

***Cry, the Peacock* (1963)**

Story This harrowing and beautiful novel was the first novel by Anita Desai. It tells the story of Maya, the daughter of a rich lawyer in Lucknow, India. She lives a happy, care-free childhood, pampered by her father, but she then loses her mother to an early death. When her brother also leaves her to pursue a new life in the US, she begins to feel alone. When she shows signs of neurosis, the family doctor advises the father to protect her from reality, by telling her fairy tales and surrounding her with beautiful things. Maya feels vulnerable and is haunted by a prediction of an astrologer made years earlier: Either you or your husband, he told her, will die within four years of your marriage. She marries Gautama, her father's friend, another lawyer and much older than she. From the beginning we see their incompatibility. She is highly strung, emotional, sensitive, loves animals and art, whereas he is rational, detached and cerebral. The distance between them grows also because he is too involved in his profession to give her attention, the attention she had from her father and that she expects from her husband. The marital disharmony reaches crisis point because Gautama expects his wife to act rationally, and she feels that he does not understand her. The father did not tell Gautama about her childhood neurosis, fearing that such a revelation would scare him off. After four years of unhappy marriage, Maya realises that the astrologer's prediction is about to come true and she fears that she will die. Now she falls into long psychotic hallucinations and bouts of madness, which brief visits to a friend or a restaurant do not halt. Then she remembers that the astrologer also told her about the peacock's cry, the wild shrieking for a lover, which she associates also with a cry for death. We see Maya descend into total madness when she relieves her agony by shifting the predicted death from herself to her husband. Then she plans to murder him, not because she hates him but because she loves life. In the frenzied conclusion, Gautama comes home late on the day of a fierce dust storm, which he did not even notice. Maya leads him to terrace on the roof so they can enjoy some fresh air. Going up the stairs, her cat rushes by them in a fright, and she sees a statue of Shiva in his manifestation of creation and destruction. Up on the roof, she is enraptured by the 'pale hushed glow of the rising moon.' When Gautama moves in front of her, blocking the moon from her view, she pushes him over the parapet and he falls to his death. Her father comes and removes the completely insane Maya from the scene. Later, Maya commits suicide by jumping from another balcony.

Characters

Maya Maya ('illusion') is the protagonist of this disturbing story of mental illness. She is an innocent but spoiled child who is later haunted by a prediction of her or her husband's death. She is a person led by instinct and emotion, unable to separate herself from the world and the people around her.

Gautama Gautama, her husband, and older man and a lawyer, is the polar opposite. Gautama is the name of the historical Buddha, and like his namesake, Maya's husband is rational, impassive and detached, though unfortunately not particularly wise. Although kind, he is incapable of understanding his highly strung, young wife.

Rai Sahib Rai Sahib is Maya's father, who loses his wife at an early age and loves his daughter all the more in compensation. Having noticed Maya's neurotic behaviour and having been advised by a doctor, he spoils her and insulates her from any unpleasant experiences. He is referred to only as 'father', which underlines his role in the drama as a figure rather than an individual.

Themes

Love The overriding theme of this sorrowful novel is love, parental love maternal love and conjugal love. The author explores the necessity of love in childhood, suggesting its supreme importance to the development of a balanced individual. Maya's mother dies when Maya is young, which is a loss that haunts her throughout her life. Maternal love is also absent when Maya grows up and gets married: she remains childless. (It may or may not be significant that the novel is dedicated to the author's mother.) Another problem is the excessive love from her father, who attempts to compensate for the loss of the mother. While the father's reaction is understandable, we feel it is harmful, and there is more than a hint of a Freudian father-fixation by Maya. The more destructive factor, however, is the lack of love from Maya's husband. Gautama is kind, but that tepid emotion is not what Maya wants.

The sensual, sensitive Maya wants something more than 'normal' affection and physical love; she craves a 'touch that goes deeper than the flesh.' Maya herself is in love with nature, enraptured by its colours, surfaces and smells.

Madness The loss of love in childhood, the departure of a beloved brother, the lack of love in marriage and the absence of a child as an object of a mother's love are what drive Maya to her murderous madness. The 'mad woman' is a well-known trope in western literature, but not so common in Indian fiction, traditional or modern. Desai's novel, first published in 1963, is the first and one of the finest portraits of the psychology of an Indian woman, abandoned, lost and alienated, who ends up in a state of insanity. The key to Maya's illness is not just the vague lack of love but a more defined state of loneliness and isolation. Here, the symbol of the peacock's cry is significant. Its wild shrieking (a good parallel to the cries of the insane) is associated with mating and death, as Maya tells the reader: 'In the shadows I saw the peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing...upon the final truth—Death. I heard their cry and I echoed it. I felt their...their passion as they hunted for their mates.'