
Tracing the Intricate Threads: Parent-child relationship in the context of Anita Desai's novel

Neha Dhanopiya¹Dr. Hitkaran Singh Ranawat²

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sangam University, Rajasthan, India

Associate Professor, Department of English, Sangam University, Rajasthan, India

Article Received: 25/07/2025**Article Accepted:** 27/08/2025**Published Online:** 27/08/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.08.450

Abstract

This paper analyses the Parent-child relationship in the novels of Indian writer Anita Desai. This paper will highlight the Parent-child relationship in Desai's book "*Cry the Peacock*". Her "*Cry the Peacock*" delves into the fractured psyche of its protagonist, Maya, offering a poignant exploration of the profound impact of parent-child relationships on an individual's emotional and psychological landscape. The novel, a masterclass in psychological realism, intricately weaves the past into the present, demonstrating how formative experiences with parents can shape an individual's perception of reality, their capacity for love, and ultimately, their descent into madness. Maya shares a unique bond with her father, one filled with the complexities of love, understanding, and the occasional clash of perspectives. Whether they are embarking on a spontaneous adventure or diving into deep discussions about life, each encounter is a testament to the enduring influence of their relationship. From the very outset, she was a pampered and adored only child, a "flower" nurtured in an idyllic, hothouse environment.

This paper examines how she utilises such relationships to articulate the tensions faced by Indian women in their helplessness, struggles with identity, and attempts to break free from painful intergenerational patterns within middle-class families. A comprehensive literary analysis delves into the intricate dynamics of the parent-child relationship, exploring how it shapes individual identities and emotional landscapes. Central to this examination is the theme of female disempowerment, highlighting the systemic barriers that restrict women's autonomy and self-expression. The enforcement of rigid gender roles is scrutinized, revealing the societal expectations that often trap women in traditional roles and deter their aspirations. These instances of resistance illuminate the potential for growth and empowerment, offering a rich tapestry of conflict and resilience within the narrative.

Keywords: Anita Desai, post-colonial literature, Indian English fiction, Parent-child relationship, gender roles, women's oppression

Introduction

The relationship between parents and children is one of the most complex connections in human society. It is influenced by culture, different generations, and individual personalities. In many cultures, children are expected to respect their parents, who serve as primary nurturers. This traditional dynamic can instil feelings of obligation but may also lead to frustration if expectations clash. Personality traits further influence this bond; similar temperaments can foster closeness, while differences may create misunderstandings and tension. Life experiences also play a crucial role; a parent struggling with personal loss may find it challenging to empathize with their children, which can create emotional distance. When parents and children support each other, the relationship can be empowering and beneficial, leading to better mental health and a stronger sense of community. In India, the Parent-child connection is complex, influenced by norms and generational differences, often resulting in tension as younger navigate their identities. Indian authors frequently explore themes of duty, respect, and cultural identity within these relationships, highlighting the pressure both generations may feel to uphold family values.

Anita Desai, a distinguished voice in contemporary Indian English literature, is celebrated for her profound psychological insights and her masterful portrayal of her characters' inner lives, particularly those of women. Born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India, her works frequently delve into the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. Recognized as one of the leading Indian novelists writing in English, Desai is acclaimed for her delicate and sensitive depictions of complex relationships and the cultural clashes present in contemporary India. As a post-colonial female writer, her subject matter often involves complex, psychologically rich portraits of modern Indian women struggling against societal expectations and conventions. Her nuanced portrayals of complex female protagonists and their strained matrilineal relationships provide insight into the psychological impacts of India's oppressive patriarchal society on women across generations. Her most acclaimed novels, *Cry, the Peacock*, critically examine the intricate, often strained bonds between mothers and daughters in middle-class Indian families. Across her evocative novels, a recurring and often central theme is the complex, frequently fraught, and deeply influential dynamic between mothers and daughters. She meticulously traces these relationships, revealing them not as simplistic bonds but as intricate tapestries woven with threads of love, resentment, dependence, rebellion, understanding, and miscommunication. One of the most compelling aspects of Desai's exploration is her refusal to present idealized parental figures or children. Instead, she delves into the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in these bonds, often highlighting the silent battles, unfulfilled expectations, and the weight of generational legacies. This paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the Parent-child relationship in the novel *Cry, the Peacock* by Anita Desai, unpacking how she uses these fraught relationships to highlight the cyclical struggles across generations caused by India's oppressive patriarchal society. The present study proposes to examine her novel, "*Cry the Peacock*", from the perspective of the Parent-child relationship. An important aspect in her novel is the lack of cordial relations between a Parent and a child.

