gautama who does not want to be 'interrupted in his thinking' by trivial matters such as the death of a pet dog. She feels the absence of her husband in the house for long hours. Whenever he comes he gets busy with his clients or discusses politics and philosophy which do not interest her. She feels dejected and lonely in the house:

'His coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order to not to hear me talk, and talking reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house.' (Desai 14)

The Story of Maya's life seems to be one of a three-fold pattern of events that can be summed up as: deprivation, alienation and elimination respectively. In the first place, Maya has been deprived of the love of mother, brother, and later her father. Secondly she is alienated from her husband and in the end she brings about his elimination from life and her own self from her family and society. Maya is an instinctive woman of passions and emotions.

Gradually by the suppression and the isolation she earned the murderous intent. She thought that she is neglected by Gautama. Life to him would mean death to her. She kills Gautama, but his death fails to leave any sense of tragedy or pathos. Even the novelist seems to play down Gautama's death which is mentioned euphemistically and evasively.

For Maya it is only a push, for Gautama it is death. While others have been removed from her life in a subtle way, her murder of Gautama is her most daring act.

Desai in fact tends to present the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters. Her approach, like that of Joseph Conrad, is very intense and elusive. The comment of Tonny Tanner for Conrad is equally suitable for Anita Desai too. Tanner writes:

'When all the lights are out, when the moral eye has nothing to focus on, when the material world is invisible and the human world is blind it is then that Conrad (Desai too) wants to know how a man, (here a woman) behaves, since then he must act according to his deepest inward impulses and not, as our usual, according to our complex of subtle eternal persuasions'. (Tanner 33-34)

Maya, in spite of her weaknesses, lays her hand in putting her all efforts to exist. That she could live happily driving away the albino astrologer's prophecy becomes clear when we hear Desai herself admits:

'I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it whose heart cries out 'the great No' who fight the current and struggle against it they know what the demands are, what it costs to meet them.' (Desai, Interview by Yashodgara Dalmia 13)

The cry of peacock is the cry of the natural instinct of a woman who is unfulfilled. But such a fulfillment is denied to Maya. She realizes that she wants Gautama's physical presence, his love and a normal life.

Maya pushes Gautama off the parapet of their house. Thus, she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury and commits suicide.

Through Maya, the novelist has tried to stress the great yearning of the woman to be understood by her male partner. Thus, *Cry, the Peacock* is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Anita Desai looks into the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. The matrimonial bonds that bind the two were very fragile and tenuous. Lack of communion was the chief cause of intricacies in the life of Maya and Gautama.

### Conclusion

The study can be concluded with the opinion that such as Heathcliff did objectionable behavior with the family members of Hindley Earnshaw, but he did all these because of his being deprived of love and love only. Similarly, here Maya is haunted by the fears of death which causes a kind of schizophrenia to her, and finally she hastens her downfall by ending the life of her husband, Gautama. It is, I think, obvious from the above discussion that if she was provided with her wifely rights i.e. husbandly love and adoration, she could drive away what the albino astrologer told her and at the same time she could lead a happy conjugal life with her husband. Thus it is the deprivation of love, esteem and adulation which makes Maya commit the final blunder.

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