

## Failure of Intra-family Communication: An Assessment of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*

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### Abstract

*Matrimonial compatibility warrants a slew of factors including but not limited to understanding emotions. Intra-family communication is critical in achieving emotional balance. Although written in 60's, Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock foregrounds the fact that failure of intra-family communication could be catastrophic. This article attempts to analyse how failure of communication in Cry, The Peacock leads to a family tragedy*

**Keywords:** Assertion, Social milieu of independent India, Aristocratic family, Volatile space, Patriarchy, Intra-family communication, Suppression, Neurosis,

*With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her, as well as her whole family . . . giving them the soil in which to send down their roots. . . always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future. . . It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. - Clear Light of Day*

Anita Desai was born Anita Mazumdar in June 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station in the Himalayas. Her father, a Bengali had met her German mother, a teacher, while an engineering student in pre-war Berlin. They married when it was still rare for an Indian man to wed a European woman, and moved to the "neutral territory" of Old Delhi, then, Desai recalls, a "sleepy, provincial place" (*A Passage from India*). She grew up in a rather secluded family without the extended network of relatives. The youngest of three sisters with an elder brother, she describes hers as "a small and intensely close family. My family was an oddity; it

didn't belong where it was. Going to school, I became aware of its difference, of things that set us apart.”

They spoke German at home, and Hindi to friends and neighbours. She learned English at mission school (“It was always my literary language, my book language”) and her father's language, Bengali, only after he died when she was 18, and the family moved to Calcutta. “Growing up, I wasn't even aware of my mother's being a foreigner; she dressed in a sari and cooked Indian food.” But Desai adds: “Everyone in India has close affiliations to state, home town, religion, caste - all the things missing from my life. That leaves one feeling free to invent whatever kind of home you want. I do have all the passions one is supposed to have for one's home country, but I know I'm not part of Indian society - it perplexes and amazes me. I find myself reacting sharply, as my mother would have. I don't think I'm sentimental about India. My mother's not being Indian was so little a conscious part of my life that when she died I went with my sister to cremate her, and immerse her ashes in the river. It was only on the way back, when we passed some English graveyards, it struck me, and maybe she would have liked to be buried. It never occurred to me to ask, or her to tell.”

Anita Desai thus grew up in a kind of diasporic situation; both her parents were exiles in some sense or the other. Her mother lived away from Germany all her life; her father belonged to a family uprooted from East Bengal on account of partition. Both her parents often recalled their respective homes and this nostalgia was a part of the family memories. Her father, “removed, remote and distant”, spoke of Bengal as “a wonderful green and fruitful land”, while her mother, with her “rich, warm, vibrant personality”, quoted German nursery rhymes and tales of Christmas in Berlin.

As Desai notes ironically, “we had beautiful pictures of both these countries very little tainted by history or world events, which we had to learn as we grew up.” While her mother never went back to Germany, Desai visited Berlin as a young adult. “I couldn't recognize a single thing; my mother hadn't known how totally it was destroyed and rebuilt after the war. I felt a complete stranger, devastated at finding the dream didn't exist at all.”

A strong sense of alienation and a desire to belong thus were integral part of growing up for Anita Desai and this experience is a recurring motif in her fictional work. Asked why she is repeatedly drawn to “failures and wrecks” as characters, Desai says: “I remember being very lost at school, not being popular or successful. It was always a great struggle to belong. It was an immense relief to come home to books, to be alone. I had a great need for privacy that was unusual for a child but not at all for a writer.” The biographical detail of Anita Desai has been provided at such length in order to throw light on the contexts which influenced her texts.