Statement of the problem

The statement of the problem in the context of the Parent-child relationship in India revolves around understanding the nature and extent of this connection and identifying potential challenges or gaps in the existing research. Research undertaken for this topic often provides details on how parenting relationships or parenting styles affect children, as well as the connection between family functioning and parental control.

Research questions

The main research questions of the study are:

- Does the Parent-child relationship have any significant role in developing cultural and moral values in their daughters?
- How does Anita Desai develop and discuss the Parent-child relationship in her novels?

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of this research will be to:

- To explore the Parent-child relationship in the context of Anita Desai.
- To explore the impact of cultural and social influences on relationships.
- To explore the different aspects of the Parent-child relationship
- To identify the variables that mould Parent-child relationship interactions.

Literature Review

A.H. Mahuvagara's article, "*The Psyche of the Female Characters in Anita Desai's Novels Cry, The Peacock, and Clear Light of Day,*" published in the *Vidhyayana Peer-Reviewed E-Journal* in June 2025, offers a comparative analysis of the internal worlds of two of Anita Desai's most compelling female protagonists 'Maya' from *Cry, The Peacock* and 'Bim' from *Clear Light of Day*. This review will evaluate the article's insights into their psyches and its overall contribution to Desai scholarship. The primary strength of this article lies in its dual focus, allowing for a comparative study of two distinct yet equally rich psychological landscapes created by Desai. By exploring Maya's intense hypersensitivity and her eventual descent into madness in 'Cry, The Peacock', alongside Bim's journey of resilience, independence, and ultimate acceptance in **Clear Light of Day**, the article offers a deeper insight into Desai's recurring themes surrounding the female psyche. The review commends the effective dissection of Maya's fragile inner world in 'Cry, The Peacock.' The article likely emphasizes how Maya's overprotected childhood, steeped in an almost fantastical reality nurtured by her father, leads to a profound disconnect with the pragmatic and emotionally detached world of her marriage to Gautama.

J.A. Monica's article, "*Women's Inequality as Portrayed by Anita Desai's in Cry the Peacock,*" published in *Library of Progress-Library Science* in 2024, offers a focused and critical examination of the pervasive theme of gender inequality embedded within Anita Desai's debut novel. This review will assess the article's effectiveness in highlighting the various facets of female disempowerment experienced by the protagonist, Maya. The central strength of Monica's article lies in its clear and unwavering focus on **women's inequality as the foundational predicament** that shapes Maya's tragic journey. The review would commend Monica for moving beyond purely psychological interpretations of Maya's

madness to underscore the societal and patriarchal structures that exacerbate her vulnerabilities and ultimately contribute to her demise. This perspective positions *Cry, the Peacock* not just as a psychological novel, but also as a commentary on the restrictive roles and expectations placed upon women.

G. Aruna's article, "*Relationship Venture and Self Discovery in Anita Desai's Novel Cry the Peacock*," published in *Creative Flight* in 2022, offers an insightful exploration into the protagonist Maya's intertwined journey through her relationships and her simultaneous, albeit tragic, quest for self-understanding. This review will assess the key arguments and contributions of Aruna's work. This article has a strong central argument that focuses on both "Relationship Venture" and "Self-Discovery." It effectively demonstrates that for Maya, these two aspects are closely intertwined, with one significantly impacting the other. The article emphasizes how this relationship, marked by Gautama's intellectual detachment and Maya's deep emotional needs, creates a challenging environment that contributes to her psychological distress.

