

# Anita Desai- an Indo-Anglican Novelist & Existentialist concern In Her Novel “Cry the Peacock”

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**Abstract:-** Anita Desai, original name Anita Mazumdar, (born June 24, 1937, Mussoorie, India), English- language Indian novelist and author of children's books who excelled in evoking character and mood through visual images ranging from the meteorologic to the botanical. She published her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, in 1963. This work immediately established her as a major voice in Indian literature in English. Since then, Desai has steadily published novels, short stories, and children's literature. Her maiden novel "Cry the Peacock" evinces Maya's quest for liberty from reality, loneliness & fear of death, which do not let her to be at peace with herself. In order to assert liberty from present turmoil she takes the help of route to go back to her childhood. Thirst for liberty haunts her so much that she becomes aggressive to such an extreme point that she takes the most unusual and ghastly step of doing away with her husband which is rarely taken by a female.

**Key words:** - loneliness, fear of death, quest for love and existence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A famous novelist, short-story writer and children's author Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She was the daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother. Her family resided in Delhi, where she had her education and took her Bachelor's degree in English Literature in 1957 (Delhi University). When she was a child of seven years, she began to write prose, mainly fiction and published some small fragments in children's magazine. Besides, she worked for a year in Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta, where she got married to Ashvin Desai. She has 4 children and she has taken proper care of them

Anita Desai adds a new dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of troubled sensibility, a typical modern Indian phenomenon. Her novels focus on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. To sustain her efforts, she has forged a style, supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness, to record the eddies and currents in the stream of consciousness of her characters. The inter play of thoughts, feelings and emotions is reflected in language, syntax and imagery.

Anita Desai projects a sensibility generally not encountered in other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. As

a novelist her distinguishing qualities are many, the chief among them being the subordination of the background to the characters and the deft handling of

language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters. She insists on analysing her characters and the story is important only in so far as it reflects the obsessions of her characters. Free from the journalistic enthusiasm for depicting the socio political life in India, Mrs. Desai makes each work of hers a haunting exploration of the psychic self. The work is executed so thoroughly that her treatment gets the look of a philosophical system- a system which has been familiar to the world in the form of "Existentialism". Mrs. Desai finds its theories suitable to her themes. Aspects of Existentialism are in evident in the total framework of her stories. Its emphasis on the alienation of man from an "absurd" world, his consequent estrangement from "normal" society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless presents the sensitive individual, fragmented and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex enough to make him obsessed. Anita Desai is well established and has been esteemed highly for her positive contribution to Indian fiction in English. Her art of characterisation has received much praise. She is an artist of a high order and her concern for human lot has imparted a special charm to her novels, Desai's characterisation is a wonder-work of genius. She possess

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exuberant energy of creating characters. Her world is the world of richness, variety and complexity unmatched in the Indian English fiction. She has never created common characters, instead, she has written about individual men and women—the solitary beings. Her characters, independent, agonised, frustrated and somewhat domineering makes us feel as though we have noticed them in our neighbourhood— and herein lies the charm of Desai’s art of characterisation. Desai’s central preoccupation as a novelist is with the existentialist outlook of human life. Her characters are distinguished by the qualities of introspection, introversion and refusal to surrender their individual selves. Deeply infected by the existential problems of modern industrial age, Anita Desai has created unique characters that are largely eccentric and abnormal in their mental make-up and hence totally unable to conform.

Anita Desai employs the stream of consciousness device to portray a particular kind of sensibility. She is unique in conveying the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters. She has intentionally employed a technique to reveal forcefully the emotional needs of her haunted characters.

Anita Desai’s emphasis on the study of the individual as an aggregate of psychic and emotional impulses leads her to write what might be called novels of character. Her protagonists are basically tragic characters. They failed to cope with their surroundings and are cut off from their families and societies. They are psychologically disturbed, morbid, self-absorbed and incoherent in their manner and expression. They do not have the determination and the steadiness of will to pursue a definite line of action. They are introverts, people temporarily fallen into a state of abnormal passiveness to sensation, in which again the association of idea is not directed and controlled by a sense for conduct. Desai justifies her selection of solitary and introspective characters in the following words.

“Well I think, solitary and introspective people are always very aware of living on the brink—but perhaps my introspective characters are more aware than others are of what lies on the other side.”

