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## Thematic Analysis in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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### Abstract

Anita Desai is an Indo-Anglican novelist who was born in Mussorie in 1937. She is one of India's most renowned novelists in English literature. Desai's unique approach sets her apart from other current Indian women writers who write in English. She is without a doubt a wonderful artist who employs exceptional symbolism in her works. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), her first novel, depicts the emotional turmoil of a young and sensitive married woman who is plagued by a childhood prophecy of a tragic calamity. The purpose of this study is to describe Desai's expression by establishing a society free of male dominance. It delves into the subject of conjugal partnerships and disagreement. Desai portrays the theme of women's particular sense in comparison to men's, as well as how they suffer from mental and physical repression and become victims of a male-dominated social and cultural system. Desai's impressions are impulses-borne, reacting to human reality and environment according to her likes and dislikes. The novel is essentially a dream-stuff of the doom-haunted Maya. There is also an element of tragic pathos in her expressions, varying from one moment to another according to her anxiety-ridden moods. Thus, there is dreaminess in what she expresses and in what she reacts to.

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**Keywords:** Agony, Alienation, Conflict, Fatalism, Prophecy

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### Introduction

Over the course of more than a century, Indian writing in English has gone through many stages, prioritizing different perspectives at different times. Until recently, Indian fiction's landscapes were dominated by themes of the liberation struggle and its aftermath. However,

with the emergence of new writers such as Anita Desai, a new direction in the field of Indian literature in English has been opened up, with various perspectives and forms. Desai has broadened the thematic convention of the Indian book in English as a notable

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novelist. Her brilliance may be seen not only in her representation of the depths of human consciousness and subconsciousness but also in her existentialist concern, which gives her writings a particular power due to her poetic eloquence. She explores the social structure in a different perspective through individual protagonist in her novels. *Cry, the Peacock* is a debut novel about the protagonist, Maya, and her unhappy marriage. "Cry, the Peacock is a terrible novel, primarily in the style of private monologue, depicting the sad mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya," writes H.M. Williams (Indo-Anglo Literature, 87). This work delves inside the mind of a person and explains why they behave strangely and fearfully. It portrays the story of a sensitive young girl fascinated with a childhood calamity prophecy, whose exceptional sensitivity is represented in terms of unimaginable estrangement. The novel begins by describing Maya and Gautama's relationship, which stresses the issue of husband-wife alienation. Maya is completely different from him. She needs a beloved spouse with broad understandings, extremely conscious, creative, and susceptible disposition. Gautama lacks these qualities. The alienation between Maya and Gautama is because of Maya's intense involvement in her own inner world of phantasm. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay from Virginia Woolf's

novel *To the Lighthouse* has a similar destiny.

#### **Thematic Analysis**

Maya, the half-child, half-woman romantic heroine, says of her spiritual pangs as she identifies with the Peacock in the agony of ecstasy of their fatal love experience: "Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and I wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine" (97). Maya, the principal character, is married to Gautama, a renowned lawyer and member of a warm-hearted, socially active family, who is nearly twice her age.

Maya, the heroine, and a supporting character unravels the riddle of the feminine psyche in a variety of ways and has her own distinct personality. Maya is from a God-fearing Brahmin family, and her father is a supporter of traditional culture and traditions. She has been raised in a safe environment and is naive to the harsh realities of life. In these words, she says, "My childhood was marked by a lot of exclusions, a life that became increasingly constrained, almost unnatural, and in which I lived like a play princess in a toy world. But it was a lovely one" (89). She has a hunger for life and 'sensual pleasure in living,' and she finds pagan delight in nature and the world. Gautama, her spouse, holds her father responsible for her immaturity and inability to deal with the harsh facts of life.



Maya is the daughter of a wealthy artist father and was raised in a lavish environment. Despite the fact that Gautama is a confident husband who looks after Maya and loves her in his own unique way, Maya is dissatisfied and unhappy. Gautama, she believes, never gives the idea of marital incoherence or experience with conjugal life. Maya's pet dog, Toto, dies at the start of the tale. This exacerbates the situation, turning it into a serious and never-to-be-forgotten incident for her. Maya is upset by this event, and she loses her mental equilibrium. She is particularly connected to the dog because she is childless, and it looks that the dog was a child substitute. Maya is extremely distraught and agitated as a result of Toto's death. Maya is depicted "rushing to the tap to remove the vision from her eyes" after seeing the dead (5). "She became agitated when she believed she saw the sparkle of a blue bottle; the sunset sun appears to be 'swelling visibly like a purulent boil until it ripe to drop,' she thought" (6).