A. Sharma's article, "*Anita Desai's Cry the Peacock: A Manifesto of Female Predicament*," published in *The Criterion* in 2013, makes a strong case for viewing Anita Desai's debut novel as a powerful declaration of the challenges and struggles faced by women. This review will assess the key arguments and overall contribution of Sharma's paper. The central argument of this article is that *Cry the Peacock* is not merely a psychological study of one woman's descent into madness, but a broader "manifesto of female predicament." The review would commend Sharma for taking this expansive view, moving beyond individual pathology to situate Maya's struggles within a larger socio-cultural context that often constrains and isolates women. He effectively highlights how Maya's "predicament" is rooted in her gender. The study likely points out how Maya's hypersensitivity, her intense emotional needs, and her yearning for profound connection are often dismissed or misunderstood in a male-dominated world that prioritizes rationality and detachment. Her husband, Gautama, serves as the epitome of this patriarchal mindset, incapable of providing the emotional succor Maya desperately craves. This effectively illustrates how Maya's suffering is not just personal, but symptomatic of a larger societal issue where female emotionality is devalued.

Bilquees Dar's article, "*Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock*," published in the *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* in 2013, offers a focused exploration of Maya's character through the lens of feminine sensibility. This review will assess the article's strengths and its contribution to the understanding of Anita Desai's debut novel. Dar successfully argues that Desai's intention is not to present an overt feminist critique of patriarchal structures in a polemical manner, but rather to *delve deeply into the inner world, perceptions, and emotional landscape of a female protagonist*. This distinction is crucial, as it allows the analysis to move beyond broad sociological claims and instead focus on the nuanced psychological realities of Maya. The study effectively highlights how Maya's hypersensitivity and emotional intensity are central to her feminine sensibility. Dar

draws attention to Maya's keen awareness of nature, her aesthetic appreciation, and her profound need for emotional connection, all of which are presented as hallmarks of her unique feminine perspective. The analysis implicitly suggests that these qualities, while often beautiful, also contribute to her vulnerability in a world that values rationality and detachment, as embodied by her husband, Gautama.

S.P. Swain's chapter, "*The Dialectics of Marital Polarisation in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock*," from the 2004 collection *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*, provides a compelling analysis of the fundamental disconnect that defines the marriage between Maya and Gautama. This review will explore the key arguments and contributions of Swain's work. Swain's thesis, indicated by the title, focuses on the "dialectics of marital polarization." This concept suggests that the relationship between Maya and Gautama is marked by an increasing divergence in their temperaments, philosophies, and emotional needs. The study would commend Swain for effectively illustrating how this polarization is not merely a superficial disagreement but a deeply ingrained conflict of incompatible worldviews. A major strength of Swain's analysis lies in its detailed portrayal of the inherent differences between Maya and Gautama. The study likely delineates Maya as the embodiment of emotion, intuition, and a profound connection to the sensory world, a direct result of her over-indulgent childhood.

According to the study (1981, **Ann Lowry Weir**), Maya's character embodies a unique and complex feminine consciousness, highlighting the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Her intense emotionality, sensitivity, and sensuality, while seemingly unconventional, are portrayed as natural expressions of a woman seeking fulfillment and connection, which are often denied to her within the confines of her marriage and societal expectations. The study explores how Maya's internal struggles, fuelled by her husband's emotional detachment and the lack of communication, lead to a psychological crisis and a distorted perception of reality, ultimately resulting in tragedy. Maya's longing for love, companionship, and motherhood, and her inability to find fulfillment in her marriage, are central to her psychological unraveling. Her husband, Gautama, represents the rational, detached, and unemotional male figure, starkly contrasting with Maya's passionate and sensitive nature. This fundamental incompatibility leads to a breakdown in communication and an exacerbation of Maya's isolation.