Desai’s characters are creatures of habit, stubborn and unyielding. Some of them are defeated but most of them succeed in saying no to society. These characters are inevitably confronted with an unfriendly and hostile reality. They feel emotionally estranged from the family and environment. They turn inward and speak to themselves in long soliloquies and monologues. Maya, Monisha, Tara, Bim, Nirod, Deven all

recollect their past. In Desai’s novel characters sit in binary opposition in terms of values, attitudes, temperaments and outlook on life. Here are the description of Desai’s first and most famous book “Cry the Peacock”.

“Cry The Peacock”.

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Anita Desai clearly stands ahead the group in as much as she introduces a shift of ideational focus from the outer to the inner part of human existence. Her novels focus on the inner climate. The climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. Life, as revealed by Anita Desai through her narratives is an eternal paradox, comprising multiple, contradictory aspects that defy comprehension with in any single perspective. This faith when opposed to the human reductive tendency to sublime everything within a singular framework for easy comprehension becomes the crux of the problem for her protagonists. This problem is that they all have fixed opinion about themselves, others and life in general and expect life to conform to these singular apprehensions. “Existentialism” is most important theme of Anita Desai’s novels. All her characters have the quest for identity.

In her novel “Cry the Peacock” Maya, the protagonist, is feeling alone and wondering her identity. She has described the alienation in a good manner. She has given a new style and theme to the Indian writers. So, nevertheless, Anita Desai is “an original talent that has the courage to go its own way.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Cry, the Peacock’ is a maiden novel and it presents an incompatible marriage of the protagonists, Maya. H.M Williams has rightly said that, “Cry the Peacock” is a disturbing novel takes the form of interior monologue, delineating tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian Woman, Maya.”<sup>2</sup>

“Cry, the Peacock” is largely concerned with Maya’s life and her loneliness. It is the writing story of Maya, the protagonist of this novel. This is significant act of “putting herself into the text”. The novel begins ! “All day long the body lay rotten in the sun”.<sup>3</sup> Maya, the protagonist is so sad because her pet ‘Toto’ is dead. Tota is the name of her pet dog. She loves him as a child but now he is dead. She is watching his body.

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Maya, the heroine of this novel is so sensitive. The death of her pet makes her

so uncomfortable and she is crying so much. Gautama, her husband is so

practical in his life. When he comeback to his home he calls the Public Works

Department to take the corpse away and say "By all means, burn it too."<sup>4</sup> After all this he enters in the room and says : It's all over, come and drink your tea, and stop crying, you must'ncry."<sup>5</sup>

Maya ask him that what he had done with Toto's body?He replies-"I sent it away to be cremated. It is all over come, won't you pour out my tea ? "<sup>6</sup>

She loose her temper and cries: "Tea" she thinks about Gautama that how much practical he is? He has no emotions. Nothing effects him, neither Toto's death, nor her grief. And this thought fills her heart with sorrow.

This is the first part of the novel. We can see that the death of Toto effects Maya so much, while Gautama is not so serious about it. He takes it normally. It shows the difference of thoughts between husband and wife. This is the main theme of the novel.

Maya, and Gautam's conflicting opinions about the issue of involvement as against detachment represent life's inherent duality that can not be apprehended within a narrow consciousness seeking a singular definition of life. In the novel, while Maya is all instinct Gautam is all intellect. He is convinced of his own logic and analysis of life and with pride of superior intellect links

fundamental religious and philosophical issues with logic not faith. His prosaic and dryly practical temperament always recommends to Maya to conquer mundane passions and debilitation emotionalism. She always feel alone. As she says: ". You need a cup of tea,' he said. Yes, I cried, yes it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cup of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house."<sup>7</sup>

It shows the emotional nature of Maya. She is very sensitive, and the nature of her husband irritates her. Maya has been in a respective and rich family. His father lover her so much. He is so caring. Her father's over

indulgent over-protective attitude that make her feel that the world is "a toy made especially for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes,"<sup>8</sup> has made her accept an indulgent and not take into account the inter-personal dynamics of adult relationship.

In an interview with Jasbir Jain. Anista Desai emphasized the basic solitariness of the human individual as a given fact of existence :

"I think all human relationship are inadequate.... Basically everyone is solitary. I

think involvement in human relationship in this world invariably leads to disaster."<sup>9</sup>

Maya feels that she is quiet alone in her house. She want to live an splendid life, full of love, romance and affection. Once she tries to make the dinner romantic. She tells him."

