



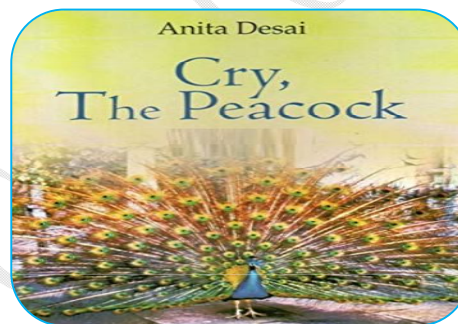
AN ICONIC SYMBOL 'MAYA, THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST' OF ENVIRONMENTAL FEMINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism or feminist environmental criticism is concerned with environmental and feminine influences on literature. The relationship between women and environment is significant in the novel Cry, The Peacock selected for the present study. A methodology based on ecofeminism is helpful in exploring the importance of nature in Desai's novels. The symbolic interpretation of nature in her novels enables the reader to explore the psychology of women in a unique way. She uses various elements of nature like trees, birds, animals, colours etc. to connect their general image with the mental state of her characters. For example, in her novel Cry, the Peacock, she powerfully describes Maya's mental anguish through a peacock's mourning for its mate.



KEYWORDS: Environmental Feminism, Female Protagonist.

INTRODUCTION :

The word 'feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'femina', meaning 'woman' (via French feminism) and refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power with men on the basis of gender equality. In other words, it has to do with the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. Anita Desai seems to be aware of the relationship between feminism as a political movement, a literary and theoretical commitment to struggle against patriarchy and sexism, and not just the study

of gender in literature. In fact, feminist critical approaches and theories have become relevant to the study and analysis of social, institutional and individual power constraints between genders. Representations of female sensibility and the dilemmas of women oppressed by a male-dominated social system are recurring themes in her fictional work.

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novel Cry, The Peacock selected for the present study. A methodology based on ecofeminism is helpful in exploring the importance of nature in Desai's novels. The symbolic interpretation of nature in her novels enables the reader to explore the psychology of women in a unique way. She uses various elements of nature like trees, birds, animals, colors etc. to connect their general image with the mental state of her characters. For example, in her novel Cry, the Peacock, she powerfully describes Maya's mental anguish through a peacock's mourning for its mate.

Maya, filled with despair and in a restless state, observes the flowers in the garden and recalls "*I was drawn away from pain into a world that knows no pain*". Under the influence of her grief, she perceives the scent of flowers differently: "*I bent to them, breathing in the mist of the sad soft fragrance, merging with the mood sensation, until nothing remained but that mist.*"

The striking contrast between the characters of Maya and her husband, Gautham, is shown in the episode where Gautham cannot tell the difference between a petunia and the smell of a lemon. On this, Maya thinks: 'The flowers of the lemon tree were different, very different: very strong, crisp character, they were seen with a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, cutting hard moon shells, in the curved petals guarding the heart of the fragrance. Their scent was also brighter—a sour, astringent scent, as refreshing as lemon leaves. I tried to explain to Gautama, paralyzed with anxiety, that by now, when his company was needed, I needed his close understanding.'

Gautama, who values his work and tries to find logic in everything, has no idea about the beauty and magic of nature. Maya is romantic by nature and needs special attention from her husband, which he fails to give. She finds joy in nature and its elements through close observation of trees and plants. Her extraordinary perception of silk cotton plants is evident in "*their huge, red flowers, solid pods with thick petals, which form blood bubbles in blue*". She remembers the days spent at her father's house. The garden at her father's house holds a special place in her memories and she remembers having breakfast in the garden with her father. Breakfast was that of fairies and elves who "*eat melons and syrup by moonlight*". Maya raves about the garden and recalls, "*Our table is set next to a mandarin orange tree. In every corner of the garden there is a small fairy tree, with its glossy leaves, and an overload of tiny, bright miniature lanterns on carnival nights*".

For Maya, spring, in which she is at Gautama's house in Delhi, brings melancholy as it echoes the mournful cry of the brain fever bird. The cry of a bird wakes her up. Spring in her memory lane, however, is quite different. It is calming and soothing rather than painful. Thus, the difference in Maya's perception of the same season at two different places and stages of her age gives the reader an insight into her psyche. Maya's garden of dreams, the garden of her father's house, the Garden of Eden for her, is no longer idyllic. An albino astrologer, depicted metaphorically as a snake, enters her garden as she waits for an unknown person reclining in her chair: "*I lay in my chair and took a deep breath, waiting for summer? For snakes? For the moon? I didn't know*". She imagines the astrologer's shadow as a snake, and as he approaches her, she turns a shadow towards her that traps her. She jumps from the chair in terror "*snakes coiling over me and drawing their damp lengths, descending viciously from the overhanging branches of a maddened death, unprepared to be heralded by deafening drum beats*". Maya has an extraordinary relationship with petunias which are "*sentimental, soulless flowers that give off scents that perfectly match her mood and she looks at them - with a familiar hug*".