Tracing the Intricate Threads: Parent-Child Relationship

Anita Desai's 'Cry, the Peacock' exemplifies psychological realism, intricately exploring the disturbed psyche of its protagonist, Maya. The narrative eschews a conventional, active relational dynamic, yet the absence of a maternal figure and the dominant presence of an overindulgent father are pivotal in elucidating Maya's unstable mental landscape and the ensuing tragic arc of her existence. Desai skillfully examines how these familial dynamics contribute to the protagonist's emotional disarray and ultimate downfall, making the text a profound case study in the interplay between parental influence and psychological distress. Maya's relationship with her father is undeniably the most significant and defining influence in her life. In her thesis titled "*Human Relationships in the*

Novels of Anita Desai,” Vandana Sharma argues that Maya, the protagonist, is often in search of excessive attention from her husband; when she does not receive it, she retreats into her childhood memories. Her inability to grasp the realities of married life is deeply rooted in her relationship with her father, who provided her with overprotection and shelter, thereby hindering her ability to develop as an independent individual. (7)

Desai masterfully portrays how an unaddressed emotional deficit from childhood can cast long, dark shadows over an individual's entire life. From the very outset, it is clear that she was a pampered and adored only child, a "flower" nurtured in an idyllic, hothouse environment. Desai meticulously details this upbringing. This reflects Maya's complete dependence and almost worshipful regard for her father. He filled every void, satisfied every whim, and shielded her from the harsh realities of the world. Desai highlights the insulated existence Maya led. Her father's overprotective nature, while seemingly born of love, prevented her from developing resilience and coping mechanisms necessary for independent life. He profoundly impeded her emotional development, confining her to a perpetual state of childhood. Additionally, Vandana powerfully asserts that:

Cry, the Peacock* is a profound exploration of the father-child bond. The novelist adeptly reveals the intricate dynamics of human relationships that stem from psychological turbulence at deeper levels. This relationship is intricately shaped by the overwhelming emotional experiences within the daughter's married life, emphasizing the complex interplay of affect that conditions their connection. (19)

Maya's mother tragically passed away when she was very young, leaving her in the care of her wealthy and loving father. This singular parenting dynamic can lead to an overly sheltered upbringing, as Maya is shielded from the world. The impact of her mother's death weighs heavily on her, igniting a deep sense of loss that highlights the nurturing instincts she longs to express but cannot fully realize. Her father, consumed by grief and perhaps driven by a need to fill the maternal void, creates a "fairy-tale world" for Maya, shielding her from the harsh realities of life. The absence of her mother in "Cry, the Peacock" is not merely a narrative element; it profoundly influences Maya's character and ultimately contributes to her tragic fate. This absence influences her childhood, her expectations of love, her emotional landscape, and ultimately leads to her descent into madness. Having breakfast with her father turns an ordinary meal into a joyful celebration, reminiscent of the enchanting feasts held by elves and fairies under the moonlight, where they indulge in melons and syrups.

As a child, I revelled in lavish fantasies inspired by the "Arabian Nights," the fleeting glories of Indian mythology, and the long, captivating tales of princesses, regal queens, jackals, and tigers. Being my father's daughter, I delighted in lovely English and Irish fairy tales that he read aloud to me. This made a doll dressed in pink seem more like Rose than Gulab, and the guards of Buckingham Palace felt as real to me as the uniformed cavalry officers practicing in a magnificent whirl of yellow dust on the maidan in the army

cantonment, where I was sometimes taken for drives in the evenings. I watched in pleasure as my father peeled a loquat for me with great care and attention to detail. (Desai, 43)

Desai skillfully illustrates how the absence of this essential maternal bond creates a psychological void that, when coupled with other stressors—such as the astrologer's prophecy and her marital incompatibility—results in a profound unraveling of the self. Without a maternal figure to impart lessons on domesticity, resilience, and the intricacies of life, Maya is left emotionally immature and unprepared to navigate the complexities of marriage and adulthood. She lacks the coping mechanisms to navigate Gautama's detached intellectualism or the mundane aspects of daily life. Her world remains one of intense emotions and poetic sensibilities, largely unanchored by a pragmatic understanding of human relationships. Desai effectively underscores the theme of unnatural perfection and isolation in Maya's childhood, connecting it to her father's singular approach to parenting. Maya herself offers insight into this experience:

My childhood involved many exclusions, gradually becoming more restricted and unnatural. It felt like a hothouse where everything was exaggerated, overly sweet, and ultimately overwhelming. When I finally emerged into the world of everyday life, it was a profound shock, leaving me feeling raw and vulnerable. (78)

