

Breaking the Silence: A Feminist Study of Patriarchal Oppression in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract: Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is widely regarded as one of the pioneering works of Indian English fiction that foregrounds the psychological and emotional realities of women living within patriarchal social structures. Through the tragic story of Maya, Desai explores the devastating effects of emotional neglect, gender inequality, and the denial of female subjectivity in a male-dominated society. Maya's intense sensitivity, loneliness, and psychological deterioration are not presented merely as symptoms of individual instability but as consequences of a patriarchal system that silences women's voices and disregards their emotional needs. This paper examines the novel through the lens of feminist literary criticism, drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Elaine Showalter to analyse the intersections of patriarchy, marriage, gender identity, and psychological oppression. It argues that Maya's fractured sense of self emerges from the unequal power relations embedded within patriarchal marriage, where male rationality and authority are privileged over female emotion and self-expression. The study further explores Desai's use of symbolism, stream-of-consciousness narration, and psychological realism to expose the invisible forms of violence experienced by women in domestic spaces.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Anita Desai, Female Identity, Psychological Novel, Gender.

Introduction

Indian English literature has played a significant role in portraying the changing realities of Indian society, particularly the position of women within traditional social and cultural structures. While earlier literary works often depicted women as idealized figures embodying sacrifice, obedience, and domestic virtue, the emergence of women writers in the post-independence period brought a profound shift in thematic concerns. These writers moved beyond conventional representations to explore women's inner lives, emotional struggles, psychological conflicts, and quest for identity. Their works challenged patriarchal assumptions and questioned the social institutions that restricted women's freedom and individuality. Among these writers, Anita Desai occupies a distinguished place in Indian English literature for her sensitive exploration of human psychology and the emotional complexities of women's lives. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee and other critics, Desai's writing "marks a departure from the social realism that dominated earlier Indian English fiction" (*The Twice-Born Fiction*, 1971). Unlike many of her contemporaries, Desai focuses less on external social events and more on the internal landscapes of her characters, revealing the silent anxieties, fears, and emotional conflicts that shape their existence. Her fiction is characterized by psychological realism, symbolic imagery, and lyrical prose, making her one of the foremost novelists to examine the relationship between gender, identity, and mental health in modern Indian literature.

Published in 1963, *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai's debut novel, marked a significant turning point in Indian English fiction. The novel presents the tragic story of Maya, a young woman whose emotional sensitivity, loneliness, and psychological instability gradually intensify within the confines of an emotionally unfulfilling marriage. Maya's suffering is not merely the result of personal weakness or mental illness; rather, it reflects the

oppressive conditions created by patriarchal social structures that deny women emotional recognition, equal participation, and personal autonomy. Through Maya's experiences, Desai demonstrates how silence, neglect, and unequal power relations within marriage can have devastating psychological consequences. Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar says: "Cry, the Peacock scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference in this world. Her insanity, sane or insane fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life." (16).

The title of the novel itself carries symbolic significance. The peacock's cry, associated with longing, desire, and loneliness, becomes a metaphor for Maya's suppressed emotions and her desperate search for love, understanding, and companionship. Similarly, Desai employs nature, dreams, recurring images, and stream-of-consciousness narration to reveal Maya's fragmented inner world and the growing conflict between her emotional needs and the rigid expectations imposed upon her by society. These literary techniques transform the novel from a simple domestic narrative into a profound psychological and feminist exploration of female subjectivity. Feminist literary criticism provides an effective framework for understanding the experiences of Maya because it examines the ways literature reflects and challenges gender-based inequalities. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir argue that women are socially constructed as the "Other," while Kate Millett identifies patriarchy as a political and cultural system that institutionalizes male authority. Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism further emphasizes the importance of studying women's experiences, voices, and literary traditions from a female perspective. These theoretical perspectives illuminate how Maya's emotional suffering is shaped by patriarchal expectations rather than by individual inadequacy alone.

One of the central concerns of *Cry, the Peacock* is the institution of marriage as a site of unequal power relations. Maya longs for affection, emotional intimacy, and meaningful communication, whereas her husband Gautama embodies rationality, detachment, and patriarchal authority. His inability to acknowledge Maya's emotional needs reflect a broader social attitude that privileges masculine logic while dismissing feminine sensitivity. Aruna and Peruvalluthi quote Desai's portrayal of Gautama as "like the mediator under the Bo tree, too squeamish to discuss such things as love, with their horror of physical demands, and even spiritual demands of 'possession' and 'rights'" (5). Consequently, Maya experiences profound alienation, isolation, and identity fragmentation, which eventually culminate in psychological collapse. Desai thus exposes the invisible forms of violence embedded within patriarchal marriage, where emotional neglect can be as destructive as physical oppression. The novel also reflects broader concerns about women's mental health and identity in postcolonial India. At a time when discussions of psychological trauma and emotional well-being were largely absent from mainstream literary discourse, Desai foregrounded the intimate relationship between social oppression and psychological suffering. By presenting Maya's internal conflicts with remarkable psychological depth, the novel challenges readers to reconsider traditional assumptions about femininity, marriage, and women's roles in society.

