

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**



**ISSN**  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## **FRAGMENTATION OF THE SELF IN ANITA DESAI'S *CRY, THE PEACOCK***

**ZOYA ZIA**

Department of English  
Aligarh Muslim University



**ZOYA ZIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

Anita Desai is one of the most prominent writers dominating the Indian English contemporary novels. This paper focuses on Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* which is a novel of psyche exploring the psyche of various characters. This was the author's first novel which depicts the inner psyche of the female protagonist Maya. Raised by a single parent, a loving father. From her childhood she was hyper sensitive and had no control over her emotions. She was so full of fantasies and believes the world as a mere toy. This world of freedom was shattered by her marriage and collides with the pure practical world of her husband. The husband fails to be what the father had been to her. Marriage proves a failure in her life resulting in the isolation, dejection and demoralization of her inner as well as outer self. All this leaves her fragmented at the psychological and emotional level. Maya finally breaks off with the stereotypical, traditional role being imposed on women by the patriarchy and liberates herself from this bondage by finally killing her husband, by throwing him from the parapet in a fit of fury. Her act of murdering her husband suggested the complete fragmentation of Maya's personality and her complete neurosis. This fragmentation of self has been studied in this paper.

**Keywords:** Fragmentation, Alienation, Exploitation, Isolation, patriarchy

**©KY PUBLICATIONS**

The novel, *Cry, The Peacock* is one of the earliest works of the renowned author, Anita Desai, which deals with the female sensibility in a much high tone than that of the description about male exploitation. Most of Desai's novels show the complex nature of the Indian traditional society from a feminine perspective, highlighting the struggles and suffering of the Indian women in withholding their individuality as a quality individual of the society and maintaining personal-identity for themselves. In the traditional Indian set-up women have no identity for themselves, they are acknowledged through their relations with the man

and are dependent on man for the fulfillment of their economic and social needs. Among the several themes the novel echoes the theme of the fragmentation of the psycho-social self of Maya, the female protagonist of the novel who also acts as a dominant character of the novel and portrays her struggle to achieve a meaningful existence for herself in the society. By the character of Maya, novelist Anita Desai, shows her feminist concerns about the Indian women who are being oppressed physically, psychologically and socially by the patriarchal power resulting in the consequent

disintegration of their psycho-social and physical self.

Desai, whose complete name is Anita Mazumdar Desai, born on June 24, 1937 in Maasoorie, India, is viewed as a proficient early Indian-English novelist who gained worldwide appreciation by her readers . She undertook significant issues of the contemporary Indian society as a subject matter for her novels. She wrote many notable novels along with children's books which added a great success to her writing career. Mostly her novels explore the anguish of her female protagonists in the modern society. *Cry, The Peacock* is her first novel, being written by her when feminism was at its early stage, though it surely have a feminist tones but it is free from all feminist theories, announced by Desai and purely based on the feminine emotions and feelings. The novel has multiple shades of female concerns which is represented by the protagonist Maya who struggles hard to liberate herself from the patriarchal restraints in a way that its consequences leads to the fall and fragmentation of her "self". Generally, the word fragmentation refers to the disintegration of social norms governing behavior and thought and social relationships and meaning of self implies your consciousness of your own identity or individuality.

In Kohut's definition of Self Psychology:

The self is a psychological structure. It is our experience of having a self and of being a self. The term structure is meant to suggest stability across time-when this structure becomes unstable, the self is said to be fragmented. Accurate and empathic self-object experiences are necessary for maintaining this stability of self-cohesion.

The present paper's focus is on the fragmented and unhappy self of Maya. Anita Desai portrays the character of Maya as a cultured, upper middle class Indian woman , of uncontrollable emotions and hyper sensitivity, born and brought up into the comforts of the home of her affluent father, who showered his abundant love and care on her. Desai plunges deep into the disturbed and trapped psyche of Maya from her carefree childhood to her tragic end, investigating Maya as the victim of social concerns and psychological predicament. The

