

Societal Expectation of Women in Cry, the Peacock by Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the societal expectations imposed on women in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and their psychological consequences on the protagonist, Maya. The novel presents a harrowing exploration of female oppression, emotional neglect, and patriarchal conditioning, all of which culminate in Maya's mental deterioration. Women in traditional Indian society are expected to embody submission, patience, and self-sacrifice, often at the cost of their individuality and mental well-being. Through Maya's experiences, Desai critiques these rigid gender norms and highlights the devastating effects of societal expectations on women's identity, autonomy, and psychological health. This paper integrates feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural analysis to explore Maya's struggle as a reflection of the broader oppression of women in patriarchal societies.

Keywords : Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Mental Health, Marriage, Feminism, Identity Crisis, Emotional Neglect

Introduction:

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is one of the earliest psychological novels in Indian English literature, offering a deep exploration of female subjectivity and mental instability under the pressures of patriarchal society. The novel follows Maya, a young woman trapped in a marriage that stifles her emotional needs and individual desires. Through Maya's struggles, Desai presents a critique of the rigid gender expectations placed upon women, particularly in traditional Indian society.

Women in patriarchal cultures are often assigned passive roles—expected to be devoted daughters, obedient wives, and nurturing mothers. Their lives are structured around marriage, where they must prioritize their husbands' needs over their own. This societal conditioning strips them of their agency, leaving many women emotionally unfulfilled and psychologically distressed. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's descent into madness serves as an allegory for the suffocation of women within these oppressive social structures.

This paper seeks to analyze how Desai critiques patriarchal expectations through Maya's characterization, the symbolism in the novel, and the psychological consequences of enforced gender roles. By employing feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives, this study highlights the novel's relevance in understanding gender-based oppression and its long-term impact on women's mental health.

Societal Expectations of Women in the Novel:

In *Cry, the Peacock*, marriage is depicted as the defining milestone in a woman's life. Maya, raised in an affluent and overprotective environment, internalizes the idea that marriage will bring her emotional fulfillment. However, her marriage to Gautama, a pragmatic and emotionally distant lawyer, shatters these expectations. The stark contrast between Maya's romanticized notions of love and the reality of her relationship underscores the societal expectation that women must accept marriage as their ultimate purpose, regardless of their happiness. Maya's despair reflects a common struggle faced by women in patriarchal cultures, where marital success is equated with a woman's worth. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), argues that women are conditioned to believe that their lives are incomplete without men. Maya's obsession with love and her frustration with Gautama's indifference highlight the deep-seated social conditioning that forces women to seek validation through their roles as wives.

Emotional Suppression and the Silencing of Women :

A significant theme in the novel is the suppression of women's emotions. Maya is deeply sensitive, expressive, and in need of affection, but her husband dismisses her fears and anxieties as trivial. Gautama's rational and detached nature represents the patriarchal belief that emotions are a sign of weakness—especially in women. This emotional neglect exacerbates Maya's loneliness and alienation, leading to her mental breakdown.

Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), discusses how women in literature are often portrayed as victims of a patriarchal system that invalidates their emotions. Maya's experience aligns with this analysis, as her struggles highlight how patriarchal norms suppress women's voices, forcing them into a state of psychological repression.

The Burden of Beauty and Femininity:

Maya is frequently associated with beauty and fragility, much like the peacock in the novel's title. In many patriarchal societies, a woman's value is often linked to her physical appearance rather than her intellect or independence. This expectation reduces women to ornamental beings, admired for their beauty but denied autonomy.

Desai uses the peacock as a powerful symbol of Maya's predicament. While peacocks are admired for their grace, their cries symbolize hidden sorrow. Similarly, Maya's outward beauty masks her inner turmoil, illustrating the damaging effects of a society that prioritizes appearances over substance.

The Psychological Consequences of Societal Expectations:

Maya's gradual descent into madness is not merely an individual tragedy but a larger commentary on the consequences of patriarchal oppression. Her mental collapse is triggered by the suffocating nature of her marriage and her internalized fears, exacerbated by an astrologer's prophecy that foretells doom. This prophecy, while seemingly supernatural, functions metaphorically—it represents the inevitability of suffering that many women endure under patriarchal rule.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Maya's madness can be seen as a result of repression. Sigmund Freud's theories on hysteria suggest that suppressed emotions manifest in psychological disorders. Maya, unable to express her emotions in a meaningful way, experiences an internal breakdown that leads to

violent consequences. Her eventual act of killing Gautama is not merely a personal act of insanity but a symbolic rebellion against the system that silenced her.

Feminist Analysis of Maya's Struggle:

From a feminist perspective, Maya's plight represents the oppression of women within patriarchal societies. Unlike traditional feminist heroines who actively resist oppression, Maya's journey is one of internal struggle, culminating in destruction rather than liberation. This serves as a critique of a system that forces women into roles that deny them fulfillment, often leading to devastating psychological consequences.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is a powerful critique of the societal expectations imposed upon women. Through Maya's journey, the novel exposes the devastating effects of patriarchal oppression, emotional neglect, and the enforced roles of wife and daughter. The novel remains relevant today, as many women continue to struggle with the burden of societal expectations. By shedding light on these issues, Desai calls for a re-evaluation of gender norms and the need for emotional validation in relationships.

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