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## ***A Psychological Study on Female Autonomy in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock and Bharati Mukherjee's Wife***

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the psychological breakdown, marital conflict, and quest for selfhood as reflected in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, positioning both narratives within the wider scope of Comparative Literature. While the discipline emerged historically as a cross-cultural mode of literary evaluation, its relevance in India grows from the nation's multilingual landscape and its rich tradition of narrative fiction. Through a comparative reading, the paper examines how Maya and Dimple two women separated by geography yet united by emotional disquiet navigate marriage, identity, and mental disintegration. Maya's world fractures under the weight of prophecy, unmet longing, and a life locked within rational detachment. Dimple, conversely, is propelled by material aspirations and the dream of fulfilment through migration, only to find that displacement leaves her further adrift. Their eventual recourse to violence is not an impulsive act, but the climax of prolonged inner conflict where suppressed desires surface with destructive clarity. Desai's narrative reveals a consciousness unable to negotiate between instinct and isolation, while Mukherjee portrays the impact of cultural transition and the hollowness beneath desire. The comparative frame underscores how patriarchal structures, emotional neglect, and psychological vulnerability shape women's resistance in modern Indian fiction. Both novels ultimately portray the inner war between submission and self-assertion, suggesting that rebellion, even in its most disturbing form, is an expression of agency forced into silence.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Maya, Dimple, psychological breakdown, identity, patriarchy, resistance.

### **Origins and Growth of Comparative Literature**

The idea of *Comparative Literature* was first articulated by the eminent Victorian thinker and critic Matthew Arnold. He introduced the expression to signify the study of literary texts in relation to one another, across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Scholars from different contexts approached the field with varying aims. The German critics, for instance, explored folk narratives with deep academic commitment, paying particular attention to recurring motifs. Their work led to the identification of 'thematic universals,' thereby laying the foundation for thematology within Comparative Literary Studies.

Today, Comparative Literature has evolved into an expanding academic discipline. Nations such as France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, as well as several Eastern countries like Japan, have incorporated it into their educational frameworks. In the Indian context, Jadavpur University was the pioneering institution to introduce Comparative Literature as a formal subject, and several Indian universities now follow this academic trajectory at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In a multicultural nation like India, where numerous languages coexist and creative writing flourishes in diverse literary traditions, Comparative Literature holds immense relevance. Scholars and critics increasingly acknowledge the scope and promise of this vibrant and multidisciplinary field.

Comparison itself is a fundamental human impulse shaped by lived experience; naturally, it finds expression in literary perception and aesthetic judgement. What began as a mode of literary appreciation in the West has now expanded into a global academic practice. A work becomes *comparative* when the act of comparison is undertaken in a structured manner whether through examining themes, genres, literary movements, or even through the study of two literary systems beyond national limitations, often aided by translation. Thus, Comparative Literature serves as a bridge, enabling the movement of literary ideas, forms, and expressions across languages and cultural borders.

#### **Status of Fiction in Indian Writing in English**

Fiction, as a dominant and expressive literary medium, has secured a remarkable place within Indian English Literature often referred to as *Indian Writing in English*. It is widely acknowledged that the novel has become the most effective form for capturing experiences, social realities, and intellectual concerns of the modern Indian condition. As a creative art, fiction both records and reflects the cultural and social environment of its time, and a large body of Indian English novels and short stories stands as evidence of the capacity of Indian writers to excel in narrative prose. Because the novel often functions as a document of social history, charting shifts in customs and cultural patterns, Indian authors have achieved greater distinction in fiction than in poetry or drama, both in scope and volume.

The fiction of Anita Desai represents a refined and distinctive stage in the evolution of Indian English narrative. When she entered the literary scene in the 1960s, the field had already been strengthened by pioneering writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. The decade preceding her arrival also witnessed the rise of prominent women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who stood alongside male writers of equal stature Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, and K.A. Abbas. These writers continued to grapple with the enduring legacy of colonial rule, addressing its profound sociopolitical and cultural repercussions. In addition to colonial and post-colonial dialogues, Nayantara Sahgal's fiction especially highlighted the strained emotional dynamics within arranged marriages and articulated the woman's desire for emotional, personal, and intellectual autonomy within a patriarchal framework.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta on 27 July 1940. Her father, Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, a Brahmin by caste, managed a pharmaceutical manufacturing enterprise, while her mother was Bina Banerjee. Mukherjee later migrated and acquired

American citizenship in 1988. Since then, she has resided in San Francisco and has served as a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

Her literary oeuvre comprises six novels, two collections of short stories, and two non-fiction works co-authored with Clark Blaise. *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) retraces the couple's year-long stay in Calcutta during 1973–74, while *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987) memorializes the 329 victims of the Air India crash in Ireland in June 1985, an attack attributed to Sikh extremists. In addition to these works, Mukherjee has contributed numerous essays, interviews, and journalistic writings, further establishing her presence in contemporary literary discourse.