intrinsic traumas of Maya's life and the immensity of the pain she faces at mental level take her to the tragedy of her life and affect her psyche so emphatically that she becomes a victim of neurosis, which destroys and destructs her inner as well as outer well being. Being a motherless child and at the prospect of her brother gone abroad to create his own destiny, she was the lone receiver of the immense love and care of her father, who tries best to provide her the love of a mother as well and treats her like a child even in her maturity and marries her off with Gautama who was his friend, prosperous lawyer and twice of the age of Maya. Maya marries Gautama as a choice of her loving father with the hope of receiving the same sense of protection and guardianship in Gautama. Anita Desai as a writer, much interested in the feminine world is critical about Arrange marriages; she considers Indian system of marriage as a trap for woman. In the traditional Indian society, a girl cannot openly discuss her choices for a future husband and is not supposed to choose a husband of their choice. It is the father or any other elder person of the house, who chooses a suitable match for her and she has to accept the choice of the father. Same happens with Maya to her utter disappointment, Gautama proves contrary to her father in terms of providing her the love and emotional satisfaction like her father. Anita Desai, in most of her novel gives special concern in selecting a name of their characters with the proper care and understanding. Maya means illusion or magic, she lives in a make believe world of her own, full of dreams, imaginations and love for the creativity in nature. She rejoices in 'the world of sounds, senses, movements, colors, tunes.'(80),whereas Gautama means a meditator like Gautama Buddha, having a rationalistic approach to life and the one who is away from all the other worldly attractions. He was a man of ambition , who remains engrossed in his studies and legal affairs and completely detached from all other worldly affairs. If Maya stands for daylight, Gautama stands for the darkness of the night, their temperaments suggests the idea of binary opposition. She wants to share her ideas about life and nature with her husband but Gautama was totally indifferent to it, Maya thinks,

'on his part, understanding was scant ,love was meager'(90) Maya's constant comparison of her husband with her father makes her more nostalgic about her father's home and creates a failure in her adjustment to her husband's home, declining her relationship with Gautama, who blames her father for her light headedness and immaturity, calling her a 'spoilt child'.

Adopting Virginia woolf technique of stream of consciousness in her writings, Desai presented the multitudinous thoughts of Maya in her recollections of her childhood memory, which she recalls as the happiest days of her life where she believes in her fantasies and assumes, 'The world is like a toy specially made for me , painted in my favorites colours ,set moving to my favorite tunes.'(32) 'Life was a kind of fairy tale for her(99).Gautama's indifference to Maya's love for nature, music and life and his parallel mindset makes Maya hopeless with shattered romantic expectations and creates a spiritual and emotional vacuum in her life, suggestive of her failure to find refuge in marriage which was linked to her plights and predicaments. Anita Desai, also highlights the inability of Maya to understand the Gautama's love for work and his ambitious nature, she only wants Gautama to satisfy her romantic and emotional needs even at the cost of his ambition. Desai, highlighted the fact about the traditional Indian women, for them marriage and finding a suitable match for themselves is the only goal of their life. Marriage is the only thing they dreams about day and night but men generally focus their interest more in building a suitable career for themselves than in dreaming about marriage. Fulfilling ambition is the first priority for them. The same idea has been dictated by Marry Wollstone Craft in her work, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women", where she says:

In the middle rank of life, to continue the comparison, men in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no their thoughts are not employed in

rearing such notable structures (77,A vindication of the rights of women')

The over expectations of Maya and her inability to face the practical life results in the loss of her own self. Her nostalgia for her father's home and her failure to identify herself with her husband Gautama, has leads her to the world of isolation, her constant fear of the albino's prophecy, hallucinatory sounds of the drum beating of the kathakali dancers and dangerous dance of the peacock in the rain who in their act of love making, kills their counterpart, ruins her mental set up and makes her confining herself in a world of superstitions. Anita Desai presented the inner turmoil of Maya who in spite of being sensitive and well educated fails to break the chains of orthodoxy by believing in the myths like fortune-telling, horoscopes, palmistry, prophesies etc. Her inability to do away with such superstitions, marital discord and her separation from her father, nurtures a sort of abnormality in her mind and makes her incapable to deal with the deep settled fear of death. The persistent horror of death in the fourth year of her marriage to any one of the husband or wife reaches her consciousness and gives way to her madness. The dilemmas of her life and the psychological fragmentation of Maya makes her cry for help from her father, brother or husband, who can provide her a protective atmosphere, she cries , "Is it madness? Am I gone insane? 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).

