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## Maya as an Existential Character in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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The novel *Cry, the Peacock* begins with the death of Toto and ends with Gautam's murder and Maya's insanity. The fear of the threatened death, though initially submerged, surfaces periodically to haunt, unnerve and terrify Maya: "And four years it was now, we had been married four years... I knew the time had come it was now to be Gautama or me". This pendulum of predicted death precariously swinging from the ceiling gradually descends and threatens to fall over her head any moment.

The mounting fear of death begins Slackens Maya's hold over herself, drawing her closer to insanity. She begins to have hallucinations of various odd creatures – of the dead ants who got drowned in attempting to drink the sweet oil, of doves" as omens of ill fortune, of separation" asking her to go away, of rats causing plagues, and of lizards in whose hissing sounds she hears "the death rattle." The dark spaces between the stars signify her separation.

*There was not one of my friends who could  
act as an anchor anymore and to*

The absence of relief from any quarter unnerves her. With her sickened imagination and neurotic mind, she begins to form many frightening images from remotely correspondingly objects after being to convince that she has been caught in the net of the inescapable and there was no possibility of mercy. During daytime, she suspects them not to be nightmare but in the night, her "memories came to life were so vivid, so detailed, I knew them to be real, too real. Or is it madness?" (PP.97.98)

When Maya comes to realize in the fourth year that her days are numbered, love for life spring in her and she becomes hysteric over the oncoming threat of death. She claims in desperation: "Am I gone Insane? Father! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with the living. I am in love, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But still I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more-Only death and waiting" (P.98). With her renewed love of life, she begins to rationalize that since one of two was to die, according to the prediction. "It might be Gautama's life that was threatened" (P.164), and thus transfers the prediction of death to him, not knowing that the idea was already there in her unconscious, repressed state. While sitting down with Gautama for tea, she had visualized earlier that one of the two would be "left alone to always pour out his or her tea, in loneliness" (P.142). The sentences show her repressed desire to get rid of Gautama for being a poor substitute of her

father and being unworthy of her love. Her logic is that she has love for life whereas Gautama, believing in the Bhagavad-Gita, considers death to be the termination of human activity and is therefore, indifferent to both life and death. Maya feels undismayed by her decision to go away with him. Hence she feels tenderly towards him, “as towards a departing guest who might never be encountered again” and talks of him “as unreal ghost” stalking beside her (P.196). This repressed desire of hers to kill him has found an expression earlier being accused of father-obsession by Gautama, she is in a fit of anger had struck out at his absurd reflection in the tale mirror with a great force. Now Gautama’s act of forgetting Toto’s name is provocation enough for Maya, but his words used for her pet appear grim as death. Planning his murder, she persuades him for a walk on the roof and pushes him over the parapet down to the very bottom. Desai’s skill lies in transforming a sensitive character like Maya into a murderess.

The threatened death of one of the two, the father-fixation of Maya and the incompatible temperaments of Gautama and his wife make the relationship between the two very fragile and tenon “neither true nor lasting” but “broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again”(P.40). The temperamental incompatibility leads to the blockade of Maya’s libidinal satisfaction and she regresses into the world of her father through her imagination. Even otherwise, their marriage had grown not out of their love for each other but on the friendship and regards her father and husband had for each other. An inkling of their inharmonious relationship and absence of mutual understanding comes when Gautama telephones the public works department to send their scavenging truck for disposing off the corpse of her dead Toto and then immediately afterwards invites her for tea. Such a casual attitude towards Maya’s pet which meant so much to her completely shakes the grief-stricken wife and when she comes back to pour the tea for him “it spilt into the sugar-pot, the tea-strainer toppled into a cup, the lemons slipped to the floor, and there was chaos”(P.7). Gautama on the other hand, completely unaffected by the death of Toto, goes out to meet another lawyer. What really troubles Maya is not so much the death of Toto as the absence of Gautama’s awareness of depth of her misery and the non-realization of her need for comfort. For Maya, like all normal women, particularly in her loneliness, wanted to mother a child and Toto was a substitute for it.

The death of Toto is thus to her the death of her child substitute. The tragic happening makes her hysterical. She explains her attachment to Toto:

*Childless women do develop fanatic*

*attachments to their pets, they say.*

*It is no less a relationship than*

*that of a women and her child;*

*no less worthy of reverence and*

*agonized remembrance (P.10).*

The death of Toto also starts a chain reaction within Maya and her fears lying in the unconscious come to the fore. Something “shadowy” comes to her vision. She feels she was grieving, besides her Toto’s death, “Another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced” (P.8) which could be the predicted death of one of them.

