

Revisiting Despair: Research on Psychological and Existential Themes in *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the diachronic continuities of psychological turmoil and existential angst in Anita Desai's seminal novel *Cry, the Peacock* and its reception history and critical relevance over the last 15 years. Ever since its publication in 1963, a good deal of scholarship has been placed into Desai's work about her heroine, Maya, the lead woman, representing a complex psychological landscape. Hence, the paper's thrust is to critically analyze these themes and look at their impact on recent scholarship. The scope is a comprehensive literature review of the criticism done so far on the novel, with works primarily from the last 15 years cutting across several current critical perspectives and methodologies. The methodology for the research is based on a systematic literature review of scholarly articles, books, and critical essays that concern qualitative analysis of themes, comparative studies vis-à-vis other works of literature, and interdisciplinary approaches. Involving chronology, this work follows the thread of chronology in critical perspectives. It follows closely how earlier analyses usually focused on Maya's acute psychological suffering and existential fear. It goes right up to more recent research situating the novel within broader post-colonial and mental health discourses. Recent scholarship underlines the lasting interest in the novel and firmly places *Cry, the Peacock* as one of the core texts for realizing both psychological themes relevant to contemporary scholarship on existentialism. Hence, this paper reinstates Desai's text as a central work that retains its profundity of appeal and insight for modern readers and scholars into the human psyche and the challenge of being.

Key Words: Critical Relevance, Existentialism, Feminine Consciousness, Maya's Psyche, Psychological Turmoil.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Since its release in 1963, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* has been the focus of significant study and critical evaluation. The investigation of intricate psychological topics, rich symbolism, and mesmerizing imagery in this literary masterwork has enthralled readers. Numerous themes and interpretations of the book have been explored by academics throughout the years as they have gone deep into the text. The study of "*Cry, the Peacock*" has developed and advanced, providing new insights and viewpoints, from the early analysis of Maya's psychological issues to contemporary research on gender stereotypes, existentialism and broader psychological aspects. In the first few years after the novel's publication, academics concentrated on how complexly Maya's psychology was portrayed. The themes of loneliness, anxiety, and existential agony in the book were examined by critics including Sreenivasa Iyengar. Iyengar emphasized the novel's portrayal of Maya's inner world and her profound reflection in his book *Indian Writings in English* (1985), points out, "Her intensity—whether she is sane, hysterical, or insane—fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life" (Iyengar 468). As feminist literary criticism acquired traction in the 1970s and later, researchers looked at how novels depicted gender stereotypes and societal standards. In *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction* (1971), Meena Belliappa examined the influence of patriarchy on Maya's existence and her fight for expressing oneself. Ann Lowry Weir's "The Illusions of Maya: Feminine Consciousness in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*" (1981) shares a similar sentiment.

The late 20th century saw the application of existentialist and psychoanalytic theories to the book, which improved readers' comprehension of Maya's character. Maya's innermost wants and unsolved problems were uncovered through psychoanalytic interpretations that probed her mind's recesses. In his chapter "Superstition and Psyche in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*" of *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study* (2000), Dr. M. Rajeshwar offers an insightful

psychoanalytic perspective of Maya's character. He states that "the knowledge of depth psychology holds the promise of examining her irrational and superstitious belief from an entirely new angle" (Rajeshwar 14). Another example of this type of study is Mittapalli Rajeshwar's *Indian Women Novelists and Psychoanalysis: A Study of the Neurotic Characters* from 1998. As their studies went on, academics placed *Cry, the Peacock* in the larger cultural and historical setting of post-independence India. Concern is expressed by Josna Rege in "Codes in Conflict: Post-Independence Alienation in Anita Desai's Early Novels" (1996) over the significance of re-examining early post-independence women's literature.

Comparative studies have been conducted in more recent years to examine the relationships between *Cry, the Peacock* and other Anita Desai works. The field of comparative studies has been enriched by several publications using an interdisciplinary approach. Shivangi D. Oza compares the two female protagonists, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Anjali in *Maun Raag*, and comes to the conclusion that both characters "search for the order in life, peace of mind, meaning of existence, but both have dissimilar ends, though having multiple similarities" (Oza 7). The novel's significance for postcolonial literature was also investigated by academics, who looked at how it influenced questions of cultural identity and the effects of colonialism. Fawzia Afzal-Khan addresses the crucial issue of how much the use of particular ideological tactics genuinely aids the ex-colonized writer in productively coping with postcolonial and post-independence trauma in his study *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (1993).

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL TURMOIL AND EXISTENTIAL ANGST:

The idea of psychological distress and existential anxiety is essential to *Cry, the Peacock*. It digs into the complexity of Maya's psyche as she battles inner demons, macabre ideas, and a great fear of death. The story revolves around Maya's introspective nature and her existential crises. Comparative studies and interdisciplinary methods have emerged in recent years, identifying links between *Cry, the Peacock* and other works by Anita Desai, as well as investigating the novel's importance in the larger context of postcolonial literary canon and mental health discourse.