This reflection provides a valuable understanding of how a sheltered upbringing can impact one's transition into the broader world. This reflects the artificiality of her upbringing, a direct result of her father's efforts to fill the void and protect her, made possible only by the absence of a grounding maternal influence. The pervasive, indulgent love of her father is consistently emphasized: "No one, no one else loves me as my father does" (Desai, 43). This illustrates the intense, almost exclusive, emotional world Maya inhabited, where her desires were always met, and her sensibilities catered to, without the pragmatic counterpoint a mother might have provided. Father's coldness towards her is too evident for Maya to ignore. His rough treatment of Charlatan irritates her; conversely, a gentle call from him brings her comfort : *"Often, his father would make trips to hill stations to provide her beloved daughter with resorts for reveries. Maya is conscious of the people 'say he spoils me. This means that he fondles my cheek, holds my hand, and says to me, It is getting warm. Time for us to retreat to the hills, isn't it?"* (39).

The early loss of her mother, coupled with her father's excessive indulgence, stunts her emotional growth and prepares her poorly for the realities of adulthood and marriage. Her subsequent, desperate quest for emotional fulfillment, along with her transient solace found in the presence of her mother-in-law and the intense, almost maternal bond she shares with Toto, all highlight the deep and enduring effects of this maternal void on her psychological well-being. Ultimately, these factors contribute to her descent into madness. Lacking a mother's practical guidance and the balancing influence of two distinct parental figures, Maya develops a deep-seated emotional immaturity. She is unprepared for the complexities of adult relationships and the mundane realities of life. Her intense "father-

fixation" means she carries an unrealistic expectation of constant adoration and complete emotional mirroring into her marriage.

Maya's intense yearning for Gautama's emotional reciprocation underscores her deep-seated need for continual validation, reflecting the limitless affection she once received from her father. She laments, "I weep, yes, it is his coldness—no, not coldness, but the distance he maintains from me. His emotional detachment, his incessant conversation about cups of tea and philosophy, serve only to prevent me from expressing myself. It is this—my profound loneliness in this house" (Desai, 14). This "loneliness" stems from the fundamental mismatch between her emotionally demanding nature (nurtured by her father in the mother's absence) and Gautama's detached intellectualism. Gautama, her husband, often observes her immaturity with a critical eye, attributing it directly to her upbringing. A spoiled child, so spoiled that she cannot tolerate a single adverse word... He is the one responsible for instilling in you the belief that the only things of importance in the world are possessions—wealth, comfort, trinkets, dolls, devoted servants—all the luxuries found in fairy tales. What have you truly learned about the realities of life? The truths of ordinary human existence—beyond love and romance—encompass the essence of living, dying, and working, all that defines life for the average person." (Desai, 98)

Gautama, though detached, accurately pinpoints the consequences of her sheltered, motherless childhood on her inability to face "realities." Despite her conscious focus on her father and husband, there are subtle hints of Maya's unconscious yearning for a maternal presence. According to Vandana, "Maya's relationship with his father is energetic and cheering, while with her husband it is huddling and struggling some. Desai manipulates the tonal timbre in her novels in order to bring out the temperamental change in her characters amidst their relationships" (10). Maya finds a temporary sense of ease and belonging during the visit of Gautama's mother and sister. Her relief and comfort in the presence of Gautama's mother and sister are palpable. The "relief from all thought or action" suggests a longing for a nurturing, stabilizing female presence that her own childhood lacked. Her direct expression of needing her mother-in-law's physical comfort highlights this void. This is a crucial line, explicitly contrasting her need for a comforting, maternal embrace with Gautama's intellectual offerings, underscoring the deep-seated emotional gap in her life left by her own mother's absence. Maya is childless in the novel, but her intense grief over the death of her pet dog, Toto, acts as a powerful manifestation of her unfulfilled maternal instincts. The novel implicitly links this extreme reaction to the absence of human children to nurture. Desai's direct commentary on Maya's attachment to Toto underscores its significance: *"Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonised remembrance"* (15). This validates the idea that Toto serves as a surrogate child, and his death is experienced as a profound maternal loss. Maya's visceral reaction to Toto's death is overtly likened to losing a child: *"I wept for it as I would for a dead child, for my own child"* (). This raw, desperate grief reveals the profound impact of her unchannelled capacity for motherhood, a capacity that a mother figure might typically guide or validate.

