

## **Beyond Patriarchy: The Interplay of Female Agency and Intra-Gender Conflicts in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions***

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### **Abstract**

This research paper examines Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* through a feminist lens, focusing on the complex dynamics of intra-gender conflict. While feminist discourse often attributes women's oppression to patriarchal structures, this study explores how internalized gender hierarchies and matriarchal conflicts also contribute to women's insecurities and struggles. Both novels feature female protagonists—Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*—whose conflicts are shaped not only by male dominance but also by their relationships with other women.

This paper argues that Indian feminism, distinct from its Western counterpart, is deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts where women have experienced both reverence and restriction. By analyzing these two texts, the study highlights how women's insecurities are shaped by patriarchal norms as well as by their interactions with other women, including stepmothers, mothers-in-law, and female rivals. Furthermore, the research underlines how feminist narratives must address the intricate ways in which women navigate oppression not just from men but from societal and familial expectations reinforced by other women.

### **1.1 Feminist Literary Criticism: An Overview**

Feminist literary criticism emerged to analyze the representation of women in literature and the socio cultural forces shaping their experiences. It critiques the ways in which patriarchal ideologies construct narratives and challenges the marginalization of women in literary discourse. It seeks to understand how gender influences the creation, interpretation, and reception of literary works (Showalter 1).

#### **1.1.1 Western Feminism**

Western feminism has evolved through distinct waves. First-wave feminism (late 19th and early 20th centuries) primarily focused on women's suffrage and access to education (DuBois and Dumenil 15-45). Second-wave feminism (1960s-1980s)

broadened its scope to address workplace inequality, reproductive rights, and sexual politics. Key texts like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) laid the groundwork for this wave. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) further examined the role of literature in perpetuating gendered power structures.

Third-wave feminism (1990s-present) embraces intersectionality, recognizing the diverse experiences of women based on race, class, sexual orientation, and other social categories. It critiques essentialist notions of womanhood and emphasizes individual agency (Heywood and Drake 1-25).

#### **1.1.2 Indian Feminism**

Indian feminism, while engaging with Western feminist thought, is distinctly

rooted in the specific cultural, historical, and religious context of India. The concept of Ardhanarishvara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, symbolizes the ideal of gender equality in Hindu philosophy. Ancient Indian texts also mention learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi who participated in philosophical debates. However, despite this philosophical grounding, Indian women have also faced significant social restrictions.

Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Savitribai Phule fought against oppressive customs like sati and championed women's education (Chandra 67-92). Despite the reverence for goddesses in Hindu traditions, patriarchal norms became deeply ingrained in post-Vedic India, impacting women's lives in complex ways. Indian feminism grapples with this duality, recognizing both the potential for female power and the pervasive reality of patriarchal constraints (Kumar 123-145).

## **2. The Concept of Patriarchy and Female Agency in Indian Society**

### **2.1 The Duality of Female Identity: Power vs. Subjugation**

Women in India have historically been positioned as both powerful goddesses (Durga, Kali) and subservient figures (Sita, Savitri). This paradoxical representation continues to shape the experience of Indian women. The Manusmriti (c. 150 BCE) codified patriarchal norms, stating that a woman should always be dependent on a male figure (Buhler). The medieval period witnessed the rise of oppressive practices like purdah and sati. While legal reforms have been enacted, modern India continues to grapple with gender inequality, manifested in issues like dowry, violence against women, and limited access to education and employment.

This paper explores how these patriarchal expectations not only directly oppress women but also foster intra-gender conflicts, often pitting women against each other in competition for limited resources and social capital.

**3. Cry, the Peacock and Women's Emotional Alienation-** Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) delves into the psychological turmoil of Maya, a young woman struggling with personal insecurities and societal pressures within a restrictive marriage. Maya's narrative reveals the complexities of female experience within a patriarchal framework, demonstrating how women can be complicit in perpetuating oppressive norms.

### **3.1 Maya's Childhood Trauma and Isolation**

Maya's strained relationship with her stepmother creates a deep sense of insecurity and longing for maternal affection. She reflects:

**"Ever since I was a child, I had waited for my mother's voice, her touch, and had never found it."**

**(Cry, the Peacock, Desai 45)**

This early experience of maternal absence shapes her emotional vulnerability and her search for connection in her later life.

### **3.2 Marriage as Emotional Entrapment**

Maya's marriage to Gautama, while seemingly providing social security, becomes a source of emotional isolation. Gautama's emotional detachment exacerbates Maya's feelings of alienation. She observes:

**"He was always so distant, so composed, his words like stones dropping into a silent well."**

**(Cry, the Peacock, Desai 102)**

While *Sexual Politics* (Millett 1970) critiques marriage as a patriarchal institution that isolates women, in Maya's case, her emotional isolation is intensified not only by her husband's aloofness but also by the absence of supportive female relationships.

## **4. The Palace of Illusions and Intra-Gender Power Struggles**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reimagines the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, offering insights into the complex dynamics of female relationships within a male-dominated society. Draupadi's story illuminates the ways in which women can

be both victims and agents of patriarchal power.

**4.1 Draupadi and Gandhari: Silent Power Struggles-** Gandhari's bitterness towards Draupadi highlights the complexities of female rivalry within a patriarchal system: **"She never forgave me for being the reason her sons had lost their kingdom."** (The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni 217)

**4.2 Draupadi and Kunti: The Burden of Obedience**

Kunti's decision to share Draupadi among her five sons underscores the denial of female autonomy:

**"Was I a thing, an object to be divided?"** (The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni 97)

Kunti, despite being a woman herself, reinforces patriarchal norms rather than challenging them.

## 5. Conclusion

This study underscores the multidimensional nature of female oppression in Indian literature. While patriarchal norms undeniably shape women's experiences and struggles, internalized gender hierarchies and intra-gender conflicts also play a significant role in reinforcing insecurities and power imbalances.

This research highlights that feminist discourse must not only critique male-dominated structures but also examine the ways in which women themselves contribute to gender hierarchies. By exploring the interplay of power and vulnerability in female relationships, these novels offer valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of female agency within a patriarchal society.

## Citations and References

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