Her own experience of loneliness and struggle to belong strongly impact the characters she portrays and their experiences. She describes the major theme of her fiction as “the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (Libert 47). She is concerned with the lives of individuals, particularly women, caught in emotional turmoil triggered by the failure of family in some sense or the other. In her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) she traces the degeneration of a young sensitive woman into insanity as a result of an acute sense of loneliness that haunts her all her life. Desai represents how lack of communication can wreck marriages and lives through the predicament of Maya, the protagonist of this novel. *Voices in the City* (1965) is a typical instance of a novel of city, depicting the nihilistic influence of Calcutta on three siblings enchanting them and alluring them into its evil vortex. *Bye- Bye Blackbird* (1971) her third novel is set in London and looks at the problems faced by Indian immigrants living there. Here Desai also studies the conflicts that are inevitable in an interracial marriage. She recreates some of her own experience as the offspring of an interracial marriage in this novel. All these early novels carry strong echoes of her own conflicts as a woman and a writer.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Desai continues to analyze the tensions experienced by a woman in her marital life. Sita, pregnant with her fifth child, takes refuge from her marriage on the magical island homestead of her deceased father. After an unhappy marital life of nearly two decades, another pregnancy brings no joy to Sita. Here Desai shows how motherhood can become burdensome in a loveless marriage. Sita returns to her home and indifferent husband at the end of the novel; but the fact that she has made some effort to express her resentment is in itself worth noting. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977)

is a variation on Sita. She is tired and exhausted after a hectic married life during which she is always kept busy in looking after the needs of the family. She withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. Desai commenting on her work said: “My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life.”

In the next phase of her work that is in the eighties Desai started to look more closely at the life of a community instead of individual lives. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) does not look at the traumas or conflicts of individuals; but it attempts a study of the community in which individual lives take shape. *In Custody* (1984) is Desai’s ironic story about literary traditions and academic illusions. The central characters are Nur, an Urdu poet, who has fallen on hard times, and Deven, a professor of Hindi, who realizes that the beloved poet is not the magical genius he has imagined. For the first time Desai chooses a male protagonist in this novel. The author’s own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) – It is the story of a retired Jewish businessman who has escaped in his youth the Holocaust and stayed on his old age. His reclusive existence is shattered by a drug-crazed German hippie, and the hidden Nazi hatred surfaces. In both of these books Desai has ventured in new directions, as an answer to critics, who have concluded that her characters are usually westernized middle-class professionals and therefore their problems are more close to those of Western readers than to majority of Indian people. In *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) Desai examined the nature of pilgrimage to India through three characters - Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman, whose story is an earlier version of their own. Increasingly Desai’s themes and concerns move out of India in her later work. In her *Fasting and Feasting* Desai contrasts two cultures: Indian known for its pious and longstanding customs representing ‘fasting,’ and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomizing ‘feasting.’ The story dangling between two countries and cultures goes to prove through the characters of Uma and Arun, and their counterparts Melanie and Rod, that attempts of escape from entrapments can only be temporary, illusory and self-destructively futile since entrapments through familial knots are ubiquitous, all encompassing and universal. And perhaps the salvation comes when one accepts entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life. Family

both in its positive and negative dimensions remains the central motif in much of Desai's work.

*Cry the Peacock* demonstrates failure of family as consequence of failure of intra-family communication. Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* articulates her major concern: the struggle of Indian women to assert their independence in a restrictive society. Written in 1963, it captures the swift changes occurring in the post independence India in terms of the paradigmatic shifts that occurred in the identity of individual and community.

What is of special significance to a discussion of *Cry, the Peacock* is the creation of colonial models of development that dominated India in post independence period. A highly competitive society where success is strictly measured in terms of one's capacity to hoard wealth became the norm. Historians and Sociologists would account for the fact that there was a great deal of generational change in the perceptions of the people. The new generation showed enthusiasm towards work and placed it above every other priority in life. A capable, efficient and hardworking male who could prove himself worthy through professional achievement came to be regarded the positive model for emulation. In the production of this gender stereotype, woman was further removed from the world of work, profession, competition and success, which was primarily a male domain. Women remained outsiders to the much happening outside world and got increasingly trapped in the silence of home.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, one finds a subtle depiction of this social milieu of the post independence India. The personalities of the two main characters Maya and Gautama are shaped and conditioned by their family environment in the aftermath of independence. Gautama's father, as is evident in the novel, was a freedom fighter dedicated to the cause of reformation. However, he did not have enough time to spare for the family. Gautama to some extent imbibes his father's idealism and work ethic but is also influenced by his own sense of detachment from the subjective. Maya, on the other hand, comes from an aristocratic family that continues to keep to the colonial life style marked by a penchant for the epicurean, the romantic, and a sense of class. Maya is transplanted from this environment into a totally different one when she marries Gautama. Maya and Gautama represent two different approaches to life: Maya is a dreamer and a romantic; Gautama is a man of practical wisdom