"We leave the lights off in the dining room, that we eat by the light that meagerly came in through the open doors of other rooms, imagining that from the dimness we should be able to look out on the stars. They are so bright tonight."<sup>10</sup>

But Gautam quickly replies :

". "Well. I hope bright enough for me to spot a fly if it falls into my dinner."<sup>11</sup> In these lines we can see that there is so much difference in their thinking. They does not support to each other. Both are different. She creates a romantic atmosphere, but he don't think about it. He is thinking about fly which can spoil his dinner. There are lots of moment when we can see their difference of nature and thoughts. Anita Desai's narrative style operates through focusing on a few intense scenes that illuminate crucial stage of her character's mental conditions. Maya's irrevocable rejection of Gautam because of his rejection of her and equation of love and attachment with death are effectively projected through a scene. Once when Maya and Gautam are sitting together, she complains to him that he does not love him and don't care him while she loves him so much. Gautam den and says that he love her and then he starts preach her the lesson of 'The Gita' about love and attachment, she doesn't like it and cries with anger.

"No, 'you listen to me tonight. You never will let me tell you this why ? Are you afraid ? <sup>12</sup> and being emotional. She asks him :

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"Is there nothing ? Is there nothing in you that would be touched ever so slightly, if I told you I live my life for you ?"

He replies !

"Listen, you do not need to explain. I understand, I do. And if I appear untouched, then it is because I am too perturbed to be touched. This is madness, Maya." 13

The word 'Madness' hoots her assertive and vocal about her feelings. She feels that Gautam by associating love with destructive detachment and rejection has effectively rejected her love. Bitter with rejection she splits out of him.

"How it suits you to quote these lines of a dry stick – an inhuman dry stick. Oh you know nothing understand nothing..... Nor will you ever understand. You

know nothing of me and how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you..... you've never loved. And you don't love me..... If you do, if

you say you do, it means nothing. Love has no importance for you. It is merely attachment." 14

Maya and Gautam remains stranger to each other because of their temperamental differences, creature of instinct. Gautam is a faithful husband, who take care of Maya and loves her in his own way. But Maya is so far from being happy. However, these temperamental polarities apart, Gautam lives with Maya tenderly. The problem with him is that he can not poetically express his feeling of love and concern for her. Even she is aware of his feeling. She herself admits!

"He touched my hair smoothing it down carefully as a nurse would, I was flooded with tenderness and gratitude ... lying here in the dark? he said, and drew a finger down my cheek, fall, fall, long fall into the soft, velvet well of the premordium of original instinct of first formed love. His tenderness was the cathartic I desired, and now at last I began to cry again, pressing my face against him." 15

The companionship between Maya and Gautam is sadly missing. Maya is so aware of her loneliness because she has nothing to keep herself occupied. Gautam is an over busy professional who can not spare long hours for his young wife. So there is no wonder if she feels neglected and ignored as she says!

"Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body of the only wanting mind." 16 His dry behaviour hardly helps Maya is driving away her loneliness:

"It was only when I realized that there was not a trace of surprise on his face that it came to me that he was unmoved even by my strange behaviour today-for surely it was unusual. But it did not hurt me that he showed no surprise - his preoccupation, his distance from me was a part of the pattern that I had, at last accepted." 17

Alienation is a fundamental fact of human life; Alienation also results into her emergence of emotions of self persecution isolation, rootlessness, loneliness; and feeling completely disconnected and disjointed from the self and from the socio cultural world. Maya feels lonely, companionless physically and emotionally starved. She is unable to help, driving away her loneliness :

"The verandah chairs had been taken out on the lawn for us, two large comfortable cane chairs rather battered, rather old, and we sat down, as we did each evening two glasses of fresh lemonade and an hour or so of matrimonial silence and conversations." 18

To Maya, companionship is necessity and she requires his tender and close understanding : "Closeness of mind" alongwith physical closeness. Maya is her father's child. Her father is so caring and she want the same love and attention from Gautam, which is impossible to him because his nature is quiet different from his father. He is very practical and professional in his life. Though, he loves her a lot, but he does not like to show this to her, which she expect to him. He tries to adjust with her but, it's couldn't be possible because of Maya's over sensitive nature. She creates problem to him to be adjust, and he irritates then.he does not like this comparison,which she always do.He says-