#### **Comparative Study of *Cry, the Peacock and Wife***

In *Cry, the Peacock and Wife*, one observes a striking parallel in the core incidents that shape the narrative trajectory. Both Anita Desai's Maya and Bharati Mukherjee's Dimple ultimately commit the extreme act of murdering their husbands. This violent climax emerges not abruptly, but as the final phase of a slow psychological breakdown. Maya's agony in *Cry, the Peacock* stems from her conviction that yielding her identity results in a loss of personal autonomy and completeness. Her craving for emotional intimacy coexists paradoxically with a fear of emotional entanglement. A part of Maya's misery arises from circumstances outside herself her upbringing in an excessively protective and insulated environment, which leaves her unprepared to confront the complex demands of adult life. Her pronounced Oedipal attachment to her father makes her seek in her husband Gautama a paternal figure, a desire impossible to fulfil and one which disrupts marital intimacy. Further, her unshakable faith in the albino astrologer's prediction that one spouse would die in the fourth year of marriage intensifies her anxiety. More disturbing than the prophecy it is the manner in which her father suppresses the episode by expelling the ayah and dismissing the astrologer. Maya internalizes the fear deeply, burying it beneath her conscious awareness.

The death of her pet dog Toto becomes a catalyst, reviving dormant anxieties and drawing her once more into the terror of the foretold death. Gradually, a network of emotional, psychological and circumstantial pressures erodes her stability. Yet Maya's despair is rooted not merely in external forces but also in her own heightened sensitivity. She belongs to that fragile category of individuals poised uneasily between rationality and irrationality drawn simultaneously towards the splendour of life and paralysed by the spectre of death.

Desai constructs Maya's world on two planes: the outward physical life and the turbulent inner life.

Externally, existence holds little meaning for Maya, for the deep emotional connection, empathy, and shared consciousness she yearns for remain absent. She and Gautama are temperamentally mismatched, and the absence of mutual understanding breeds alienation, disappointment, and a profound solitude that borders on existential despair. As Maya's neurotic anxiety intensifies, the boundary that separates normality from madness begins to dissolve. A particularly moving dimension of this psychological portrayal is Maya's awareness of her mental collapse she is conscious of her descent yet is powerless to avert it. The moment at which she transfers the burden of the ominous prophecy from herself to Gautama cannot be precisely located; suicidal fantasies slowly transform into murderous determination. In the end, Gautama's death becomes inevitable.

In Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, the conflict that emerges between Dimple and her husband Amit Basu springs primarily from their lack of emotional communication and their failure to reconcile themselves to practical realities. Unlike Maya who possesses an inherently rebellious temperament and resists conventional norms even in trivial matters like clothing Dimple is less complex, driven largely by materialistic aspirations. Her dreams revolve around comfort, luxury, and the prospect of marrying a neurosurgeon an ambition that is both unusual and revealing. Instead, she marries Amit, an engineer who is eager to migrate to the United States in search of better prospects. Her monotonous life in Calcutta cultivates dissatisfaction within her, yet the anguish she feels is not as deep-rooted or existentially intense as the psychological suffering that torments Maya.

Amit eventually succeeds in moving to America, but Dimple soon discovers that the glamorous world she imagined is far removed from reality. Success proves slow, life demands perseverance, and she lacks the emotional fortitude to cope with hardship. Her very name, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a slight surface depression," symbolically reflects her superficial emotional makeup. To attribute her crisis merely to cultural displacement would be reductive, for the roots of her breakdown reach far deeper than the struggle of assimilation.

Dimple, like Maya, experiences psychological disturbance, though the sources of their instability diverge. Both novelists portray depression with remarkable subtlety and insight. The progressive movement from disillusionment to frustration, the emergence of neurosis, and the gradual intensification of psychological strain until the boundary of sanity ruptures this underlying pattern forms a thematic convergence in both texts.