Feminism

Feminism is a critical and socio-political movement that advocates equality between men and women by challenging systems of gender-based discrimination, oppression, and inequality. As a literary theory, feminism examines how literature represents women, constructs gender roles, and reinforces or resists patriarchal ideologies. Feminist criticism seeks to recover women's voices, experiences, and identities that have historically been marginalized in male-dominated societies and literary traditions. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), argues that woman is socially constructed as the "Other," whose identity is defined in relation to man rather than as an independent individual: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (2). Building upon this idea, Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), describes patriarchy as a political and cultural system that legitimizes male dominance over women through social institutions such as family, marriage, religion, and education. Elaine Showalter further expanded feminist literary criticism through her concept of gynocriticism, which emphasizes the study of women's writing, female experiences, and the development of a distinctly female literary tradition. Feminist theory therefore moves beyond exposing gender inequality to examine how women

negotiate identity, agency, and resistance within oppressive social structures. In the context of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, feminist theory provides an effective framework for analysing Maya's emotional isolation, psychological suffering, and loss of identity as consequences of patriarchal expectations. Her experiences reveal how patriarchal marriage privileges male authority and rationality while silencing women's emotions and desires. Through a feminist reading, the novel emerges as a critique of gender inequality and an affirmation of women's right to emotional expression, individuality, dignity, and autonomy.

Patriarchy in *Cry, the Peacock*

Patriarchy is one of the central themes in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. The novel presents patriarchy not as an overt system of physical domination but as a subtle network of emotional, psychological, and social control that governs women's lives. Desai demonstrates that patriarchal oppression often operates through silence, indifference, and unequal power relations rather than through direct violence. Maya's experiences reveal how deeply patriarchal values are embedded within family life, marriage, and social expectations, shaping her identity and ultimately contributing to her psychological disintegration: "I am not yet twenty-five and already I am exhausted and sick unto death of life" (11). Patriarchy in the novel operates through emotional control rather than physical violence. Maya is expected to remain a devoted wife regardless of her emotional needs. Her opinions, fears, and desires receive little attention. Although Gautama does not openly abuse Maya, his emotional distance reflects patriarchal authority. He values reason, discipline, and intellectual detachment, while Maya seeks affection, empathy, and companionship: "I wanted to talk, endless, silly, intimate talk... But he was silent, indifferent, remote" (24). Patriarchy privileges Gautama's worldview and dismisses Maya's emotional reality. Thus, Maya's loneliness results from a social system that undervalues women's emotions. Maya is affectionate, imaginative, and emotionally expressive. However, society expects her to become the ideal wife—patient, obedient, and silent. Her childhood was filled with love from her father, but marriage abruptly replaces affection with emotional neglect. Gautama neither understands nor responds to her emotional needs. Maya's inability to communicate reflects the silence imposed on women by patriarchal culture. Her gradual psychological breakdown symbolizes the destructive consequences of denying women emotional freedom.

In the novel, Maya occupies a subordinate position within her marriage to Gautama. Although she belongs to an affluent family and enjoys material comfort, she lacks emotional security and personal agency. Patriarchal ideology defines the husband as the rational authority and the wife as the emotional dependent whose needs are secondary. Gautama embodies this traditional masculine role through his detached, intellectual, and philosophical outlook. He values reason, discipline, and self-control, often dismissing Maya's fears and emotional needs as irrational. His inability to understand or respond to her emotional distress reflects a patriarchal mindset that privileges masculine logic while devaluing feminine sensitivity. The marriage between Maya and Gautama represents unequal gender relations. Gautama enjoys intellectual independence and social authority, whereas Maya remains emotionally dependent and confined within domestic life. Communication between husband and wife almost disappears. The marriage illustrates how patriarchal structures often prioritize male comfort over female emotional well-being. Maya constantly struggles to understand herself. Her identity is shaped by fear, loneliness, and the search for affection: "My body was sick with unshed tears, a thousand weeping sores of loneliness" (89). The astrologer's prediction of death intensifies her anxiety, but the prophecy alone does not destroy her. Instead, emotional neglect transforms fear into obsession. Her psychological crisis symbolizes the fragmentation of female identity under patriarchal oppression.