"Neurotic, Neurotic, that's what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse world. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya – that is what her father taught" 19

They talk and converse while strolling together, but is only a meaningless conversation that does not bring them closer or inspire Maya, at least with feeling of being related :

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Maya feels empty, alone, afraid. She sits in her house "as in a tomb". Maya's demand for contact; intimate relationship and communion is so strong that she becomes aggressive in her urge to join him. They, of course, make several attempts to serious conversation, but a nameless barrier prevents effective communication. What is real to her is shadowy to him, what are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her. What is truth? What exactly is "the truth of living". Maya feels that the truth of living, the quality of existence, the colour and flavour and each passing moment of life, are things to be felt, not described and explained. What is for Gautam, a life without vacation, is for Maya, a life full of meaning and fulfillment: As she says:

"I have, so much to look at, to touch, and feel and be happy about. I like to walk about here and touch things – leaves, sticks, earth, everything. I play with my cat. And if I am lonely, I can visit my friends. The world is full-full Gautam. Do you know what that means? I am not bored with it that I should need to hunt another one." 20

To Maya companionship is a necessity and she requires his tender and close understanding; "closeness of mind" along with physical closeness:

"I relieved the horror of those awesome realization that had followed sometimes a moment of union, and taught me how hopeless, how impotent is sex-where not union but communion is concerned." 21

However, they love each other, but their different ideas about love and life makes difference between them. Maya lives in a world of idealism and fantasy, whereas Gautam like to live a realistic life. As he tells her:

"Life is not a matter of distinguishing between the two, but of reconciling them, One day you shall learn that these ideas eventually resolve themselves into realities one has known all one's life and spurned perhaps. Love – that great and splendid ideal of the young – ultimately becomes, for the man a matter of dealing with the bills that come in, and, for the woman, of worrying about them." 22

Their diversity disjoint them from each other and condemn them to a lifeless relationship. Maya is very emotional, while Gautam is completely a practical man. That's why Maya always feel along in his house. As she says:

"No one, no one else loves me as my father does." 23

This is her loneliness which turns her to believe on albino's prophecy that after four years of her marriage, one of them will die and she believes that it is she who will die first. She feels so just because of her loneliness because there is no one to understand her feeling and to respect her emotions. That's why she never tell him about this. And she says with realization that: "It was I who would die young, unnaturally and violently, four years after my marriage." Because, she quiet alone, no one is there to understand her feeling. As she says:

"The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror." 24

It shows that how much alienated she feels. She has nothing to remember, nothing to forget. She feels that there is nothing in their relationship, which is

memorable, but merely loneliness. She wants to live in the house of her father to get relief. She has got her fathers' undivided affection and attention, and Maya wants the same affection and love from her husband. But Gautam is not aware of her misery; her frustration, her loneliness. He always neglects her feelings.

Though he loves him, a lot but he can't understand what she really want. He always calls her desires "childish" and sure of his own infallible wisdom, he suggests to her to cultivate a "detached temperament to ensure an even tenor of life. The anxieties of fear dominates her mind.

She believes in 'Fate', because she belongs to a Brahmin family. She thinks that the prophesy of Albino astrologer's will be true one day. She feels that her loneliness will take her to the end of the life. She says:

"When I heard one cry in the stillness of night, its hoarse, heart torn voice pierced my white flesh and plunged its knife to the hilt in my palpitating heart. 'Lover, I die!' Now that I understood their call, I wept for them, and wept for my self, knowing their words to be mine." 25

Here, I would like to admire the novelist's effort to present the pain and fear of the protagonist through the example of the peacock. Maya compares herself with the peacock Maya compares herself with the peacock in these lines.

