

CRY, THE PEACOCK

Anita Desai

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.

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.'

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

MAYA (Haunted)

Character Maya is the daughter of a lawyer in a major city. Even in the beginning of the story, we see that she is a neurotic young woman, haunted by loss and death. She lost her mother to an early death, then her brother leaves her and goes abroad and, on the first page of the novel, her pet dog dies. And, as if this wasn't enough, she is terrified by the prediction of an astrologer that either she or her husband would die within four years of their marriage. She also wants warmth and love, which she got from her father, but which her husband is capable of showing. She laments to herself that '[n]o one, no one else, loves me as my father does.' Her frustration with her husband builds throughout the novel, during which becomes more and more terrified that the time for the astrologer's prediction to come true is approaching. She is an extremely sensitive and sensuous person, who wants 'contact that goes deeper than the flesh.' She is affected deeply by colours and by nature, especially the call of birds, such as the peacock. Maya is affected by all this to the point of psychosis, and later total madness, because she is a sensitive person, who feels rapport with plants and nature. In the end, haunted by the prediction and all alone, she becomes a murderess.

Activities As a young girl, Maya plays in the garden, often with her widowed father. She has the imagination to turn objects into playthings and ordinary sadness into nightmares. After her marriage, she is often alone in a big house, which adds to her terror. Once or twice, she goes out to visit a friend or to her husband's family home, but most of the time she broods at home, inside or in the garden.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive A poignant illustration of Maya's character occurs in the very first scene of the book, when her pet dog dies. She loves all animals, but especially Toto, perhaps even more so because she is childless. The death shatters her, weakens her and throws her back into terrible memories of the past. She 'saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes...It was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps, as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair.'

Sensual Maya's world is the world of the senses: colours, tastes, physical sensations and images. The contrast between her sensual world and her husband's intellectual world is brought out in a scene where she has suggested they take a holiday to south India, rather than to the hills. When he shows not interest, she tries to fire his imagination. 'But I thought you'd be more interested in that [dances in the south] than the hills...it must be such a marvellous sight, so...so violent and...bizarre.' I groped for the word painfully. The vision was so excruciating in its vividness to me...'The masks they wear, and the costumes. And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight...and perhaps they have torches.' After her breathless description, her husband only says that it would be less expensive to wait for a dance performance in Delhi.

Isolated Maya is isolated from the normal social world, both by her own desire to withdraw and by convention that does not encourage women to be 'in the world.' The pain of her isolation is conveyed during a scene when she visits her friend, Pom. This is one of her very few times that she goes out of the house to be with people. Maya is surprised when her friend takes her to a temple because, Pom explains, she is pregnant and she is praying for a son. The childless Maya then says to herself, 'After that, I ceased to hunt, ceased to plan, and merely laid my face into those cool cloths, odorous with camphor and lavender, that recalled mountain waters to me, and ferns, and nights full of stars, for I found myself alone with them after all.'

GAUTAMA (Cold)

Character Gautama is a lawyer who marries Maya, but he is more the friend of his wife's father than he is her husband. He is described as 'tall, stooped and knowledgeable.' He is a rational person, uninterested in emotions, only reality or facts. When Maya challenges him for only feeling 'bored' at a party and not registering anything stronger, he defends himself by saying that the boredom was just a fact. 'Facts are made to be accepted and to be studied,' he says. 'Not to be wept over.' He is totally devoted to his work as a lawyer and shows little interest in his wife as a person. He is forever finding reasons, mostly financial, not to agree to her plans for doing things outside their normal routine. He is kind to her, according to his own lights, especially in external things. He gives her an opal ring, but 'does not see blue and flashing veins of pleasure every time I wear it.' He brings her a cup of tea when her pet dog dies, not realising the depth of her despair. He takes care of her when she is ill, has headaches or lies in the bed with some kind of 'female ailment.' Despite this superficial kindness, he is censorious and constantly tells her to 'sit up' or 'change your sari.' When she tells him that her does not love her, he is puzzled.

Activities Gautama spends long hours in his office, not only the one in the city but also the one in his home. Clients come in the morning and evening, bringing him more cases. He sometimes goes to visit his parents or friends. He also reads not only case law but also religious texts, like the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Illustrative moments

Cold The cold distance that Gautama puts between himself and his young wife is displayed early in their marriage. It is the beginning of the hot season, when people who can afford it often go up into the cool hills of the Himalayas. He has forbidden Maya, his wife, to speak about summer holidays because he can't take them: he is, he says, too busy with work. Forgetting his injunction one day, Maya says, 'Let's go on a holiday,' and he says, " 'Why don't you? Your father can take you wherever you want to go.' 'Can't you get away for a short time?' Maya asks. 'Unlikely,' he says, snapping open his cigarette case with a metallic click that matched his voice.' "

External Gautama is a man without access to the interior world of emotions and feelings. Everything is seen and experienced in terms of the 'nuts and bolts' of the measurable, external world. This is a world that Maya does not understand or appreciate, as we hear in her description: 'In Gautama's [lawyer] family, they did not talk of love, far less of affection. One spoke--they spoke--of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel...sometimes, in order to relax, they played cards. But they played so intensely that they found they had to release the mounting pressure by conversing and began to talk again of politics and government.'