who entertains no illusions. Maya loves life intensely and values every little experience of life; Gautama deals with life as if it were a chore and hardly takes note of the small desires of Maya. In an Indian marriage man is not expected to make any adjustments to make the relationship work; the woman is supposed to make all the adjustments and make the marriage a success somehow. The entire onus of sustaining the marital bond lies on the woman and this creates a great deal of stress for her. Husband and family occupy the entire emotional space of women while wife is part of life for man. This essential asymmetry in the marital relationship is the cause of many conflicts that arise in the lives of married women and men. Many of Desai's married women like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Nanda in *Fire in the Mountain*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, become depressed, violent or self-destructive. They either lose their sanity and kill others, or they kill or destroy themselves. "The nemesis of these women is not a private one but an outgrowth of the complex social context, immediate family environments and the relationships with their men" (Singh 94).

Thus, *Cry, the Peacock* is the story of a woman who feels suffocated in the entrapment of home. Influenced intrinsically and intensively by cross-cultural family situation, she finds herself in the emotional and psychological cobweb woven around her by the albino astrologer, the father and the husband. The prediction of the albino astrologer, though, has vital impact in influencing the emotion of Maya; it is the emotionally volatile and fluid familial situation- both at the father's place and the husband's place- that defeats all her efforts of achieving psychological and emotional emancipation. Therefore, *Cry, the Peacock*, establishes unequivocally, how an imbalanced familial situation can lead to the collapse of all familial relations and results in catastrophe for everyone.

An effort to understand the source of family imbalance reveals the failure of intra family communication as a major cause for this. As already mentioned in the earlier chapters of this work, renowned philosopher, Jiddu Krishna Murthy thinks that free and fair communication is "possible only when the individuals involved share common concern with the subject." Otherwise, at least the people involved in the dialogue should have enough maturity to differ with each other in a healthy way. Intimate communication is the very basis of human relation and the cardinal principle of family life.

The family system in India, which is stringently hierarchized, is traditionally known for stifling communication among the members of the family. The status of women, with respect to free communication, is worse except, in the matters relating to religion and festive rituals. Thus, patriarchal hierarchy that percolated deep into the institution of family impairs intimate communication. Moreover, because of the strict demarcation of gender roles there would hardly be any common subjects for communication. As the worlds of men and women are totally different with very little overlap, certain amount of silence between them becomes inevitable.

The issues of patriarchy and communication acquire significance in the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, particularly for comprehending the tragic predicament of the central character – Maya. Her major problem is: she has no female companion with who she can share her emotions. She loses her mother early in life and is reared by her father. Her only sibling is a male and he has neither time nor space for her. After her marriage she goes to live with Gautama in a large and isolated home where her only companion is her pet dog. She is always on the margins of a male dominated world. In her father's home she is reared in a rarefied atmosphere but is always kept protected. She is not allowed to develop emotional stability or maturity to deal with her adult life. The excess and blind love of the father and the ruthless pragmatism of Guatama are equally responsible for the tragedy of Maya.

*Cry, the Peacock* is the story of Maya and her married life with Gautama. There are three parts in the novel: part I describes the death of Maya's favorite dog Toto and the municipal truck taking away the carcass of the dog. This part highlights the inner vacuum that Maya experiences which is reflected through the metaphor of Toto's death and consequent response of Maya. Part III deals with the situation after the death of Gautama and the decision of taking Maya to an asylum. The main story of the novel is in Part II, which describes the marital life of Maya and Gautama, in the city of Delhi.

