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REVIEW PAPER

Madness and Marital Alienation: A Psychoanalytic-Feminist Reading of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the psychological collapse of Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), through Freudian psychoanalytic and feminist lenses. Interpreting Lady Maya's descent into madness as the result of patriarchal emotional neglect, an unresolved Oedipal fixation, and the emergence of Thanatos (death-wish), this analysis explores how Anita Desai presents madness not as individual pathology but as a systemic response to the emotional deprivation experienced by women in marriage. Through close textual analysis of Maya's interior monologues, visions, and her alienation from her husband, this paper contends that Maya's psychosis is both a personal tragedy and a metaphorical act of rebellion against societal neglect. The findings affirm that *Cry, the Peacock* offers one of the earliest and most incisive critiques of patriarchal emotional violence in modern Indian English literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) occupies a pioneering space in Indian English literature as one of the earliest psychological novels centered on a woman's inner disintegration. At first glance, the narrative depicts the gradual unravelling of Maya, an emotionally hypersensitive young woman whose arranged marriage to the rational and emotionally detached Gautama leaves her isolated within the confines of her own mind. But what appears to be an individual tragedy is, in the hands of skilled readers like Desai, revealed to be a systemic

indictment, an emotional indictment of patriarchal neglect, cultural repression, and psychic fragmentation.

Set in the early 1960s, the novel enters public discourse in the aftermath of India's independence, a time of great optimism, yet Maya's first-person consciousness belies that optimism. Instead, the reader confronts a consciousness haunted by loneliness and fear, haunted further by the albino astrologer's ominous prophecy: "death in the fourth year of your marriage" (*Cry, the Peacock* 12). The question then becomes: Is Maya losing her

mind—or is she, in fact, more lucid than a world that refuses to validate her emotional reality?

This research paper situates Maya's breakdown at the intersection of psychological trauma and feminist critique. Through detailed psychoanalytic close reading anchored in Freudian concepts like the Oedipus complex, Thanatos (the death drive), and repression, we will uncover the deep psychic fissures that Maya carries from childhood and which erupt under the unrelenting devaluation of her emotional self. In parallel, employing feminist frameworks building on the work of Elaine Showalter, Nancy Chodorow, and our Indian feminist interlocutors, we will demonstrate how Maya's "madness" constitutes a form of protest against the emotional erasure implicit in a patriarchal marital model. She is not "madness" incarnate; rather, her breakdown is the body speaking the unspeakable truth about institutional neglect, gendered invisibility, and thwarted psychological wholeness.

The present research, therefore, is not an exercise in pathologizing Maya; rather, it is an attempt to understand *why* Maya's fears, rage, and silent desperation must be seen as a cogent response to her world. By analysing narrative strategies, stream-of-consciousness, imagery, repetition, timing, and tracing symbolic motifs (like astrology, lucid dreams, possessions), we will map out how Desai constructs emotional realism and stages a critique of gendered emotional violence. Finally, we will situate *Cry, the Peacock* within Desai's broader oeuvre and relevant socio-cultural debates of the time about marriage, mental health, and women's psychological autonomy. In demonstrating how Maya's suicide is both personal and political, this study advances the novel's status as a feminist psychological text that retains its power and urgency decades after its publication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critics have consistently recognised Desai's psychological intensity. Iyengar describes her work as a "poignant study of the tension between self and society" (475), and Walsh asserts that her fiction focuses not on events but on "states of being" (58). Ahmad interprets Maya's breakdown as a "death wish" articulated through her dreams and delusions (Ahmad).

Feminist scholars highlight *Cry, the Peacock* as a critique of the Indian marital institution. A study on marital conflict in JETIR emphasises the "incompatibility of character" between rational Gautama and sensitive Maya, a union born of convenience rather than emotional intimacy (Tiwari 1753). Another analysis describes Maya's marriage as "a loveless cage," with his failure to recognise her sensitivities as a contributing factor to her madness (Gunasekaran 285).

With limited Indian-focused psychoanalytic criticism, this study intends to fill that gap by applying Freudian psychoanalysis, alongside feminist critique, to understand the nexus of gender, emotion, and mental health in Maya's character.

