
From Sensitivity to Rebellion: Feminine Consciousness in Maya's World of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract: Simone de Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex* 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' suggests that femininity is not biological but a social construct. Her widely cited idea implies gender equality and women empowerment which are basics for the existence of mankind. The identity of human beings is usually connected to societal and cultural norms while the identity of a woman is generally defined in relation to man though having established her own identity furthermore she is merely treated as an accessory to man. In Indian Writing in English, authors strongly focus on the sociocultural subordination of women in male dominated realm. Anita Desai, Indian born author, lives in the US, has been widely known for her novels *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Fire on the Mountain* (1978), *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) are set in India and portrays feminine sensibility in the hypocrite world. The present paper attempts to represent the lives of women and their struggle for identity in Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock*. She portrays the picture of Maya, a typical representative woman in conventional male dominated society being stuck in the four walls and none to share her pain. Superficially she has all the material comforts of life but in reality her voice of pain is suppressed and goes unheard. Even the novel focuses on her dependent identity without any existence of hers. She shows being surrounded by superstitious and typical patriarchal society leading her into insanity. The novelist presents some minor women characters like Nila, Nina, Pom and Leila along with Maya to expose the various aspects of women's oppression.

Keywords: femininity, gender equality, women empowerment, subordination, patriarchal society, women's oppression

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai deftly represents the suffocating world of women where she finds a 'woman' who is not at the secondary position in reality but at the place of equality and claiming and regaining her existence and identity. The protagonist of the novel Maya; a young, sensitive, educated but superstitious married woman is portrayed as being haunted by the childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. Astrologer Albino's prophecy intensifies with the myth of peacock's cry. Maya hallucinates being caught into the trap by listening to the cries of the peacock in the rainy season and feels that she should never get sound sleep. She expects that her husband should take care of her during her mental disorder as her father used to do. But Gautama, her husband, indulges in his profession as a prosperous lawyer. He neglects her and her demands. For him, she remains the only tool for his household duties and his physical satisfaction. "Through the heroine's reactions to the situations and events in the book, Anita Desai defines the distinctiveness of feminine sensibility. Maya is a sensual, sensitive, and intensely emotional lady with an infatuation with life."⁶

The alienated Maya leads her own world of darkness. She is very scared to be isolated and prays for the Messiah to enlighten her. Maya knows that she is a puppet in the hands of her husband Gautama; a representative man of the evil world. She is laden with social, cultural and traditional role. Social and cultural norms deepen existence and unique identity. Mentioned earlier about woman, Maya is made, as Simon de Beauvoir, puts "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," (295)¹

Anita Desai tries to expose the unpleasant state of women through her novels. Being a *diasporic*³ writer of the Indian Sub-continent, Desai portrays the picture of Indian women and their marginalized situation in the patriarchal world which she too personally experienced. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the author shows the frustration and storm which is swirling in the mind of the protagonist which discloses the female's difficulties. Maya has her own ideas about freedom, happiness, satisfaction and ideas about social, political and economic rights of women; but her voice is suppressed and remains unheard. Virginia Woolf rightly puts the thought regarding women in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929)⁴ that women will not be able to make progress and create their own identity until they have their privacy and independence. Here, in the novel, Maya is deprived of both. "It's always money or property - never a case of passion and revenge, murder and exciting things like that not for love or basic things - like Toto dying."²

As culture and society define man barring woman who rather is defined and labelled by her relation with man as weak, passive, foolish, fat-hearted, and insane and her parents being blamed for spoiling her. Maya as a sensitive woman, the death of pet dog Toto increases her hypersensitivity

culminating to an unbearable tragedy. The material comfort fails to suffice her ambition but on the contrary her social status affects her and causes high insanity dragging her into her tragic end. The prediction that keeps haunting her that either she or her husband would die within four years, leads her towards neurosis and fear of death is intensified by the cry of the peacock - is considered to be a bad omen. Here, Maya is seen as the character of a complex mentality of Indian culture where she does not get her independent identity. She may suffer a lot if her husband dies first because traditional and superstitious Indian society blames the wife for the death of husband. Rituals like wearing white sari, bald widow and *sati*⁵ are more horrible than death.

The psychological conflict (inner conflict) of Maya reveals her awareness of the imminent disaster and expects her brother, father and husband to save her from her neurosis. She woos, "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying" (84)² She feels being neglected by all including the messiah and no one to save her from the clutches of the devil world. Though she desires for her freedom, she refuses to be a scapegoat of society after the death of her husband. So she kisses the ultimate truth - one evening, she leads Gautama to the terrace on the pretext of enjoying the beauty of the moon and pushes him down to death. The protagonist Maya grieves from both physical and mental misery. She remarks, "He did not give me, or the soft, willing body or the lonely, waiting mind that waited near the bed, another thought."² This is her explosive suppressed mind rebelling against the rituals. Maya rebels against everything that makes her a 'woman'. The action of killing Gautama is a justice for her independent existence. It seems, it is a kind of revenge on the patriarchal order. Francis Bacon rightly says in his essay *Of Revenge* that revenge is a wild kind of justice. She commits suicide after killing her husband - creates her own identity as fearless, strong and independent thinker.

Apart from Maya, Anita Desai presents other women characters in the novel to enhance and to expose the various aspects of women's oppression and their struggle for an identity. Nila, a sister of Gautama and her mother are symbolically presented for positivity and strength. Leila shows her protest against the brutal customs in the form of elopement with her lover and her marriage. Pom exposes her thought by saying, "Like two mice in one small room, not daring to creep out..." (55).² Thus, the novelist roars against the customs, rituals, and oppressions of women in male world and suffocation of women due to lack of freedom and identity in the male dominated society.

Conclusion: Anita Desai depicts women as victims of societal oppression where feminine sensibility doesn't find their personal existence. She tries to portray subjugated sides of their existence and represents the issue of women's consciousness and sensibility on the basis of their

sufferings. The research paper is an effort to highlight Anita Desai's point of view to create a society on the basis of equality and value towards feminine sensibility. The author wants to establish ethics of mankind that should not affect patriarchal mind set of women's oppression. Due to the pressurizing mindset of patriarchy out of socio-psychological and economic issues, women are suppressed, marginalised and lonely. Anita Desai's book *Cry, the Peacock* is a measure and solution to the contemporary situation of suffering women in the imbalanced and unstructured society.

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