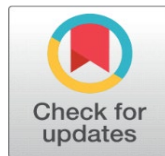
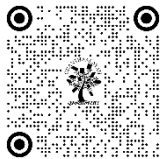


THE FRACTURED PSYCHE AND PATRIARCHAL CONSTRAINTS IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Maya's psychological distress and subjugation within patriarchal structures in Anita Desai's 1963 novel, *Cry, The Peacock*. The analysis delves into Maya's deepening neurosis, stemming from an overprotective childhood, an emotionally detached marriage, and a haunting prophecy of death. The pervasive influence of patriarchal constraints is explored through her father's stifling care and her husband Gautam's emotional neglect, which exacerbate her feelings of alienation and unfulfilled desires. The peacock's symbolism is investigated as a reflection of Maya's inner turmoil, embodying both the intensity of life and the inevitability of death. Finally, the paper considers Maya's culminating act of violence—pushing Gautam from the roof—as a complex outcome, blurring the lines between a desperate act of rebellion against her "existential imprisonment" and a tragic descent into psychotic breakdown. The novel's enduring significance lies in its profound portrayal of female psychology within a specific socio-cultural context, offering varied critical interpretations of identity, isolation, and societal pressures.

Keywords: Female Psychology, Patriarchal Constraints, Psychological Distress, Alienation, Symbolism, Neurosis, Madness, Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, a significant voice in Indian English literature, is celebrated for her insightful exploration of the inner lives of her characters, particularly women navigating intricate emotional landscapes. Her debut novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, published in 1963, immediately garnered attention for its innovative psychoanalytical approach and its deep exploration of the subjective experiences of its protagonist, Maya. The narrative centres on Maya, a young woman initially depicted as neurotic, grappling with intense feelings of alienation and nearing insanity. This analysis examines Maya's psychological turmoil, her subjugation within patriarchal structures, the rich symbolism of the peacock, and the various critical interpretations that have emerged. The novel's lasting importance lies in its intricate portrayal of female psychology within a specific socio-cultural context, a subject that continues to invite scholarly investigation. The convergence of Desai's focus on Maya's internal world and the evolving critical perspectives applied to the text underscores the novel's depth and its capacity to sustain varied interpretations across different analytical frameworks, suggesting that *Cry, The Peacock* transcends a simple linear narrative, engaging with enduring themes of identity, isolation, and the pervasive influence of societal pressures.

2. THE NEUROTIC PSYCHE UNVEILED: DECONSTRUCTING MAYA'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

The initial characterization of Maya aligns with neurosis, a condition marked by significant psychological distress and maladaptive behaviours. Within the novel, neurosis manifests in Maya's persistent anxiety, her overwhelming fear of death, and her increasingly erratic conduct. Her internal world is fraught with inner demons, macabre thoughts, and a profound terror of mortality, establishing psychological distress as a fundamental element of the narrative. Desai masterfully delves into Maya's interiority, revealing her intense anger, deep-seated frustration, and the emotional tempest raging within her mind and heart. This inner turmoil positions Maya as a figure on the brink of madness, her psychological predicament serving as a central focus of the novel. A significant aspect of Maya's distress is her pervasive sense of alienation, particularly from her husband, Gautam, and her environment. Their relationship is characterized by mismatched temperaments and a distinct lack of emotional connection. Gautam, often engrossed in his legal work, fails to provide Maya with the emotional affection and attention she desperately seeks. This emotional distance significantly contributes to Maya's feelings of loneliness, alienation, and pessimism, stemming from a sense of displacement and a morbid temperament. The absence of genuine communication between Maya and Gautam further exacerbates her neurosis, a consequence of her overprotected childhood and her husband's emotionally detached nature. Maya's psychological struggle is evident throughout the novel, painting a portrait of a woman psychologically torn between the idyllic memories of her childhood and the stark unhappiness of her married life. Her neurosis, therefore, is not merely an individual struggle but is deeply interwoven with her profound marital dissatisfaction and pervasive feelings of isolation.

