

Neurosis And Incompatible Marriage: An Analysis Of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock

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Abstract: *Neurosis and its impact on human personality have engaged the attention of both the psychologists and creative writers. The parallel interdisciplinary engagement with the study of neurosis has given new dimension to the critical understanding of the subjects. Following the impact of Freud and with the development of various psychological theories in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the attention of both the creative and critical writers was drawn towards a deeper understanding of human psyche. With the emergence of new theoretical assumptions, literary imagination was focused on exploring new techniques of narration and character portrayal. This paper aims at examining the character portrayal of Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel Cry, The Peacock to locate the causes and consequences of Maya's neurosis and how her incompatible marital relationship aggravates it and leads to an advanced mental illness i.e. psychosis. Neurosis generally termed as a medical condition in which a person experiences strong feelings of fear and anxiety has attracted the attention of contemporary women writers like Anita Desai. As modern Indian fiction engages with the deeper psychological study of characters, contemporary women writers have attempted to locate neurosis in the oppressive norms of marriage and patriarchy. As the young women protagonists of Anita Desai struggle to give in to convention and authority, they lose their balance and their inner self is torn apart. They recede into dark corners of silence and withdrawal and find it difficult to relate with their social surroundings in a reasonable manner. The paper examines how Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock is forced into a psychotic state on account of an incompatible and unsympathetic marital relationship. The paper also analyses the use of bird imagery in the representation of Maya's neurotic behavior that eventually creates a complete disjuncture between her private and public self.*

Keywords: *Stream of Consciousness, Patriarchy, Anxiety disorder, Suppression, Neurosis, Psychosis, Desai.*

I. Introduction

Neurosis and its impact on human personality have engaged the attention of both the psychologists and creative writers. The parallel interdisciplinary engagement with the study of neurosis has given new dimension to the critical understanding of the subjects. Following the impact of Freud and with the development of various psychological theories in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the attention of both the creative and critical writers was drawn towards a deeper understanding of human psyche. With the emergence of new theoretical assumptions, literary imagination was focused on exploring new techniques of narration and character portrayal. This paper aims at examining the character portrayal of Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel Cry, The Peacock to locate the causes and consequences of Maya's neurosis and how her incompatible marital relationship aggravates it and leads to an advanced mental illness i.e. psychosis. Neurosis generally termed as a medical condition in which a person experiences strong feelings of fear and anxiety has attracted the attention of contemporary women writers like Anita Desai. As modern Indian fiction engages with the deeper psychological study of characters, contemporary women writers have attempted to locate neurosis in the oppressive norms of marriage and patriarchy. As the young women protagonists of Anita Desai struggle to give in to convention and authority, they lose their balance and their inner self is torn apart. They recede into dark corners of silence and withdrawal and find it difficult to relate with their social surroundings in a reasonable manner. The paper examines how Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock is forced into a psychotic state on account of an incompatible and unsympathetic marital relationship. The paper also analyses the use of bird imagery in the representation of Maya's neurotic behavior that eventually creates a complete disjuncture between her private and public self.

Neurosis, Psychosis and Guiltless Murder

Magda declares, "If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete. I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify nothing" (Coetzee 9). The pitiable plight of Magda, the neurotic female protagonist in Coetzee's novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, aptly finds a parallel in Anita Desai's Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*. Like Magda, Maya's trajectory is one of despair, sterility, madness, and vengeance. The novel explores the inner world of Maya. She is a tragic figure, encumbered by dissonance and pain, incessantly lost in the labyrinth of her anxious thoughts, and fearsome instincts. The bidungroman novel traces the journey of Maya as a little

motherless girl, one being highly pampered by her father. She is impulsive, emotional and idealistic. Her childhood, nonetheless, is not wholly a fairy world. It is haunted by a demon like albino astrologer's prophecy that she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Maya's anxiety that erupts out of this prophecy subsides under the filial love of her father, who dismisses it as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. The prophecy remains consequently repressed in her unconscious and fails to affect her given to the excessive care, love and friendly atmosphere found in her father's home. Unfortunately, Maya's marriage triggers off a storm in her mind given to her husband Gautam's impassiveness, sexual indifference and insensitivity. All these problems culminate in the fourth year of her marriage during the course of the novel the shape of an "obsessional neurosis and keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on a tender leaf" (Rajeshwar 13).