Gautama, being a realistic guy, takes the tragedy in stride and tries to make preparations for its burial. He consoles his wife, Maya, in his own unique way, and promises to get her another puppy. Maya feels harmed by his lack of attention. Toto's death may seem little to Gautama, a reasonable and professionally busy man, but it is extremely important to Maya.

Despite the fact that they live together, Gautama knows very little about her. He brings her a cup of tea in an attempt to console her, oblivious to Maya's distress. We can see that without any malice on the part of Gautama or the Maya, a tragedy takes its place. In his own way, Gautama adored Maya. "Do sit down, Maya," he replied softly. You look so hot and tired that a cup of tea is in order" (7). "Are you lying in the dark?" "He said, drawing a finger down my cheek," he said

(11). "Come, come," he murmured, pulling out the handkerchief, which was now even more stained than before. 'Get up,' he said, 'the servants are coming to take the beds away for the night, and it is actually much nicer outside.' Maya, wipe your face and we'll head out.' (11). Her heart soared with all-consuming love's exhilarating agony. Maya, as the embodiment of the "feminine principle," is deeply affected when Gautama dismisses her sadness over Toto's death with a simple "it's all over" (8). Maya and Gautama's realms are diametrically opposed in that they both embody the extremes of feminine and masculine principles. Maya's restlessness is visible in her multifaceted projections of camaraderie, materialism, Keatsian sensuality, and her identification with petunias. On the other hand, Gautama is an Apollonian who values form, order, discipline, career, and logic machinery. Maya is more interested in her need for love "of



the tranquilly that comes from companion life from brother flesh" than in aberration and insanity (18). She desires to be immersed in the ephemerality of contact, intimacy, and communion. Gautama has no sensation-he cannot distinguish the smell of petunia from the smell of lemons he is into abstract thought.

The death metaphor is subtly woven throughout the story. Maya has a premonition of some future calamity after Toto's death, as she proclaims in Chapter 1 of Part 2:

it was not 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). Maya's unconscious psyche and conscious mind are never in sync. According to psychological data, when anxiety levels reach the unconscious level of the human psychic, it causes a person to separate from what genuinely belongs to him. As a result of her persistent concern, she develops a dissociation of concepts and feelings. She adopts a pessimistic attitude on life, considering its entirety to be pointless. She develops psychosis as a result of her loneliness. Her disenchantment grows so strong in her subconscious that she loses her mental equilibrium. In psychology, when confronted with the worries and anxieties of life, the human mind traces its existence in certain invisible and unfelt items from the deeper recesses of the

preconscious level of the human psyche. She is tormented by the sire prediction, just like Macbeth, because "It had been four years since we had been married, and I felt it was time. It was either Gautama or I at this point " (32). The albino's prognosis causes a dreadful ruckus in her mind. When she receives a letter from her brother, she convinces herself that her death was unnecessary for the prophecy to be fulfilled; it could be Gautama's, because "the man had no relationship with the world, or with me" (175). Maya's mental breakdown and murder of her spouse could be interpreted as an allusion to their opposing life ideals. But, as a Sanskrit (cultured) Hindu woman, she is plagued with guilt and remorse for murdering her husband, and, despite her rationalisations, she commits herself. Maya's heart-breaking tragedy could be any woman's story, anywhere in the globe. The story of a Hindu woman expands the significance of the novel's symbol or title by incorporating religious and cultural themes.

This novel contains symbols, which are an important component of Desai's literary fabric since they allow her to establish place, create atmosphere, and conjure the proper word of the difficult issue by giving the reader a key to grasp them. Symbolism is "a late-nineteenth-century art and literary movement that attempts to portray concepts or states of mind rather than represent



the real world through the use of words and images” (Cambridge dictionary). In this tale, the peacock and their screams are immensely meaningful. The peacock is said to be the only animal that is aware of its impending demise. It is used as a symbol for Maya, who is also aware of her imminent death. She, like the peacock, is more in love with life when she realises, she is about to die. The peacock understands that death is the ultimate fact and that they will die when it rains. They look up at the sky to see coming death in the form of gloomy clouds, and as a result, they are never free of the fear of death for the rest of their lives. Maya thinks her death is near because she believes the albino astrologer's prophecy.

When the peacock sees the clouds loaded with water, they cry out as if in pain: “*pia, pia*, Lover, lover. *Mio, mio*,--I die, I die” (82). They want to make the most of their short lives. Maya is in a similar predicament. She is completely in love with life despite the fact that she knows she will die shortly. The peacock battles his mate first and then dies. Maya and her husband's death process is a metaphor for the end of their relationship. She has known her fate since she was a child. She would listen to the peacock's cry after the astrologer's prophecy and feel horrible terror and misery.