Desai presented Maya's mental state in the fourth year of her marital life as one with the constant fear of death, one who is caught by hallucinations that something evil or a dark shadow of a monster is following her. Her fear of darkness, the moon, shadows of trees, shrieks of peacock as ill omen, their destruction of each other, left a negative impact to her psychic. Moon which is a symbol of beauty seems to her as a demonic figure. Desai presented her frenzy of mind in the lines:

It was not the stars that told me, but the moon, when it rose out of the churn of my frenzy, vast and ghost-white, written over with dim, tortuous signs in ash-grey, casting a searing shaft of stark white across my body

which thereupon began to shake, for it was not the gentle moon of love ballads and fairy revels that so swiftly mounted the roof of our house, but a demonic creature, the fierce dancer that had all day been trying to leap the threshold of my mind and home, accompanied by a deafening roar of silent drums.(24)

Her fearful thought of the impending doom of death reaches the high membrane of her brains making her confines herself in the four walls of her room brooding over the inevitable death, forlorn and fragmented. Her darkest fears and secret desires makes her to consider her own life more worthwhile than her husband's life as unlike her own self, Gautama was completely dejected from the beauty of the world, he has nothing to lose if he will die, he is insensitive towards nature unlike Maya who has an intimacy with the natural world and intrinsic love for life, she wants to live longer to appreciate the nature of beauty. Anita Desai studies the mental agony of Maya who nurtures the secret desire of murdering Gautama because of his inability to see the beauty in nature, Desai presented the same idea through Maya's narration:

I rose and went up to him, beginning to feel as tenderly solicitous towards him as towards a departing guest who might never be encountered again, and I strolled with him slowly across the lawn, feeling that an unreal ghost stalked beside me- a body without a heart ,a heart without a body-what was he? An unfair question, oh, grossly unfair, I chided myself, immediately. He was a tired man, worn out by a day's hard, concentrated work. Age surrounded him, weariness steeped his limbs. Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly ,so shallowly. And I felt sorry for him, for this slow, harmless, guileless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it.(169)

As for Gautama she believes him as already spent most of his life in his useless studies. Her frenzied mind craves for an urgent solution from her fears and obsessions which brings her constant headaches, from which she wants to liberate

herself. In a fit of fury she kills him, thus brings ease to her disturbed, agitated mind and to her anxiety ridden life.

Through the character of Maya, Anita Desai gives a new vision to the lives of Indian women. Among all the other female characters of the novel, Maya stands at a unique place. She is the most interesting and psychologically perplexed character. Her marriage to Gautama proved as a failure, who has his own perspectives to see life parallel to that of Maya, the lover of instinctual beauty of nature ,he fills her life with a sense of alienation, she was anxiety ridden and does not know how to surmount her problems and fears for future. Due to her intense emotional and sensitive nature, She blunders her way to liberation through her act of murdering her husband Gautama, fulfilling indirectly the desire of the author who wants her to free herself from what is tying her down. Apart from the ill prophecy of astrologer, she was doomed to live a loveless marital life, the issue of her life is the romantic outlook and her inability to look at her husband's dedication towards his work, and she is not satisfied with the amount of importance she is getting from her husband who proved himself as a no companion. The ending of the novel is surprising, where she thinks her life more worthwhile than her husband's and refuses to sacrifice herself. The sudden darkness of the night triggers a fit on her and she pushes her husband down in insanity. Through this act Maya shows the art of liberating herself from the chains of the patriarchy. She creates her own independent world different from the dependent world provided to her by her husband. Anita Desai presented Maya as a representative of the entire world of women who are living a restrained life under the hegemony of patriarchy. Maya excels in providing a raised position to all the miserable women, who are highly sensitive and emotional, and are tortured by negligence and loneliness.

#### WORKS CITED

Desai, Anita. Cry, The Peacock. Great Britain: St. Stephen's (Bristol) Press Ltd, 23 December 1964. Print

Kohli, Devindra, Just, Maria, Melanie. Anita Desai,  
'Critical Perspectives, New Delhi: Pencraft  
International, 31 March 2009 Print.

Tiwari, Shubha. Critical Responses to Anita Desai  
(volume 1), New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers  
and Distributors, 2004 Print.

Uniyal, Ranu. The Fiction of Margaret Drabble and  
Anita Desai Women and Landscape. New  
Delhi: Creative Books. 2014 Print.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication of the Rights of  
Woman. England: Penguin Books, 2011.  
Print.

---