The childhood prophecy delivered by the albino astrologer plays a crucial role in shaping Maya's psychological state, acting as a persistent source of anxiety and influencing her behaviour. Maya becomes obsessively fixated on the prediction of death within four years of her marriage, a preoccupation that significantly contributes to her escalating anxiety and neurotic tendencies. From the very beginning of the novel, Maya is haunted by this gloomy prophecy, her mind constantly returning to its ominous pronouncements. Due to her upbringing in an orthodox Brahmin family, Maya holds a strong belief in astrology, and the astrologer's prediction of an unnatural death for either her or her husband becomes a cornerstone of her anxieties, ultimately leading her towards insanity. The fear of the predicted death, initially suppressed, periodically resurfaces to unnerve and terrify Maya, casting a long shadow over her thoughts and actions. The prophecy, therefore, acts as a catalyst, amplifying Maya's pre-existing anxieties and providing a tangible framework for her growing sense of impending doom. While Maya might have possessed inherent sensitivities, the specific prediction of death provides a concrete focal point for her fears, interacting with her internal vulnerabilities and potentially leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of psychological breakdown.

Beneath Maya's outward demeanour of submissiveness and obedience lies a significant reservoir of suppressed hostility directed towards her father, husband, and to some extent, her in-laws, a dynamic that aligns with Freudian perspectives on the origins of superstition. Maya harbors resentment towards her father for his overprotective nature during her childhood, which she perceived as impeding the development of her individuality. She felt like a "toy princess in a toy world," suggesting a childhood that, while perhaps comfortable, was ultimately unnatural and restrictive. Furthermore, she resents him for arranging her marriage to Gautam, a much older man, and for his subsequent perceived neglect. Her husband, Gautam, becomes another target of her suppressed hostility. She is deeply frustrated by his cold intellectuality and his rigid adherence to the philosophy of non-attachment, which prevents him from providing her with the emotional and physical satisfaction she craves. Even her in-laws, with their cool and detached demeanour, contribute to her feelings of resentment. Maya's father's seemingly compassionate autocracy, while appearing to indulge his only daughter, ultimately suppressed her individuality and hindered the development of her self-esteem. The excessive love and care she received from him during childhood are even seen as factors that spoiled her marital life. Gautam himself believed that Maya's father played a significant role in spoiling her, making her unable to cope with the common realities of human existence beyond "love and romance". This suggests that the seemingly submissive Maya masks a deep well of unexpressed anger and resentment stemming from her stifled individuality and unmet emotional needs within her familial and marital relationships. This unacknowledged hostility, as psychoanalytic theory posits, could indeed contribute to her neurotic symptoms and her eventual violent outburst.

3. A PRINCESS IN A TOY WORLD: THE IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY ON MAYA'S DEVELOPMENT

The assertion that Maya's father's overprotective attitude significantly hindered the development of her individuality is a crucial aspect of understanding her psychological state. Her childhood, characterized as "unnatural" and akin to that of a "toy princess in a toy world," fostered a sense of isolation from the realities of everyday life. This sheltered upbringing cultivated unrealistic expectations regarding her marital life, leaving her woefully unprepared to navigate the complexities of her relationship with Gautam. Maya herself reminisces about a childhood where she lived as a "toy princess," indicating a life of pampering and perhaps a lack of genuine connection with the world outside her father's protective sphere. This excessive love and care from her father, while seemingly nurturing, ultimately spoiled her capacity to adjust to the demands of marital life. Gautam explicitly states his belief that Maya's father is responsible for spoiling her, instilling in her the notion that material possessions and comforts are paramount, thus shielding her from the realities of common human existence. Indeed, Maya's father created a fairy-tale world for her, a world painted in her favourite colours and set to her favourite tunes, which psychologically disunited her from the real world and fostered an unhealthy emotional dependence. This overbearing protectiveness, while perhaps rooted in affection, inadvertently infantilized Maya, impeding her emotional maturation and her ability to engage with adult relationships within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Her dependence on a paternal figure for emotional fulfilment might also explain her later yearning for a similar dynamic with her husband, a dynamic Gautam was unwilling or unable to provide.