One of the most significant aspects of patriarchy in the novel is the suppression of female voice. Maya repeatedly attempts to communicate her fears, anxieties, and loneliness, particularly after recalling the astrologer's prophecy that either she or her husband will die in the fourth year of their marriage. Rather than offering comfort or reassurance, Gautama treats her concerns with indifference and philosophical detachment: "He would not listen. And I could not speak" (93). His responses deepen Maya's sense of alienation and reinforce the belief that a

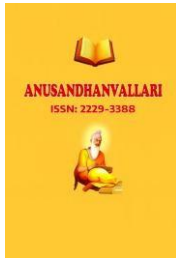
woman's emotions are insignificant. Desai thus illustrates how emotional neglect can become a powerful instrument of patriarchal domination, silencing women without the need for physical coercion. The institution of marriage is depicted as a space where patriarchal power is normalized. Instead of being a relationship based on mutual understanding and companionship, Maya and Gautama's marriage is characterized by unequal expectations and poor communication. Gautama enjoys intellectual freedom, professional respect, and social authority, while Maya remains confined to the domestic sphere, where her identity revolves around her role as a wife: "I was his pet, his darling, his toy, his fool" (27). Her emotional dependence is not simply a personal characteristic but a product of a social system that discourages women from developing independent identities and equal partnerships within marriage. Desai also exposes the psychological consequences of patriarchal oppression. Maya's growing loneliness, fear, and obsession are closely connected to her inability to find empathy or emotional support within her marriage. Her isolation is intensified by the absence of meaningful relationships and the lack of opportunities for self-expression. Feminist critics argue that patriarchal societies often invalidate women's emotions by labelling them as excessive, irrational, or hysterical. Maya's psychological suffering can therefore be understood not merely as an individual mental crisis but as the result of continuous emotional repression and social marginalization.

Another important aspect of patriarchy in the novel is the unequal distribution of emotional labour. Maya constantly seeks to preserve the relationship by longing for affection, conversation, and intimacy, whereas Gautama remains emotionally detached and largely unaware of her inner turmoil. This imbalance reflects traditional gender expectations in which women are expected to nurture relationships and provide emotional care, while men's emotional distance is accepted as a sign of strength and rationality. Desai critiques this imbalance by showing that genuine relationships cannot survive without mutual empathy, communication, and emotional reciprocity. The novel further suggests that patriarchal values affect not only women's social position but also their perception of themselves. Maya gradually internalizes her loneliness and helplessness, leading to increasing anxiety and psychological fragmentation: "All order is gone out of my life, all formality, there is no plan, no peace nothing to keep me with the pattern of familiar every thing living and doing" (195). Her loneliness is captured in the simple declaration, "I am alone" (Varshney 7). Her inability to articulate her suffering in a society that dismisses female emotions leaves her trapped between her desire for affection and the reality of emotional neglect. The recurring images of death, darkness, and the peacock's cry symbolize this inner conflict and emphasize the destructive effects of prolonged emotional suppression.

Although Maya's final act is tragic, it also represents resistance. Her refusal to continue living in emotional imprisonment exposes the failure of patriarchal marriage. Gore describes Maya as acting in a "maddening fury" (Gore 2). Desai does not glorify violence but demonstrates that continuous emotional suppression can destroy human identity. The novel therefore challenges patriarchal assumptions that women exist solely to support men. It demands recognition of women's emotional, intellectual, and psychological autonomy.

Conclusion

Cry, the Peacock is more than a psychological novel; it is a profound critique of patriarchal society. Through Maya's emotional suffering, Anita Desai reveals how silence, neglect, and gender inequality damage women's identities. The novel challenges readers to reconsider traditional gender roles and advocates relationships based on equality and empathy. Maya's tragedy ultimately becomes a powerful protest against a system that refuses to hear women's voices. By highlighting Maya's emotional isolation and her struggle for recognition and autonomy, the paper demonstrates that the novel is not merely a psychological novel but also a profound feminist critique of patriarchal ideology in postcolonial India. It contends that Desai challenges conventional gender roles by revealing how the suppression of women's desires, identities, and voices can lead to alienation, fragmentation, and psychological crisis. The novel ultimately advocates greater emotional understanding, equality, and respect within human relationships, making its feminist concerns enduringly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender, mental health, and social justice. Many women continue to experience emotional neglect, unequal domestic



responsibilities, and limited decision-making power. Mental health issues among women are increasingly recognized as being connected to social pressures and gender discrimination. Desai's novel encourages readers to value emotional communication, equality, and mutual respect within relationships. From a feminist perspective, *Cry, the Peacock* challenges the patriarchal assumption that women should remain silent, obedient, and emotionally self-sacrificing. Through Maya's tragic experience, Anita Desai exposes the hidden forms of violence embedded within patriarchal relationships, demonstrating that emotional neglect can be as damaging as physical abuse. The novel argues that denying women empathy, communication, and autonomy ultimately leads to alienation, loss of identity, and psychological collapse. In doing so, Desai presents a powerful critique of patriarchal society and calls for relationships founded on equality, mutual respect, emotional understanding, and shared humanity.

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