The novel uses natural elements to depict Maya's feelings. Each animal or bird has an image attached to it. The dog is known for its loyalty, the peacock for its beauty and shyness, the snake for its venom and the crow for its guile. These associative images are effectively interwoven with events in Maya's life. Maya's pet dog Toto is the most prominent image and is used "as a structural device integral not only to the novelist but also to the theme". Toto's death, a very moving event in Maya's life, causes her paranoia and mental instability:

The body was rotting in the sun all day. It could not be moved to the veranda because in the April sun, the decay of the dead flesh was too strong and would soon have penetrated the rooms. The crows sat in a circle around the carcass and the crows will eat anything - guts, eyes, anything.

When Maya's pet dog dies, she is changed and unwilling to accept the bitter truth that death is inevitable. "Childless women develop intense attachment to their pets," she asserts. She is torn apart by her husband's cold response to her wishes. Gautama's ignorance of her desire is evident when she thinks, "Gautama, let me wear an opal ring on my finger, not noticing the translucent skin beneath, the blue shining veins running beneath". When her mental imbalance reaches its peak, she starts seeing imaginary creatures trying to bite her.

Maya's failure to conceive is a major cause of her concern. The botanical elements used in the novel relate to her barrenness and the resulting emptiness. She observes:

Undisguised by the finer details on the leafless, bare neem trees, hitherto carefully hidden, nests, deserted by birds... On the Dova road, the silk-cotton trees blossomed for the first time: their huge, reddish flowers, thick. Petals, hard pods ... then dropped onto the asphalt and squashed into a soft, yellowish miasma, they looked like animals instead of flowers, they were so big, they were heavy, moist and alive to the touch.

The 'silk cotton trees' with 'huge blossoms', 'crushed in a yellow miasma' represent Maya's suffering of barrenness. The introduction of various images related to nature is important in understanding that Maya is aware of these events happening around her. When she hears the cooing of pigeons during mating, she feels sorry for her own loveless life. When she sees new-born chicks in a pigeon nest on her veranda, she thinks about the inadequacy of having children. She gets even more annoyed when she sees the baby mice and thinks, "Mice will nurse their young very tenderly. I know this because I now lived very close to one, with seven cubs nestled at its feet". All these incidents add to her agony and gradually she becomes paranoid. She cannot stop thinking of the snakes that "crawl lustily over the pale sweet white flowers".

She looks suspiciously at the lizards as if they are trying to give her a clue and says, "Of the lizards, the lizards that come upon you, follow you silently, when cold, fingers slide in and out of tongues, in and out an audible hiss and death rattle. , slowly moving up, closing in on you...rubbing their cold bellies against you...rubbing and grinding". Finally, when Gautam asks Maya about the behemoth lizards known as iguanas, she says, "Iguanas...! My blood ran cold, and I heard the crack of his tail still in the white daylight. Get off—I say, get off!". These events bring to life the terrible fear of Maya in her subconscious mind.

Fearing death more than anything else, Maya is not ready to die and Gautama's death is the only way to get her out of this predicament. To survive, she decides to kill her husband who is the main factor of her unfulfilled desires. She has no thought but Gautama's death and gets involved in plotting his murder. She is not willing to wait much longer and tries to find the first opportunity to kill her husband. Eventually, it becomes difficult for her to kill her husband and she tries to find every reason necessary to do so. Finally, she agrees to her decision after reflecting on her past life with her husband.

CONCLUSION:

Desai effectively uses botanical imagery and the destructive conditions prevalent in nature to intensify the character of Maya's tragic suffering. Meanwhile, Maya's father plans to go to Europe to spend some time in peace and asks Maya and Gautham to come with him. But Gautama has an alternative plan and is ready to go to his ancestral home. When they are at the train station, Maya's attention is drawn to cages full of monkeys destined to go to a laboratory for experimentation. This pitiful scene is quite heart-wrenching because Maya is in the same condition as those animals. Seeing the thirst of the monkeys, Maya gets angry and "there is not even a bowl of water for them". When the couple reaches home, Maya is somewhat relaxed in the company of her sister-in-law, Nila and mother-in-law. Still, she cannot forget the thought of her husband's murder. She is haunted by it and remains "relentless as an arrow". She makes her final decision and considers the right time to implement her plan. Soon a dust storm approaches and she becomes confident that "the hour of destruction has come". Maya believes that this is a time of "release and liberty". Instead of going for a walk in the garden with Gautham in the evening, Maya insists on going to the terrace with her. In a casual conversation with Gautama, Maya thinks: "Poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama who was intense and yet never lived and never will". Speaking to him, she leads him to the edge of the parapet and pushes him down shouting "Gautama! in a rage". Gautama's sudden death comes as a shock to his family. When asked about the incident, Maya declares "It was an accident". Shows no sign of grief and continues to walk excitedly. After Gautama's death A month later, Maya moves into her home with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Nila and her mother, one day, "hear the sound of a child's laughter and some new joy coming down the scales - perhaps a bright peacock feather? Then they stop, suddenly they see a A different sound was heard...came out in great fear". Maya's mother-in-law rushes to the balcony in an attempt to prevent

Maya from taking any hostile steps, but she disappears "*silently into the darkness*". Like peacocks, Maya ends her life to escape pain.

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