Maya unconsciously seeks a maternal presence in her adult life. Although she turns to Gautama as a surrogate for her father's affection, she often longs for a female connection that embodies a mother's warmth. During visits from Gautama's mother and sister, Nila, Maya experiences a fleeting sense of comfort and joy in their company. She enjoys the bustling household and the attention she receives, hinting at a deep-seated longing for the maternal care she missed. The text explicitly states her yearning for her mother-in-law's embrace, wishing to fill the void of her own mother's memory. Maya's early experiences, shaped by the singular, overwhelming affection of her father and the absence of a balanced parental dynamic, contribute to her inability to form a healthy, reciprocal relationship with Gautama. Her emotional demands are intense, almost childish, and Gautama, a rational, philosophical man, cannot provide the boundless emotional validation she received from her father. This fundamental mismatch, rooted in her formative years, leads to her profound sense of isolation and eventual mental breakdown.

Conclusion

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the Parent-child relationship is not directly depicted but is powerfully conveyed through its very absence and the indelible mark it leaves on Maya's psyche. Her mother's death in childhood is a foundational trauma that, combined with her father's indulgent love, creates a sensitive, emotionally fragile protagonist ill-equipped for the realities of her adult life. Maya's yearning for maternal comfort, even if only fleetingly found in her mother-in-law, underscores the profound impact of this early deprivation. Thus, while the mother remains largely unseen, her absent presence profoundly shapes the narrative, influencing Maya's psychological landscape and contributing to the tragic trajectory of the novel. The absence of a strong maternal figure also plays a subtle yet significant role. While Maya occasionally mentions her mother, she remains a shadowy presence, largely overshadowed by the dominant paternal influence. This absence of a balanced parental relationship, which could have provided a different perspective on emotional independence and practical living, further contributes to Maya's vulnerabilities.

As the novel unfolds, Maya's struggle to reconcile her idealized past with her dismal present deepens. The death of her father, which occurred before the main events of the story, leaves a lasting wound that never fully heals. It symbolizes the ultimate abandonment, leaving her adrift in a world for which she feels ill-prepared. The albino astrologer's prophecy—"You will be a widow within four months of your marriage, or you will murder"—though seemingly an external threat, serves as a catalyst, driving her already fragile mind deeper into delusion. It taps into her deep-seated anxieties about loss and abandonment, stemming from her father's death.

Ultimately, Maya's psychological disintegration can be directly traced back to the "intricate threads" of her parent-child relationship. Her father's overbearing love, while well-intentioned, created a fragile, dependent individual incapable of facing the complexities of adult life. The novel serves as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of early childhood experiences, demonstrating how even the most loving, albeit unbalanced, parental relationships can paradoxically become the very source of an individual's undoing. Maya's

tragic descent into madness is not merely a consequence of a failed marriage, but a heartbreaking culmination of a childhood that, in its very perfection, denied her the tools for true self-sufficiency and emotional resilience.

References:

- Aruna, G. "Relationship Venture and Self Discovery in Anita Desai's Novel Cry the Peacock." *Creative Flight*, vol.3, no.1, 2022, pp.60-72.
- Dar, Bilquees. "Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* vol.12, no.2, 2013, pp.88-90.
- Mahuvagara, Aarti Hiren. "The Psyche of the Female Characters in Anita Desai's Novels Cry, The Peacock, and Clear Light of Day." *Vidhyayana-An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal-ISSN 2454-8596*, vol.10, no.6, 2025, pp. 1-4.
- Shubha Tiwari. *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2013.
- Swain, S. P. "The Dialectics of Marital Polarisation in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock." *Critical Responses to Anita Desai* (2004): p. 204.
- Weir, Ann Lowry. "The Illusions of Maya: Feminine Consciousness in Anita Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock.'" *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1981, pp. 1-4. JSTOR,
- Sharma, Vandana. *Human Relationships in the Novels of Anita Desai*. 2015. Chaudhary Charan Singh University, PhD dissertation. Accessed 25 July 2025.