The thematic leaning towards the exploration of female subjectivity in an otherwise patriarchal social space occupies most of the Indian Women Writers. They mainly aim at endowing the female characters with a sense of individuality and identity. Novels like Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956), Ruth Praver Jhabwala's *Whom She Will* (1955) and *Heat and Dust* (1975) and Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) exemplify the same trope which portray feminine wills and their conflicting choices. Anita Desai is in the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness. She writes,

Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth - the truth that is, nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things. (Desai 348)

Desai explores this reality through an introspective incursion into the mind of Maya. The narrative technique of stream of consciousness used in *Cry, The Peacock* is commonly used to characterize the "unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in the waking mind" (Abrams 298). It is used to "illustrate internal disruption of a hitherto smooth flow of thought, action and events" (Kehinde 182). Since events do not unfold smoothly in Maya's world, a world wracked by superstition, hopelessness and anxiety, it is reasonable to represent this incoherence in the inner consciousness or mind of the character. This technique is enabling in foregrounding the mental conflict and neurosis of Maya.

The novel captures the inner consciousness of Maya who is caught in the vicious web of anxious deliberation. Throughout the narrative, the long passages of introspection provide a picture of Maya's mind. The first person narration is crucial for the reader to understand the reasons for Maya's behavior as her private thoughts form the core of her experience. Maya herself communicates all her thoughts to the reader. "Gautama sees only the outward manifestations of her thoughts, and those visible aspects are so fragmentary that he cannot piece together the total picture of Maya's disturbance" (Weir 2).

Madhusudhan Prasad in his *Anita Desai: The Novelist* briefly alludes to Maya as a neurotic figure, "In *Cry, The Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity" (3). Through Maya's thoughts and behavior it becomes obvious that she has neurotic tendencies since childhood. There are instances in the text that substantiate the point that Maya was undergoing medical treatment, "It is the doctor's orders that I must be permitted no anxieties, no excitements. . . The doctor has to be called, finally, to give me a little morphine so that I might sleep in peace" (Desai 77-78). She herself says that she had a disturbed childhood devoid of freedom and meaning but despite that she lived a happy, satisfied life before marriage. "She has had a sumptuous feast of life and is never exposed to real life but always kept away from it" (Devika 242). Her father puts his best efforts to keep her happy by telling her stories, accompanying her to long walks and tours. "Yes, now that I go over it in my mind, my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was a pretty one" (Desai 78). Unlike her father, Gautama fails to understand her predicament and to provide her a conducive environment. Instead of calming her fears, Gautama calls her neurotic and a spoilt child, and blames her father for her idealistic and impulsive nature. "'Neurotic', he said, 'Neurotic, that's what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse word. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya -that is what her father taught her'" (Desai 98). Gautama's indifference to Maya's needs, her aspirations and desires create a vacuum inside her. Gradually she sees herself on the verge of dissolving into complete insubstantiality.

In medical terms a person is qualified as a neurotic if he exhibits symptoms like, "anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, irritability, worry, compulsions and a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches, palpitations, sweating and temperature" (Hancock 1). Maya exhibits all these symptoms. She yells out in pain, "My mind is tired, I am tired. I have thought too much, remembered too much. . . I want to sleep, I want to sleep. . . My body breaks in the battle". (Desai 143-8). She suffers from palpitations, excessive sweating, sensations of shortness of breath and sensations of choking, nausea and dizziness,

My outraged heart pounded against my ribs, till I choked, till I saw night about me, and began to cry hysterically . . . The hair on my neck was glued to the skin with perspiration. No breeze lifted the smallest strand, though I could hear the fan, an old one, ticking, ticking, metallicly. (149)

I had no breath left any longer . . . All I could do was gasp for breath, and that made the process more and more difficult. (155)

Gautama too often finds her tired and feverish, "you have fever - I do believe you have a temperature Maya " (Desai 123). She gasps in horror, "I am in a fever. Stop me! Silence me! Or I will fly on, fly up, at you, through you, past you, and away. For I am ill. I am in a fever, God, in a fever" (Desai 150). According to Dr. Jason Hancock, neurotic patients suffer from specific phobias where they experience a "persistent fear of a specific object or situation that is considered to be excessive and unreasonable" (2). Throughout the novel, Maya is haunted by the idea of turning insane, and obsessed with astrologer's prophecy and fear of death. She screams in her dreams, "But to perish? Who? Tell me who" (Desai 106). The fear reflects in her thoughts as well,

And it was the end that I waited for. (Desai 154)
I knew there was no time left, no time left at all. (Desai 48)

Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment - these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain. (Desai 88)

I knew how uncontrollably my mouth jerked at times, when my lack of control, the dominance of fear over me, grew too obvious to others, too obvious for safety. (Desai 140)

There are instances in the novel where Maya feels as if everything around her is unreal, manifesting another symptom of neurosis that is 'derealization' where the patient feels the world around him is illusory and imaginary. She herself realizes it when she says,

Only a dream. An illusion. Maya - my very name means nothing but an illusion (Desai 144).
Insanely. I dropped my head into my hands. Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope, that encounter with the albino, his predilections, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity. And insanity can be cured . . . (Desai 92).