3. Theoretical Framework

This investigation blends Freudian psychoanalysis with feminist insights:

Freudian Concepts: (a) *Repression* (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 124): Maya's early emotional suppression leads to psychic rupture. (b) *Oedipus Complex*: Maya's unresolved attachment to her father, a frequent motif in her recollections, is viewed through Freudian symbolism. (c) *Thanatos (Death-Wish)*: Her obsessive belief in the astrologer's prophecy is interpreted as an unconscious death drive.

Feminist Theory: (a) Drawing on Desai's portrayal of marriage as emotionally barren (Tiwari 1753), we consider how power and neglect shape marital psychic landscapes. (b) Following Elaine Showalter's theory that women's madness often reflects protest against oppression, Maya's breakdown is interpreted as resistance rather than individual pathology.

4. Analysis

Early in the novel, Maya recalls the albino astrologer's warning of death: "He had uttered that one prophecy: death would come in the fourth year of her marriage" (*Cry, the Peacock* 12). This becomes an obsession: "There is no rest any more, only death and waiting" (Desai 98) (qtd. in Ahmad). Freudian theory would identify this fixation as sublimated Thanatos: suppression of grief (her mother's death) yields a psychic death wish. The prophecy reactivates Oedipal tensions. Maya's childhood, dominated by her father's affection, left her emotionally and psychologically dependent, hindering her marital emotional adjustment.

Maya's sensitivity clashes sharply with Gautama's stoic detachment. He undermines her emotional expression by quoting the Gita: "From attachment arises longing...and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes" (Desai 95) (qtd. in Dutt 62). Maya describes, "Telling me to go to sleep...he didn't give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind" (Desai 14) (qtd. in Dutt). Gautama's minimisation of her feelings amounts to emotional erasure. Tiwari observes, "Maya is extremely sensitive...while Gautama is insensitive and rational...They live in a loveless cage" (1753). This emotional abandonment reinforces feminist critiques about the depressive costs of care work and emotional labour within patriarchal marriages. With no outlet for psychological pain, Maya's repressed anxieties manifest as hallucinations, hearing voices, and fearing predatory animals in trees. Freudian repression theory explains this as the id's need to surface. The text presents her with a stark soliloquy: "Am I gone insane? Father! Husband! Who is my saviour?" (Desai 98) (qtd. in Ahmad). These intrusive thoughts mark the breakdown of psychic defences.

The climactic murder, where Maya pushes Gautama from the terrace, signals an extreme assertion of agency. Ahmad notes that Maya visualises one of them left alone to pour tea in loneliness (Criterion). Through a Freudian lens, this act reflects Maya's internal projection of the death wish onto him as a means to reclaim control in a world where she felt voiceless. From a feminist perspective, this act is a tragic protest. Maya's

violence is not random, but symbolic: in the only way left through an irreparable act, she voices her protest. Showalter's model identifies such extremist acts as radical rejections of oppressive frameworks.

5. DISCUSSION

In light of the preceding textual analysis, this discussion will integrate psychoanalytic insights and feminist critique to articulate a holistic interpretation of *Cry, the Peacock* one that sees Maya not merely as a tragic individual but as an emblem of systemic emotional failure. Freudian analysis has revealed that Maya's deepest psychic wounds originate not in failed marriages or failed astrology but in childhood emotional repression. Her obsessive reliance on the prophecy ("I felt death was stalking me" Desai 12) acts less as a common delusion and more as an unconscious internalisation of guilt and rage. Freud teaches us that repressing traumatic experiences simply stores them in the unconscious, where they emerge in other, often destructive, guises (*Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* 68). Maya's hallucinations haunted houses of memory, spectral voices are not aberrations but symptoms of an internalised death drive.

The Oedipal chemical brew of childhood fixation, sexual longing, and rage at paternal authority coalesces in Maya's adult psyche. That her father died early like a "pivot-less star" around which she revolved makes her marriage to a man as emotionally remote as Gautama a repetition compulsion. Her father's absence becomes a void her adulthood cannot fill or even call weakness by, and so she unconsciously organises her life around yet another emotional absence. The fantasy of the "fourth year" is less prophecy and more prophecy that she has wished to fulfil for years.