Gautam, as Maya's older and intellectually inclined husband, inadvertently reinforces traditional patriarchal roles within their marriage by consistently failing to meet her fundamental emotional and physical needs. A significant mismatch exists between their temperaments: Maya is portrayed as deeply sensuous and emotionally expressive, while Gautam embodies a cold, rational, and logical approach to life. This fundamental incompatibility is further exacerbated by Gautam's adherence to the Bhagavad Gita's philosophy of non-attachment, a principle he applies in a manner that deeply alienates Maya, who yearns for emotional and physical intimacy and connection. The stark contrast in their characters is evident; Gautam is rational, hard, cold, detached, and insensitive, while Maya is poetic, high-strung, dreamy, emotional, and sensitive. This results in significant marital discord arising from their mutually opposed temperaments. The disharmony is further highlighted by Maya's dreamy and emotional nature juxtaposed with Gautam's realistic, insensitive, and rational demeanour. Gautam fundamentally rejects the world of senses that Maya so vividly inhabits. Gautam's character, therefore, embodies a patriarchal ideal of the detached, rational male, a stark contrast to Maya's emotional and sensual being. This leaves her feeling profoundly unwanted and unfulfilled within the confines of their traditional marriage, where her emotional and physical longings are consistently unmet and undervalued.

Maya experiences a profound longing for sensuous enjoyment in her life, a desire that is consistently frustrated by Gautam's emotional and physical negligence, as well as the significant age difference between them. She openly admits to experiencing sexual dissatisfaction within her marriage, a direct consequence of Gautam's lack of attention to her needs. To cope with this profound lack of fulfilment, Maya increasingly sexualizes her surroundings, perhaps as a form of psychological displacement. The papaya tree and jasmine flowers, for instance, take on a new, heightened sexual significance for her. As her control over her own psyche begins to weaken, she starts experiencing hallucinatory visions, often involving lizards and birds copulating in bizarre settings, which can be interpreted as a symbolic gratification of the sexual desires that remain unfulfilled in her actual life. Maya's longing for sexual communion with Gautam is likened to the peacocks' own intense desires, yet her husband remains listless and unresponsive to her needs. Her insatiable biological urges exert a strong influence on her psyche, further highlighting the disharmony in their conjugal life. Gautam's cold intellectuality and his advanced age contribute to denying Maya the emotional and physical satisfaction she instinctively craves. The suppression of Maya's sensual and sexual desires within the confines of her marriage, a common consequence of patriarchal structures that often disregard or control female sexuality, significantly contributes to her mounting psychological distress and her pervasive sense of being trapped in an unfulfilling existence.

4. ECHOES OF THE PEACOCK: SYMBOLISM AND MAYA'S INNER WORLD

The central symbol of the peacock and its distinctive cry resonate deeply with Maya's inner turmoil, her intense longing for love and connection, and her haunting premonition of death. The peacock's cry, a piercing "Pia, pia," becomes an auditory mirror reflecting Maya's own stifled anguish and her desperate yearning for release from her suffocating circumstances. She explicitly connects the agonizing wails of the peacocks to her own state of helplessness, recognizing their cry of "Lover, I die" as an echo of her own internal despair. This cry is not merely a sound but also functions as a

premonition of death, stemming from the childhood prophecy that foretold tragedy within four years of her marriage. The repeated use of the peacock in the narrative transforms it into a potent symbol of Maya's own neurotic state, with its cry for a lover and its awareness of impending death embodying her own obsessions and desires. The peacock's cry, therefore, acts as an auditory manifestation of Maya's profound internal suffering, encapsulating her yearning for connection and her pervasive fear of mortality, thus serving as a powerful symbol of her deteriorating psychological state.