Maya is schizophrenic as she displays the qualities of one catalogued by Thomas J. Scheff who says that one of its qualities is "bizarre behavior, e.g., delusions and hallucinations" (14). Her world is one of delusions and hallucinations. She keeps on thinking about astrologer and two more women, Pom and Leila emerges in her imagination. The thought of these two women make her realize that her neurosis has intensified. Therefore, she consoles herself by bursting out: "God, Gautama, father, surely it is nothing but an hallucination . . . nothing but a flagrant nightmare" (Desai 24). "Neurotics always fear death, loneliness, poverty, destruction" (Inamdar 26). Maya is obsessed with the fear of death and their lonely future existence when she ponders, "One of us would be left alone to always pour out his or her tea, in loneliness, and I felt the shroud of death blur my vision" (Desai 119). Sometimes it dawns upon her that her actions are one of an insane person. Convinced of this, she says, "There is something weird about me now, wherever go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this' unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself? Or the world around me?" (Desai 122).

Moreover, neurotic patients remain too much occupied and exhausted struggling their thoughts that they find it difficult to maintain their external world, be it work or other social responsibilities. She finds herself different from Gautama and his family as they are too worldly and occupied by their external world. She says to Gautama, "But I am not like you, I am different from all of you," when Gautama tells her, "Not at all, like my father or myself, Maya. We are egotists, one and all. We work for fame, name, money, all the other evils put together. Yet we do have our work - our vocations - each one of us, and so far, I must say it, it appears to have brought us a certain amount of serenity" (Desai 99-100).

The inner chaos of Maya finds an objective correlative in the images of summer, the dust-storm and the birds. The summer heat in the month of May aggravates her irritation and inner trouble. "The heat oozes into the room and pours like thick warm, oil. It swells and expands till it becomes physical, a presence that presses against her body." (Inamdar 27). The external heat parallels the turmoil and restlessness inside her mind. Likewise, dust-storm is the "inside insanity objectified," foretelling her future destruction and it is the storm that culminates with Gautama's end. The images of birds in the novels too depict the psychic state of Maya. The bat becomes symbol of her imprisoned self when she shrinks involuntarily feeling as if a bat was caught in the same room with her. Owl's haunted presence is insistent in the novel. Before Maya pushes Gautama, she significantly draws his attention to the owl, "Listen, I said, stopping at a sound. 'Do you hear that? It's an owl!'" (Desai 171). The central image of peacocks cry signify Maya's yearning for love. She finds her restlessness in them when she says, "But sleep was rent by the frenzied cries of peacocks pacing he rocks at night - peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with - agony at the death of love" (Desai 146). Its cry evokes the death wish in Maya and she tears Gautama as peacocks do in

lovmaking, "It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rainclouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror" (Desai 146).

What is intriguing in the novel is how Maya's condition worsens, what prompts the journey from neurosis to psychosis? What difference would it have made if Gautama had met her aspirations, desires and needs? Was Maya's guiltless crime of murdering Gautama an externalization of the sexual frustration, emotional tumult and alienation caused to her by the burdensome marital knot? Perhaps, Gautama heightened it, if not caused her problem, as she says, "his coldness, his coldness, and incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking, reveal myself. It is that - my loneliness in this house" (Desai 14). "She feels sexually starved, emotionally enervated, and intellectually overfed; she expects emotional and physical satisfaction in her married life but gets cold intellectuality and insensitivity from her husband" (Devika 242). Maya craves for love whether of Gautama or his family. She feels unwanted, alienated and loveless, as she says, "no one, no one else, I sobbed into my pillow as Gautama went into the bathroom, loves me as my father does"(Desai 43).