The incompatible temperaments of Maya and Gautama cause lack of communication between the two which in turn makes her feel alienated. In Maya’s case it is, what Sidney Finkelstein defines, “a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself”. Maya’s alienation refers to her estrangement from her family, her society and even her own self. For her alienation from husband, mainly Maya is responsible, but to a certain extent Gautama also has a share. Her loneliness becomes more poignant after the death of Toto—a child substitute—who in her opinion deserved a splendid ceremony but which Gautama had derisively termed “the frills and flaps of pious frivolity” (P.15).

Maya’s alienation is also reflected in the loneliness of the bear and of the caged monkeys. Her desire to get the monkeys released and her faith that her father would open their cages and let them out show her own suffocating loneliness externalized.

The absence of harmony among the two and the solitude of the house increase her psychic problems. Maya, being so much in love with life, feels bored by Gautama’s act of pouring out wisdom from the Bhagavad Gita which, to her, appears dry and inhuman. Gautama wants to be her friend, philosopher and guide, while she wants him to be her lover. Thus instead of extricating herself from the world of father and merging herself into that of her husband, she regresses into her loneliness. Her, pent up feelings for love come out in an emotional outburst when she tells, “Oh, you know nothing of me – and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you have never loved. And you don’t love me.....” (P.112)

By its repeated use the peacock becomes a symbol of neurotic protagonist Maya herself. When the peacock cries for lover and for death, it is Maya’s own obsession with and wishes for death. Maya’s life, like the peacock’s dance of joy, also implies death. Maya is well aware of life and death with the help of albino astrologer’s prediction. Before the peacocks mate, they fight symbolizing Maya’s own marital disharmony. Maya in her post marital loss of freedom identifies her with the caged monkeys on the railway platform. Since Maya is sensitive, introvert and of reflective cast of mind, small incidents set her thinking mill in motion, making it go on working imperceptibly like some kind of a delicate but partially damaged wrist watch with its moving wheels and ticking sounds intact but the unimpaired hour-hand barely showing its inner workings. After the knowledge of the inevitability of predicted death, Maya is advised to pray to

God to escape the disaster. She begins to realize then as if every living being was asking her to go away. The whole atmosphere becomes different to her.

“The atmosphere was charged with  
restlessness, as my hair, suddenly  
gone drier and finer, was  
charged with electricity and  
crackled sharply when I brushed  
it. Gusts of wind dragged the  
thorny, paper-flowered bougain  
villia creepers against the wall  
with a dry, scratching rattle that  
unnerved me. The cries of birds,  
caught in the rut of love, were  
like frantic warnings to my  
ears. The rolling cotton balls,  
the flying yellow leaves,  
the surging clouds of dust, all  
seemed to flee, flee, flee,  
and yet could not, for they  
were bound to the seasons,  
and returned to continue their  
struggle for escape. Something  
similar heaved inside me - a  
longing, a dread, a search  
for solution, a despair, and

my heart throbbed and spun  
as I lay flat on my back  
through the long afternoons,  
under the fan that turned,  
turned relentlessly, and  
sent a small quivering breeze  
over my body, blowing my hair  
across my damp face, then  
blowing it away again. (P.35)

The darkest passages of her consciousness, the deepest recesses of her mental experience are illumined by the novelist and are of great interest to the reader in enriching his understanding of hypersensitive women characters. The reader is passed on all the information that is registered on Maya's mind. It is both thinking and feeling part of Maya with which Desai is concerned and as such it becomes a psychological novel.

The cry of the peacock begins with the death of Toto which, as also some objects and persons provoke Maya into bringing on surface in chain-reaction involuntary associations with the albino astrologer which are presented with the help of flashback technique. This is done to convey the inner consciousness of Maya, of course, the chronology is not much disturbed here as in stream – of – consciousness novel like Faulkner's the sound and the Fury. Wyndham Lewis complained that the stream – of – consciousness writer "robs work of all linear properties whatsoever, of all contour and definition..... The romantic abdominal within method in a jelly fish structure, without articulation of any sort."

### **Works Cited:**

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