The peacock in *Cry, The Peacock* carries a profound dual symbolism, representing both the vibrant beauty and intensity of life and the stark inevitability of death. This inherent duality in the peacock's symbolism directly mirrors Maya's own intense preoccupation with both the joys of living and the ever-present spectre of mortality. Maya herself recognizes this intricate connection, understanding the peacocks' call as an awareness of death even during life, and a love for life even in the face of dying. The image of the crying peacock first appears when Maya has a crucial realization that the prophecy of death could equally apply to her husband, Gautam. This duality of existence is further expounded in Maya's association of the colours "white and black" with life and death, a dichotomy that resonates with the peacock's complex symbolism. In Indian culture, the peacock holds significant mythological and cultural importance, often considered the epitome of beauty and grace. It is associated with various Hindu deities, symbolizing beauty, pride, transformation, reality, and even serving as a vehicle for gods like Karthikeya and goddesses like Saraswati. The rich and multifaceted symbolism of the peacock, therefore, encompassing both the splendour of life and the finality of death, deeply reflects Maya's internal conflict and her constant oscillation between a fervent desire for fulfilment and a haunting preoccupation with her own mortality.

Maya maintains a deep and profound connection with the natural world, which functions as both a source of temporary solace and a poignant reflection of her escalating inner turmoil. Her intense longing for the freedom and beauty of outdoor life is consistently thwarted by Gautam's indifference and his preference for a more constrained urban existence, mirroring her own constricted existence within the confines of their marriage. The intricate use of nature imagery throughout the novel, particularly botanical and zoological descriptions, serves to represent Maya's fluctuating emotional states and her gradual descent into the depths of madness. This imagery allows readers to perceive the often-unexplored realms of Maya's female psyche, offering a glimpse into her distorted inner world. Maya herself is depicted as highly sensitive and possessing a deep love for the beauty found in the flowers, fruits, trees, plants, the sky, the changing seasons, and the animals around her. She appears to be filled with a passionate appreciation for nature and its various elements. The minute details in nature often reach out to her, reflecting her physical and emotional turmoil. This intense connection with the natural world underscores Maya's inherently sensuous nature and provides a vivid visual and emotional landscape that directly mirrors her internal state, with the inherent beauty and vibrancy of nature standing in stark contrast to her growing despair and profound alienation.

5. THE DESCENT INTO MADNESS: UNRAVELLING MAYA'S PSYCHOTIC SOLUTION

Maya's journey is marked by an increasing sense of isolation and a profound inability to find genuine emotional support from her husband, Gautam, her immediate family, or her circle of friends. Gautam's persistent indifference to her emotional needs, her father's eventual neglect, and the starkly contrasting natures of her friends and in-laws all contribute to her overwhelming loneliness and her accelerating psychological breakdown. Maya's desperate cry for a saviour – "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one" – highlights her profound sense of helplessness and the realization that none of her male relatives can offer her the salvation she seeks. Her friends and in-laws are depicted as being fundamentally different from her in nature, further contributing to the gradual metamorphosis of her melancholic psyche. Within the confines of her marriage, Maya experiences an intensifying inner turmoil fuelled by her isolation. This profound loneliness has played a significant role in her transformation into a neurotic individual. She perceives her life as an endless cycle of uneventfulness, leading to a feeling of suffocation due to the severe restrictions placed on her social activities. This profound sense of isolation, stemming from her emotional disconnect with Gautam and a lack of meaningful connections with others in her life, serves to intensify her psychological distress, ultimately pushing her towards a desperate and tragic solution.

Maya's climactic act of pushing Gautam from the roof is a pivotal moment in the novel, raising questions about whether it represents a conscious act of rebellion against the oppressive patriarchal forces in her life or the tragic culmination of a complete psychotic breakdown. This final act can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to break free from her profound "existential imprisonment," a state of being defined by her suffocating marriage and the restrictive

societal expectations placed upon her. In her final moments of madness, Maya watches as Gautam comes between her and the moon, appearing as "an ugly, crooked, grey shadow," an image that evokes the horrifying memory of the demented albino from her childhood. In this state of heightened psychological distress, she hurls Gautam to his death from the edge of the roof. Some interpretations suggest that Maya, in this act, liberates herself from the illusion of a harmonious marriage, shattering the constraints that bound her. Unable to resolve her deep-seated conflict with Gautam, she resorts to this extreme measure, effectively terminating her struggle within the confines of their relationship. Ultimately, Maya's violent act is a complex culmination of her protracted psychological distress and her lived experience of patriarchal oppression, blurring the distinct lines between a conscious act of rebellion and a complete descent into mental collapse, leaving her true motivations and final state open to varied critical interpretations.