From a feminist standpoint, the standard psychiatric lens obscures that Maya's breakdown is a form of resistance, albeit a tragic one. As Showalter observes, female madness often signals rebellion against gendered confinement (Showalter 47). Maya's mental collapse is the emotional body becoming her only language when speech fails her: "I howl quietly inside," she admits (Desai 39). Her internal scream is not for herself, but for a world devoid of empathy.

Here we confront a central paradox of feminist literary psychology: madness can be both liberation and extinction. Maya's final act, pushing Gautama from the terrace, is a moment of psychic assertion. Yes, she kills him. Yes, she dies. But *Cry, the Peacock* challenges readers to recognise that her blood-stained hand is *also* a hand reaching for recognition, for love, for emotional legitimacy. Her death is a radical refusal to continue a life that has consistently denied her emotional truth.

Desai's stylistic choices, including interior monologue, repeated imagery, and hallucinatory timelines, create a fragile story-world that mirrors Maya's collapse. Gothic conventions blend with Indian folklore, from the recurring image of the moon (prophecy) to the narrator's collusion with Maya's paranoia. This narrative style immerses the reader into Maya's consciousness to such an extent that her fears and hallucinations feel less like literary devices and more like ethical intrusions. Desai doesn't let us observe madness; she forces us *to feel* it.

This empathetic force is central to feminist literary ethics: the movement from *about* to *with* the other. Through the dream scenes, the symbolic tree outside the window (roots anchoring her yet threatening to strangle her), and the almost hysterical repetition of "something is wrong," Desai creates a mirror where emotional alienation becomes universal human anguish.

Maya's breakdown is less surprising when viewed as the logical outcome of cultural neglect. Indian middle-class marriages in the 1960s often valorised stoic male rationality and submissive female compliance. Maya disrupts this binary. Her emotional candour her admitted loneliness, her morbid need for parental attention threatens to shatter the cultural script. Gautama's unyielding stoicism ("I have responsibilities, responsibilities" Desai 33) is not a virtue but violence. His refusal to see Maya as emotional and irrational becomes an act of erasure. Feminist psychologist Chhaya Dutt argues that Maya's condition "underscores the necessity of emotional labour in marriage labour undervalued, denied, rendered invisible" (62). When that labour is denied by the husband, the emotional void it leaves widens into psychic rupture.

Contextualising *Cry, the Peacock* alongside Desai's later novels opens an emotional genealogy of women's alienation Maya's madness shares affinities with Monisha's suppression, Sita's withdrawal, and Nanda Kaul's retreat. Each woman represents a different facet of cultural failure: domestic overload, marital emotional violence, motherhood trauma, and emotional exhaustion. Between 1963 and 1999, India witnessed enormous societal change the emergence of women's movements, the expansion of urban middle classes, and the growing visibility of mental health conversations. Yet Maya's condition remains hauntingly resonant. Her loneliness, her unmet emotional needs, and her quest for recognition continue to echo in lives silenced by gendered expectations.

This paper contributes to critical conversations about mental health, gender, and marriage, not as mere symptoms of individual pathology, but as structural consequences. The novel intervenes in conversations about emotional autonomy, and offers a warning: when emotional labour is erased—and emotional suffering dismissed madness becomes not a fault but a foreseeable outcome. Therefore, *Cry, the Peacock* is neither a sensationalist depiction of female hysteria nor a tragic outlier. It is a milestone precursory to later feminist psychological narratives, an early but enduring testament to the human cost of emotional invisibility within patriarchal systems. Maya's breakdown does not signal failure, but refusal: refusal to continue loving within a system that refuses to love her back.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study shows how *Cry, the Peacock* portrays madness as a coherent psychological narrative anchored in emotional deprivation and patriarchal neglect. The integration of Freudian psychoanalysis and feminist critique demonstrates that Maya's breakdown is as much a social protest as a mental collapse. Desai's novel thus emerges as a powerful psychological and feminist text that critiques marriage,

emotional denial, and the silent tragedies of women's inner lives in 1960s India.

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