### **Violence as Liberation and Collapse**

Both protagonists endure prolonged mental suffer-

ing, robbed of serenity or balance. In *Wife*, Mukherjee amplifies this turmoil through the omnipresent violence of American society, where discussions of murder become as commonplace as conversations about weather. Anita Desai similarly highlights the latent aggression embedded in modern urban life. While Maya resigns herself to a barren marital existence, Dimple attempts to validate her femininity through an affair with Milt Glasser, only to realize that it deepens her dissatisfaction. The final act of homicide unfolds in vastly different stylistic modes in the two narratives. Maya, in a disturbingly calm and methodical manner, premeditates and executes Gautama's murder. With a disquieting clarity of purpose often exhibited in madness, she leads him to the terrace and, in a moment of violent impulse triggered by his obstruction of her connection to moonlight, pushes him to his death. She later persuades herself that since Gautama was emotionally detached from life, death merely releases him from existence without consequence. Her complete psychological breakdown, reversion to childhood, and eventual demise are rendered with remarkable intensity and compactness. In contrast, Dimple's act of killing Amit unfolds with hazy ambiguity, enveloped in a psychologically charged atmosphere that borders on the surreal:

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, and then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder. (W 212-13)

One cannot help but speculate whether Dimple's act of stabbing Amit seven times represents a distorted reflection of the traditional marriage ritual, in which husband and wife walk seven symbolic steps together. It appears as though she attempts to reverse or nullify that sacred bond through the violent repetition of the number seven.

Both Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* thus foreground the theme of psychological collapse, though each writer approaches it with distinct variations. The concern with disintegration in these narratives extends beyond the personal tragedy of Maya and Dimple. In Mukherjee's portrayal, Dimple's emotional and mental breakdown seems to speak not only of an individual's cultural dislocation but also of larger concerns surrounding migration and identity. Desai, on the other hand, delves deeply into the existential solitude of her protagonist, illuminating the stark absurdity that often defines human existence.

Maya, almost from the opening pages of the novel, remains haunted by the astrologer's ominous prediction. According to the prophecy, either she or Gautama would die in the fourth year of their marriage. Her father dismisses the forecast as irrational nonsense and insists that it be forgotten. Maya suppresses it obediently, burying the fear deep within her subconscious. However, as her marriage approaches its fourth year, the memory re-surfaces, and with the sudden death of her pet dog, Toto, this repressed anxiety blossoms into a full-blown neurosis. It slowly consumes her inner world, like a voracious insect eating through delicate foliage.

### **Freud's View Applied to Maya**

It is peculiar that Maya, who understands well that Gautama and his family ridicule superstitions, clings with such rigidity to the fatal prediction. At first, she convinces herself that she is the one destined to die. Yet her passionate attachment to life prevents her from accepting this calmly. Gradually she begins to imagine that the danger may lie not with her but with Gautama instead. As this thought strengthens, she becomes more fearful, more possessive of the secret, determined to guard it from everyone regardless of consequence.

She insists that Gautama must never suspect the secret she carries *not even faintly*, for if he ever became aware of it, dangers would flare up suddenly like hidden fires bursting through parched earth. She even wonders fearfully whether Gautama, if he ever discovered the truth, might turn into a threat to her own existence, for he too, like her, cherished life intensely (151). Gradually, she convinces herself that Gautama, not she, is the one destined to die, and this belief makes her increasingly guarded and withdrawn.

*I stole glances at him, stealthily, for secrecy had become second nature to me, burdened as I was with dark and unspeakable thoughts that had to be concealed from him terrible, shameful thoughts (165).*

Although some critics maintain that Maya clings to the astrologer's prophecy because it carries a romantic aura, a psychoanalytic perspective opens a new interpretative dimension. Freud proposes that superstition arises out of repressed aggression. He argues that in neurotics, especially those dominated by obsessive thoughts, superstition often emerges from deeply buried hostile impulses. According to Freud, one who has unconsciously harboured cruel wishes yet has been socially conditioned to appear virtuous tends to expect punishment for those unacknowledged impulses, and therefore foresees disaster as something imposed from the outside world (Freud 1974: 232).

If we apply this lens to Maya, her superstition may likewise be rooted in suppressed hostility. Out-

wardly she appears docile dutiful daughter, devoted sister, compliant wife and therefore accusing her of latent cruelty may initially seem incongruous. Yet an exploration of her unconscious reveals a heavy accumulation of repressed resentment toward Gautama, and to some degree toward her father. Intensely responsive to instinct (16), Maya subconsciously holds Gautama responsible for her unfulfilled emotional and physical needs. After four years of marriage, she confronts the grim truth that she cannot secure from him the intimacy she yearns for. As insecurity over her identity and self-worth intensifies, she perceives Gautama's death as a means of preserving herself. The prophecy becomes a convenient external justification for this unconscious wish, which explains her fierce attachment to it. Before returning to her belief in fate, it is necessary to dwell briefly on why Maya might desire Gautama's death.