Pom and Leila, Maya's friends, are the other female characters in the narrative. Maya and Leila

are two very different people, but they both believe in Fatalism. Maya naturally considers family members and recalls Leila, who reminds her of poppies (white poppies). Leila symbolises the negative aspect of human destiny, which is bitterness, disease, and death, and represents human luck or fate. Maya once informed her that she had made her think about opium. Opium is a bitter, brownish addictive narcotic substance made from the dried latex of immature opium poppy seeds capsules (Merriam-Webster). Maya believes Leila offers abilities that can alleviate pain and provide comfort to others. Naturally, she thinks about her when she is in pain. She remembers Leila marrying a man who was dying of tuberculosis and providing him with a lot of care because she was a painkiller to him. But, like Maya's father, she had another side to her personality: she was a fatalist. Fatalism is defined as "the conviction that people cannot alter the course of events and that occurrences, particularly catastrophic ones, cannot be prevented" (Cambridge Dictionary). “It was all written in my fate long ago,” Leila said, accepting her sad life as her destiny beyond man's control (52). A different character Pom, who does not speak about fate, is confronted with issues that are all too frequent in the lives of Indian women. “Logic, tact, diplomacy - nothing mattered to her who chattered so glibly and gaily...and never, alluding



to family, tradition, custom, superstition," she says about her in-laws (53). Pom is the stereotypical Indian woman who has been ripped from her culture and now plagues the large cities. In the context of the prophecy, Maya compares herself to Pom. Mrs. Desai elaborates on how women are smothered in their lives and must seek permission from their in-laws for every task. "Like two mice in one small room, not daring to creep out for fear of being pounced on, asking you where you're going, when you'll be back, why you aren't wearing the jewellery they gave you," she describes her life. (53). The biological characteristics of a woman are linked to her fate. She has a conventional role and is restricted to the four walls of her home. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," writes Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*.

Anita Desai intends to convey, through Mrs. Lal's character, that a woman and her family are not whole and significant without the birth of a boy. Mrs. Lal appears to be well-off with her four daughters, but she secretly wishes for a son. Even if we may exalt and rationalise girls, they are nonetheless viewed as a liability in our culture due to the scourge of dowry. In addition, only sons are regarded as legitimate heirs to their parents. The novelist describes how women in a male-dominated world

are sexually exploited and treated as commodities in this novel's cabaret girls.

Anita Desai promotes a fresh concept of feministic writing through Maya's persona. She focuses on marital disharmony, escapism and loss of hope through the character Maya. Maya stands out among the novel's female characters. Among Desai's female characters, she is the most intriguing and psychologically perplexing. She represents a group of women who suffer silently at the hands of men. *Cry, the Peacock* is more of a novel of feeling than of action. Desai focuses on marital disharmony, escapism and loss of hope through the character Maya. It has the appearance of an orchid and the sound of a flute. It is almost entirely concerned with the terrors of existence, and it achieves its impact by using a succession of exploding and multiplying metaphors.

## Conclusion

As a novelist, Anita Desai is unconcerned with exposing social and economic issues in her works. According to Naik, she has a "uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet entirely at comfortable in the mentality of the west." Her creative energy has been channelled into the psychological states of the human psyche. She has opened up a new universe for us, providing us with a wonderful study of human connections and psychology. *Cry, the Peacock* is a novel that is



primarily written for women. Desai emphasised the plight of women in a variety of ways. She specialises in describing the plight of highly sensitive and emotional women who are tormented by neglect and loneliness. Although the work is mostly about Maya, all of the other characters, such as Pom and Leila, add to the voice of women and issues that affect them. So in the role of Maya, Anita Desai has shown the feminine mind of both a girl and a woman. The issue of females, a hot subject in feminism, is addressed by her with sensitiveness. By Maya's role, Anita Desai carries a new aspect of feminist publishing. Maya stands separate from every female character in the novel. Even though Desai denies herself as a narrow feminist approach but tells that she can understand them better. It is observed clearly in the character Maya, according to the author she is the most exciting and psychologically amazing amongst the whole

Desai's female characters. She stages a sort of woman who silently abides from the men. The novelist has therefore spotlighted the feminine predicament in several prospects. Desai took the lead in investigating modern women's damaged sensibilities, expressing the inner psyche of her protagonist, and bringing the existential suffering of women to

the fore. Even the novel's title has a strong symbolic meaning. Maya's entire life, including her mental workings, anguish, and death, is symbolically conveyed through a vivid depiction of peacock life.

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