Practical Gautama's extreme pragmatism is seen throughout the novel, in his profession and at home. A clear demonstration of this outlook is given in the first scene, when his wife's pet dog dies. While she is shattered and lies in tears, he takes control. 'He was very late,' Maya tells the reader, 'but as soon as he came, he did all that had to be done, quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work. He telephoned the Public Works Department, he had them send their scavenging truck to take

the corpse away.' Then he wiped his fingers on his handkerchief, still in neat folds, and calmly told his still-grieving wife that all she needs is 'a cup of tea.'

RAI SAHIB (Disciplined)

Character Rai Sahib is a retired lawyer, who was educated in England and later spent time in prison during the fight against the British for Independence. He is also Maya's father. Beyond these bare facts, we know little about him. One reason for this is that the novel is narrated in the first person by Maya, who only refers to him as 'father.' His personal name is used only once, by a friend—otherwise we would not know what he is called. He is portrayed as 'the father', without much depth of character, because that is how he is perceived by Maya, whose disturbed psychology is at the heart of this searing drama. Given his legal training, it is not surprising that Rai Sahib is a very disciplined man, who loves order, patterns, habits and repetitions. But he is also an indulgent father, at least toward his daughter, Maya, if not toward his son, Arjuna. His overprotective tendencies, which could be understood as an extension of his desire for control, increase with the death of his wife. Now he plays the role of father and mother, looking after Maya with constant affection and perhaps too much interference. His affection can come across as the sweet attention of an older father, but for Maya it has dire consequences.

Activities Rai Sahib spends a lot of time maintaining his garden, which becomes his arena for discipline in his retirement. He inspects it every day and gets into long discussions with his gardener, pointing out problems and suggesting solutions. He also likes to have his breakfast in the garden, where he can watch his young daughter play shuttle-cock or he can peel fruit before handing it to her. Clients sometimes come to him for advice, either in his study or again in the garden. In the evenings, he often reads poetry, usually Urdu poetry, with friends.

Illustrative moments

Disciplined As a retired lawyer, Maya's father might be expected to appreciate order and predictability, but he has a very pronounced, almost pathological, need for discipline. An excellent display of this characteristic occurs very early in the story, when Maya is thinking back to her childhood. She and her father (her mother has died) are having breakfast in the garden when a 'woman with loose straggling hair' arrives, sits in a wicker chair and sobs. After she has gone, with 'all the advice that he has found it prudent to give to a wife of a friend,' Rai Sahib speaks to Maya. He explains that he is appalled at how humans beings can be 'a magnet for disorder and failure. Disorder. I really cannot tolerate it.' Then, shaking his head, he neatly folds his napkin. 'As one neat crisp white square settles upon the other, one long crease straightens and flows into the next, so do his thoughts.' His desire for discipline is likened to the formal design of a Mughal garden, with not a single flower out of place.

Affectionate The second prominent trait in the father's personality is his affection for Maya, his daughter. Having lost her mother at an early age, Maya is mothered and fathered by the father, who seems to relish the role. The potentially dangerous undercurrent of his affection is brought out in another scene with Maya and her father in the garden. She has just heard him speak angrily to a client, call him 'a charlatan', when he turns to her with a broad smile and 'crinkled eyes.' He takes her arm, which makes her warm inside, and says, 'Where shall we go this summer, Maya?' Maya thinks to herself, 'They say he spoils me. That I can get anything I want from him.' Then she blurts out, 'Darjeeling [a hill station in the low Himalayas]. I want to go to Darjeeling.' Her father readily agrees and the pattern is then set. She loves her indulgent father deeply, too deeply, the novel suggests, for later she is unable to form a bond with the husband whom he has chosen for her.

Cold The father's constant affection for his daughter is in sharp contrast to his cold relations with his son, Arjuna. Arjuna sometimes stays away from home for hours, or even a day or two, which angers the father. On one such occasion, his father speaks sternly and asks where he has been. 'I should like an exact account,' he says and Maya [as the first-person narrator] comments that she would have liked her father not 'to be so cold, so terse, so grim. With me he never was, and I noted the difference with anxiety.' When Arjuna says he's been with a friend, and it turns out the friend is a Muslim, the father's 'lips grew narrower and tighter as his fastidious fingers folded away the newspaper.' Then the father speaks to his son with a punitive tone, ridiculing him and ordering him not to leave the house for three days. The father's cruel coldness, it is suggested, is the flip side of his admirable discipline.