Maya embodies raw instinctual energy, craving deep physical and emotional union. In Freudian terms, a psychologically balanced person might redirect or sublimate these urges internally. Maya, however, is unable to detach herself from her instinctual life her very sense of being depends on it. She anticipates fulfilment in marriage, but neither emotional warmth nor sexual satisfaction is granted to her one denied by Gautama's serene rationality, the other by his age and detachment. Her sensual appetite is smothered by his steady recitations of *Gita* philosophy and the ideal of non-attachment.

He regards life dispassionately, "nothing subjectively, nothing with passion" (150), whereas for Maya even the lightest touch floods her with tenderness and gratitude (11). A simple caress ignites in her the primal ecstasy of first love (11). When Gautama remains unaffected by her beauty, she grows resentful toward herself. She is left to battle with the painful ache of unreturned affection.

In *The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels*, a comparative reading of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Wife* suggests that Dimple's neurosis is insufficiently developed in contrast to Maya's, whose emotional framework revolves around intense sensitivity and personal feeling (17). Likewise, S. Indira in *Exploration of Inner Space* studies both protagonists and concludes that Maya and Dimple are "neurotic and solipsistic individuals" (59). She further remarks that their morbidity does not emerge from marriage alone but is inherent within them (61).

### **Feminine Identity, Rebellion, and Selfhood**

A critical reading of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates how both authors negotiate the struggle for women's selfhood within rigid patriarchal frameworks. Their fiction often emerges as a deliberate response to the overwhelming authority of a masculine social order, and the voices they create in their narratives reflect a refusal to

remain passive or voiceless. Their protagonists speak from a place of personal consciousness, continuously negotiating the meaning of their existence both within the boundaries of marriage and beyond domestic spaces. Each woman-character carries traces of a disturbed or unusual childhood, a past that breeds self-doubt, fractured identity, and a deep-seated sense of alienation. Such psychological fractures compel them to perceive the external world as threatening and inhospitable. For Maya, the household is not a sanctuary, but a confining enclosure where her individuality is suppressed and slowly erased. Her distaste for domesticity and the emotional dissensions of married life push her towards loneliness, hinting at an unwillingness to accept the prescribed order of life. This emotional suffocation leads to fear, insecurity, and the urgent need to reclaim a sense of self in the shadow of dominance.

Their search for identity thus becomes a negotiation through difference an attempt to establish autonomy rather than dissolve into patriarchal sameness. Maya resists being absorbed into gendered uniformity instead, she asserts her individuality through internal struggle: against herself, against inherited customs, against the bewildering pressures of culture, and against her own rising hopes and longings. These women do eventually discover a voice of resistance, yet only after contending with violent confrontations within the self-confrontations shaped by how society sees them as silent, exotic, other, and subdued. The psychological turbulence surfaces outwardly: Maya's and Dimple's acts of murder, coupled with the suggestion of alternative sexual expression, become symbolic eruptions of suppressed rage. Their spirit of rebellion is rooted in the fact that they are products of a culture that historically disciplines women into silence, causing their eventual awakening to take the form of reclaiming the body and sexuality as a space for self-expression. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's desperate yearning for affection and emotional acknowledgment in her barren marriage becomes an early stage of her revolt. The contrast between Maya's need for emotional attachment and Gautama's stoic detachment echoes the dynamic between Sindi and June in *The Foreigner*, where distance becomes the catalyst for tragedy. Gautama's aloofness frustrates Maya's profound need for intimacy and gradually silences the peacock's cry within her. In *Wife*, Dimple's private attempt to terminate her pregnancy becomes an act of self-birth a rebellion against unmet expectations and shrinking hope. Ultimately, the women's journey toward selfhood is not gentle; it is an unsettling mix of exhilaration and terror, marked by uncertainty, error, inner conflict, and at times, violent rupture.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee do not merely narrate the mental disintegration of women; they transform it into a cultural commentary on how society moulds, suppresses, and finally breaks the individual female self. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Dimple in *Wife* stand on different emotional grounds and live through different worlds, yet both are driven by an unfulfilled hunger for tenderness, recognition, and a space to breathe as whole human beings. When these needs remain unheard, their desperation takes the shape of violence not as an impulsive act, but as the final fracture of a long-strained psyche.

Seen this way, the murders in the two novels become less about crime and more about the muted cry for selfhood. The narratives expose a social order that grants affection as obligation and demands silence as virtue, leaving women to negotiate identity through pain rather than choice. By bringing Maya and Dimple to the edge of collapse, Desai and Mukherjee invite readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that madness is often born from loneliness, and rebellion from prolonged invisibility. Together, the two texts reveal how the disturbed mind can become the only voice strong enough to challenge what society insists on calling normal.

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