Earlier when she broods over astrologer's prophecy, she frequently tells herself that it was she who was fated to die. But she is in ardent love with life and so she soon begins to wonder whether it was not Gautama's life that was threatened. "Like a woman wronged by her husband she puts all the blame on her husband and though unconsciously, she probably wishes to kill her husband to remove him from her life because she feels that it is he who always stops her from living life the way she desires" (Devika 246). Soon after she feels that it is Gautama who is fated to die, she becomes more and more secretive.

He must not know, not even guess. Never, never, never. If he guessed, new dangers would arise like sudden fires out of the cracked earth . . . Ah, if Gautama found out, would he not put me in peril of my life? Did he not love life too . . . (Inamdar 13)

I glanced at him now, slyly, for sly I had grown with such a load of secrets that had to be hidden from him, such evil and awful secrets. (Inamdar 14)

Maya feels that Gautam's death is justified given to his cold attitude to life. She finally convinces herself that the ultimate solution to all her problems lies in Gautama's death be it astrologer's prophecy or her dissatisfied marriage. She says,

The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he dies 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 rainclouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (146)

Maya's reaction to loneliness, helplessness and frustration is similar to that of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Women at Point Zero* (1983), who has to murder the pimp, Marzouk, who is considered her oppressor. Firdaus too is knotted in an incompatible marriage with a disgusting man who is emotionally and psychologically abusive. Firdaus concludes that all men are criminals, refuses to submit an appeal on the ground that she has not committed a crime and goes to her death a free woman, without fear or regret. Likewise, Maya succumbs to her schizophrenic self which takes the toll of both her husband and herself. She destroys of course, not her neurosis but Gautama and herself.

Self Reliance, Emotional Indifference and Detachment

Interestingly, the text also nudges one to decipher that Anita Desai portrays Maya's character as an emblem of doom. Maya lacks independence, individuality and identity. Her life becomes meaningless unless accompanied by a male patriarch be it her father or husband. Her emotional balance and mental peace is wholly navigated by how they treat her. She hinges on the age-old tradition that a male can save her soul, "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one" (84). Maya is more engrossed in expectations and dependence. She looks for happiness in people associated with her rather than searching for inner peace. She keeps waiting for her father's letters, aspiring for Gautam's love and care and even her pet Toto's death shatters her. Maya represents an Indian woman who finds herself successful and confident only when her husband loves her and she has a settled life with children. Her barrenness makes her think, "she is not a complete woman; she misses the contentment and bliss of motherhood, another death of one of her parts" (Devika 245). An emotionally crippled person, she fails to gather herself in an incompatible marriage. Her love for Gautama robs her of her sense of self and identity. Forgetting herself to the extent of insanity, she says that Gautama taught many more things to her heart "new, strange, and painful things. He taught it pain, for there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much" (Desai 167). She constantly reminisces how her father was a panacea for all her problems, "What I had forgotten was the magic of my father's gentle words that had once had the power to soothe and console me. Now nothing calmed me" (Desai 147).

Critics either blame the marital incompatibility for Maya's neurosis or her neurosis for the conjugal failure. Madhusudhan Prasad says, "Maya's neurosis in the novel is based on marital discord" which shatters her identity and drives her insane (Prasad 3). Inamdar believes, "Maya's neurosis does not entirely arise out of

marital discord in which Gautama is entirely to be blamed. The marital discord arises out of her neurotic personality in the face of which she is herself helplessly struggling to extricate" (Inamdar 22). No matter Maya's neurotic self affects the smooth marital relationship but Gautama cannot be absolved of his role in turning her totally insane either. Maya shows symptoms of neurosis even before marriage but Gautama's indifference, insensitiveness and harsh attitude drags her to a psychotic state in which she causes the death of Gautama. Earlier she would reflect on her anxiety but later she loses her inner balance completely so that she is not even capable of feeling any guilt or remorse for her criminal action of murdering Gautama. To conclude, one would say Maya's incompatible marriage is the main culprit and the root cause for her tragic end. Her excessive dependence, expectation and attachment to people around her who continue to be indifferent and hostile bring her doom. The novel itself offers an alternative for Maya in the lines of Gita which reads, "He whose joy is within, and whose light is within, that Yogi, being well-established in Brahman, attains to absolute freedom. The freedom of the lotus from water, of the lamp from winds, of the tortoise from all contact. Detachment- in a word, detachment" (Desai 101). The philosophical answer of all Maya's agonies and miseries lies in existing like a "lily upon water, rooted in water yet with its petals dry, untouched by it" (Desai 101).

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