Maya, born in an aristocratic family is the only daughter of a senior lawyer of Lucknow, Rai Sahib. She loses her mother at very young age and her only brother Arjuna leaves home revolting against the authority of the father. As a result, she becomes the sole

object of father's attention, love and affection. He creates an epicurean ambience consisting of Gazals and garden parties to keep Maya happy. However, Maya's childhood is largely spent in solitude in the absence of familial network. The only family she has is her father. So she grows with an almost obsessive attachment to her father. Later, Maya gets married to Gautama, who is twice her age because she is primarily looking for a father surrogate. Gautama is kind and affectionate, but fails to understand the emotional requirements of Maya because of the basic incompatibility of their temperaments. Owing to the age gap and owing to the difference in wavelengths, Maya and Gautama fail to strike a common chord. Gautama, a successful lawyer, is so busy building up his career that he has neither time nor energy to understand the emotional and psychological pressures to which his young wife is gradually succumbing. The death of Toto, the pet dog of Maya, marks the first major emotional crisis in their lives. Toto's death comes as a rude shock to Maya while it is an insignificant happening of little consequence for Gautama. Maya is shocked by the stark indifference of Gautama and she feels utterly alienated. The solitude and silence of the house preys upon her and she yields to hallucinations and fantasies. As a girl she had gone to an astrologer Albino Eyes, who prophesied the death of her husband in the fourth year of their marriage. This also creates a lot of tension in her. Lonely and friendless, haunted by fear of some impending disaster, Maya begins to suffer from insomnia and depression. She spends most of her time in a sort of semi-delirium. Gautama fails to understand the causes for the emotional disequilibrium of Maya. Communication gap and matrimonial incompatibility steadily grow between Maya and Gautama. All their attempts at serious conversation fail to find a meeting point. Three years they live together, there is no significant change in either Gautama or Maya. And one day there is dust storm, followed by a few drops of rain. Gautama, as usual is oblivious of everything. They go up to the roof, each orbiting a different world. Both of them move towards the low parapet's edge. Gautama inadvertently moves in front of her blocking Maya's view of the moon. Maya plunges into a sudden frenzy and pushes him over the parapet and this results in the instantaneous death of Gautama. Three days later Gautama's mother and sister take her to her father's house at Lucknow and it is understood that she would be taken to an asylum.

Owen M Lynch in his celebrated book *The Divine Passions* dealing with the anatomy of emotion states that, "emotions are essentially appraisals-----judgments of situations



based on cultural beliefs and values” (8). He considers that emotions are learned or acquired in the society and therefore, emotions would have far reaching impact on the behavior on an individual or a society. He thinks that emotions are “rational, not irrational, uncontrollable, eruption within the natural self. “Emotions are essentially cognitively based appraisals of situation” (9). This insight is helpful in understanding the emotional turbulence experienced by Maya. The essential crisis in the novel stems from the dismissal of Maya’s emotions by Gautama as psychic aberration without ever making an attempt to appreciate or understand them. Total failure of communication between wife and husband, absence of any other member of the family who could have acted as a conduit for communication precipitate the tragedy in the lives of Maya and Gautama.

Maya represents the vulnerability of women to neurosis. Insanity and schizophrenia occur as recurring concerns in women’s texts as well as woman centered texts. Reasons for this are obvious: women traditionally condemned to silence in the male dominated world bottle up their emotions, keeping a cool exterior for public eye. This suppression of emotions creates psychic stress, which eventually affects the equilibrium of the mind. Anita Desai offers a poignant study of woman’s silence and psychosis in her portrayal of Maya. It is pertinent to recall Juliet Mitchell’s observation in this context:

I think the novel arose as the form in which women had to construct themselves as women within new social structures; the woman novelist is necessarily the hysteric wanting to repudiate the symbolic definition of sexual difference under patriarchal law. (391)

Women writers’ portrayal of female insanity provides us with useful insights into psychological factors that affect the mental health of women in a patriarchal society. As Phyllis Chesler argues persuasively in his influential work on female insanity: Women and Madness, “women do not suffer from mental illness because they are the weaker sex, but rather due to men’s fear of losing power and female suppression.” In the case of women nervous breakdown occurs as a reaction to oppression and silencing. Maya’s predicament illustrates this finding.

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