In her article "Existential Crisis in Indian Women: A Study of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," Atashi Ghosh focuses on the existential crisis in women that causes mental detachment, frustration, mental anguish, suicide, and murder. She goes on to say that, using Sartre's perspective on existentialism, "Existentialism comprises an individual's assertion of subjective self...questioning...so called rationality...striving to discover one's identity and meaning in a meaningless life" (Ghosh 47). She uses the persona of Maya to explain how being obsessed with a fear of dying causes her great mental suffering as well as a significant break in her marriage. By using her argument, Atashi declares Maya to be an existential character. He then goes on to discuss the characteristics of existential characters in general, stating that "these characters suffer from identity crisis, often failing to find meaning in life and turn to violent cathartic outcomes like murder or suicide" (Ghosh 51). In her conclusion, she introduced the term "fairer sex" in relation to female characters who always strive to define their identities, after drawing comparisons between Maya and Macbeth and stating her case on how Indian women are portrayed in Indian novels.

In her Ph.D. thesis, "A Comparative Study of the Aspects of Existentialism in the Novels of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi," Aneela Malhotra expands on the comparative method and discovers that it is challenging to define existentialism since the term is used so amorously. She continues by pointing out that 20th-century philosophers concentrated on a single idea, namely, a philosophy that deals with each individual and their emotions, actions, and thoughts. As a result, she makes an effort to demonstrate how this philosophy has an impact on Indian English Literature through the writings of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai. In her research, she compares and contrasts the existential elements of Self-Alienation and Angst while contrasting *Cry, the Peacock* by Anita Desai with *The Last Labyrinth* by Arun Joshi, and she evaluates how their protagonists struggle with loneliness and aloofness in their lives, which has tragic results.

In "Marital Discordance and Psychic Tensions in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*," Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa focuses on the psychic conflicts of Maya that result from her marital disagreement and to examine the marital discord in the married lives of Maya and Gautama, the writer uses psychoanalytical theories outlined by Sigmund Freud, along with other psychoanalytical theorists including Jacques Lacan with a particular emphasis on the psychoanalysis components of Maya character. Writer finds, "Maya is pensive, receptive, and sensitive while Gautama is pragmatic, insensible, and lucid" (Shrivastwa 2335). The study's primary outcome is that Maya and Gautama have an unpleasant marriage because their temperaments are incompatible.

In his article "Cry the Peacock: Analytical Study on Neurosis," Ashish Gupta focuses on the neurotic behavior of the protagonist that results from shocking experiences rooted in socio-psychological circumstances that always keeps her on the brink of precipice and ultimately leads to her self-effacement with already deteriorating psychologically and mentally and then choosing to kill her husband and then commit suicide. Her flimsy and tenuous hypersensitivity, her plaguing neurosis proves to be a last straw on the back. Ashish further puts out that in her neurotic stupor and

claustrophobic behaviours, Maya epitomises the plight and predicament of an individual governed by determinism. Neurosis in Maya begins when her real individual is shattered and forsaken. She is ruled by her compulsions, inner stress, and mental duress which precipitate her condition reasons for which arise from discordant and uncaring family circumstances, broken home and further her incompatibility to adapt. And, finally a conflict between her internal and external self.

Samia Firoz Wagla Wala's essay entitled "Feminine Psychology in the Protagonist in the Novel "Cry the Peacock" by Anita Desai" encapsulates a comprehensive insight into the nuanced understanding of the concept of womanhood and female psychology. It further delves into the domain of how femininity, femaleness and feminine psychology are fundamental to the normal and abnormal psychological aspects. It also stresses upon why it is crucial to unravel the same as the author herself portrays the precarity of a woman's perception. The import of the essay is to decipher the psychology of women which if left unstudied can have detrimental effects. This is what the essay does study by bridging a connect between healthy psychology and its effects. This paper also tries to understand the persona women tend to develop under precipitous socio- psychological conditions. Maya's childhood and adolescent sensibilities influences her life in later stage and her abnormality takes a toll upon her and also impacts the behaviour of neighbourly characters. Though insane, chaotic and disillusioned, her feelings and emotions resonate with her stubbornly and finally cripple her condition, worsens her psyche and her marriage. Thus, the Psycho-social contours of Maya's behavioural patterns is what is the quintessence of the essay that rightly ends with: "Alienation is a condition defined as emotional isolation or dissociation from others, people who are alienated are separates from their loved ones both physically and psychologically" (773).

3. CONCLUSION:

Cry, the Peacock continues to stay the focus of intense scholarship and critical research. Scholars have examined its issues via psychological, feminist, and cultural views. The progression of study through time demonstrates Anita Desai's debut novel's ongoing effect and relevance, making it an important and valuable resource of literary discussion and interpretation. The novel's comprehensive investigation of the human mind, the intricacies of human sentiments, symbolism, and its portrayal of the Indian social milieu assures that it remains an outstanding work in the world of Indian English literature.

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