Despite the tragic loss of her sanity, some interpretations suggest that Maya's final act represents a form of ambiguous victory, an assertion of her identity, and a triumph of her long-suppressed desires for life, love, and tenderness. Her momentary action, born from a deeply nurtured motive, is seen as a victory, albeit a nihilistic one, against the patriarchal neo-colonialist tradition embodied by Gautam and his family. However, this victory is double-edged, as her psychosis, while enabling her to enact her revenge, simultaneously leads to her own self-destruction. Maya is associated with powerful imagery of "star" and "moon," symbolizing her intense passion and her fundamental connection to life. Even in her madness, she stands for a form of radical change, a stark contrast to the stagnant patriarchal status quo represented by Gautam. Her actions can be viewed as affirming a fierce urgency of "now," a rejection of passive endurance in the face of post-independence disillusionment. Though she exists within a male-dominated world, Maya ultimately refuses to identify with it, instead choosing to revolt against its constraints. In the final clash between the life of instincts and the life of rationality, Maya's action leads to the irreversible destruction of the illusion of a harmonious marriage. While her final state is undeniably one of insanity, her act can be seen as a desperate and ultimately destructive assertion of her individual will against the oppressive forces that have confined her, representing a tragic and ambiguous form of liberation.

The novel also features other female characters, albeit in more minor roles, such as Pom, Laila, and Nila, whose experiences and perspectives offer glimpses into the broader context of female existence within the novel's patriarchal society. Pom is depicted as a loud and somewhat vulgar figure, culturally rootless and dwelling in a superficial world. Laila, on the other hand, is portrayed as a masochist, accepting her troubled married life as her predetermined destiny. Nila, a mother facing her own marital difficulties and contemplating divorce against the wishes of her family, is preoccupied with her own problems. These characters, each facing their own unique challenges, can be seen as representing different responses to the prevailing patriarchal pressures and societal expectations of the time. Their contrasting experiences serve to illuminate the diverse ways in which women navigate the constraints of a male-dominated society, with some, like Laila, accepting their fate, while others, like Nila, contemplate more radical departures. The presence of these varied female experiences suggests that Maya's struggles, while intensely personal, are not entirely isolated but reflect some of the diverse challenges faced by women within a patriarchal society, albeit with differing individual responses and outcomes.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Reassessing Maya: Victim, Rebel, and the Enduring Cry of the Peacock

In conclusion, Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* presents a compelling and nuanced exploration of female psychology within the restrictive confines of a patriarchal society. Maya's journey is one marked by profound psychological distress, fuelled by a sheltered upbringing, a detached marriage, and the haunting weight of prophecy. She is undeniably a victim of her circumstances, trapped between the unrealistic expectations fostered by her overprotective father and the emotional unavailability of her intellectually inclined husband. The rich symbolism of the peacock, with its intertwined representations of life and death, serves as a powerful reflection of Maya's inner turmoil and her oscillating preoccupation with existence and mortality.

Maya's final act of violence is a complex culmination of her suffering, blurring the lines between a desperate rebellion against her oppressive reality and a complete descent into madness. While her sanity is lost, her action can also be interpreted as a tragic assertion of her individual will, a destructive attempt to break free from the "existential imprisonment" of her unfulfilling life. The novel's exploration of other female characters provides a broader context for

Maya's experiences, suggesting that her struggles, though extreme, resonate with the diverse challenges faced by women within a patriarchal framework.

Ultimately, *Cry, The Peacock* remains a powerful and relevant work of literature due to its sensitive and insightful portrayal of female psychology, its subtle yet potent critique of patriarchal structures, and its masterful use of symbolism. Maya's story, with its blend of vulnerability and defiance, continues to resonate with readers and scholars, prompting ongoing critical engagement with the complexities of female identity, the impact of societal forces on individual lives, and the enduring cry of a spirit yearning for liberation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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