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Though, she is alone and depressed in her life, yet she wants to live her life. But she feels helpless and requests to God :

"I might, after all, have achieved the way to grace, Had you but granted me a few years more, O Lord !"26

It is her recall, her vocation, her quest for existence. She is going to be hopeless

and insane day by day, and in her insanity she makes a mistake. One day in the

evening, Maya and Gautam upto the roof. Both are walking together, but both

have a different vision. Maya is watching the pale moon and she is bewitched

by its beauty. As she

describes here :

"I saw the man's face, pure surface, touched only faintly with petal of shadow, as though brushed by luna moth's wings, so that it appeared a great multifoliate rose, woxen white, virginal, chaste and absolute white."27

But suddenly Gautam unconsciously stands between her and moon. She

doesn't want it but in her anger she causes Gautam to fall to his death. Maya loses her sense because of his death, and become mad. After the death of Gautam, his mother and sister take Maya to her father's house at Lucknow, where she has got love, happiness, affection and protection. And thus the novel comes to the end.

In 'Cry, the Peacock' Anita Desai has beautifully portrays the existentialism through Maya, the heroine. Everytime she feels alone and wondering her identity. In this novel nature is a powerful mediating force between the principal character and the external world. Here we can see a natural scenery portrays by the novelist :

"It was spring : As ever, spring came with the brain fever bird, whose long, insistent call rang imploringly from the tree-tops all morning and, again, at twilight. I woke each morning to its call, the first sound of dawn, as it begged, 'Who are you ?' 'Who are you'"28

Anita Desai is a novelist, who represents the picture of Indian women, that how much they suffer for the 'existence.' Maya, the central character of the novel is a

daughter of a rich, and wealthy Brahmin. She is so much loved and pampered by her father. She suffers from father's obsession, and it makes her very sensitive. She is so much emotional and unable to understand the reality of the world. She looks for the typical father image in her husband Gautam. Gautam is an older man, very insensitive, pragmatic and rational lower. He fails to understand her sensitive nature, and that's why all the time she feels alone and loneliness become the cause of her psyche and in her psychic position she kills her husband.

Anita Desai has presented the loneliness, the feeling of alienation very strongly through the character. We have seen that Maya is alone completely. There is no one in the house to understand her feelings and thoughts except her husband Gautam, but he is very practical in his life. It always presents a communication gap between them. Maya is young and Gautam is an aged person. So, we can also take it as a generation gap. Temperamental, they are completely opposed to each other. One is emotional, then other is practical. One believes fate, other believes in hard work, one looks at the beauty of the world, while other concentrates in its harsh reality. So, we can say that they are like two different weather, who never meets.

Some other female characters in the novel are Pom and Leila who are Maya's friend. Silly Plump Pom who did not speak of fate wants to move away from her in-laws with her husband but does not succeed: "Logic, Tact, Diplomacy-nothing mattered to her who chattered so glibly and goily..... and neve, referring to family, tradition, custom, superstition."29

Pom is the typical culturally uprooted woman of India who swarm the big cities. Maya compares herself with Pom in the context of the prophecy. Another woman character in the novel is Maya's friend. Leila who has married a tubercular man against the wishes of her parents. She is a teacher of Persian in a girls' school. She married a man knowing his disease. Her attitude towards life is fatalistic. She is gloomy and ascetic wearing no jewellery or bangles. She is a teacher of Persian in a girls' school. She is contrast to Pom. Desai aptly comments that she "Was one of those who require a cross, can not walk without one," If Maya is obsessed with Albino priest prediction, Leila has conceded her destiny and does not grudge or complain. "It was all written in my fate long ago." Except Pom, and Leila there are some other characters like Mr. and Mrs. Lal, Nila, Gautam's sister, the mother of Gautam etc., who has played important role in this novel and presents the different conditions of life.

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Anita Desai has a very good picturesque quality. In this novel she presented nature so beautifully. We can see here :

"I am waiting for him, in the shade of the bougainvillea arbour, where the light turns from lilac to mauve to purple, from peach to orange to crimson, as the small whispers of breeze turn and turn and turn again the heavy load of blossoms upon the air."30

A beautiful presentation of a natural-scenery It looks very natural. She has not only presented nature in this novel, but she also admitted wild creatures like – snakes, rats, lizard, dog, cat and peacock to show the connection of Maya from the external world. In the whole novel she compares herself to the peacock, her happiness, pain, sexual desire, and cry of her heart, because she has a quest for love and existence.

An effort has been made here to arrive at a conclusion that Anita Desai is undoubtedly a great novelist. She emerges as an artist of exceptional ability in studying and expressing the existential problem of characters in an adequate form. She has assimilated the influence of the pioneers of modern western fiction into the gesture of Indian English fiction.

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