

Echoes from the Parapet: Society, Silence, and the Anatomy of Suicide in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

The twenty-first century has witnessed rapid scientific and technological advancements, paralleled by increasingly complex psycho-social realities that fracture human life. South Asian literature has consistently navigated the delicate intersections of postcolonial identity, psychological awareness, and mental well-being. Anita Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), stands as a pioneering work of psychological realism, one that resonates powerfully with Émile Durkheim's sociological typology of suicide. Durkheim argued that self-destruction emerges not from individual pathology alone but from four key societal forces: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. This paper examines the fragile mental state of Desai's protagonist, Maya, through this four-part framework, demonstrating how her emotional crises, the suffocating expectations of a patriarchal society, and her irreconcilable internal conflicts lead inexorably toward a tragic climax of homicide and suicide. The study further engages with feminist critiques of Durkheim's sociology, particularly the foundational work of Jennifer M. Lehmann, to expose the gendered blind spots embedded in classical sociological theory and to position Maya's tragedy within a broader discourse on women, oppression, and psychological survival. By situating Desai's literary achievement within this dual framework, the paper argues that *Cry, the Peacock* constitutes not only a psychological portrait but a sociological argument, one made through the language of fiction with particular force.

Keywords: Durkheim; Feminism; Fatalistic Suicide; Anomie; Postcolonial; Gender

1. Introduction

1.1. The Intersection of Sociology and the Tormented Psyche

Suicide has long occupied a fraught and highly contested place in both sociological thought and literary representation. It is, paradoxically, at once the most deeply individual of acts and the most fundamentally social act. It is a tragic phenomenon emerging from the violent collision of personal anguish with broader cultural, familial, and ideological structures. To understand suicide merely as a private medical failing is to ignore the invisible scaffolding of society that holds the individual in place, or conversely, lets them fall.

In the realm of sociology, Émile Durkheim's seminal work, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), radically redefined the act of self-destruction. Durkheim posited that suicide is a "social fact," shaped by the degrees of integration and regulation within a given society, rather than being merely the tragic endpoint of private melancholy (83). His four established typologies: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicide, offer an enduring framework for understanding how collective forces can push an isolated individual toward self-annihilation.

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Yet Durkheim's theory is not without its contradictions, particularly with respect to gender. As Jennifer M. Lehmann has argued in her foundational feminist reconsideration of Durkheim's work, the classical theory of suicide encodes highly essentialist assumptions about men and women, configuring the social subject as implicitly male and treating women's existence as

fundamentally "asocial" (Lehmann 904). More specifically, Lehmann demonstrates that Durkheim identified empirical evidence of a "female fatalism" in his own data but later retracted and suppressed this finding in a subsequent essay precisely because its political implications were too radical for his theoretical framework to accommodate (Lehmann 904–906). This suppression is not a minor footnote; it is a structural fault in the edifice of classical suicide theory, and Desai's Maya brings it devastatingly into the open.

In the landscape of Indian English literature, this convergence of sociological insight and feminist critique finds a vivid counterpart in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). Desai's novel is a pioneering work of psychological realism, capturing the claustrophobia of a newly independent nation where traditional patriarchal structures persist even as modern rationalism asserts itself. The protagonist Maya experiences a harrowing psychological disintegration that culminates in a shocking homicide-suicide. K. R. S. Iyengar observes, "*Cry, the Peacock* scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference in this world. Her insanity, sane or insane fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life" (qtd. in Sarika 42). Her tragedy is not incidental; rather, it is the entire architecture of the novel.

This paper meticulously examines how Durkheim's four typologies of suicide structure Desai's representation of mental illness, gendered subjectivity, and the suffocating pressures of domestic patriarchal order. By bringing Lehmann's feminist critique, Meenakshi Mukherjee's literary assessments, and Jasbir Jain's theorisation of female entrapment into dialogue with close readings of Desai's prose, the paper argues that Maya's breakdown is not merely a psychological collapse but a socially mediated, gendered act of self-annihilation that exposes both the violence of patriarchal domesticity and the theoretical limits of classical sociology.

2. The Egoistic Void: The Tragedy of Inadequate Integration

Egoistic suicide provides the foundational sociological framework for interpreting Maya's disintegration. Durkheim defines suicide as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (Durkheim 44). From this baseline, he constructs his central claim: "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups to which the individual belongs" (Durkheim 167). Where social bonds weaken, the individual is thrown entirely upon themselves, "recognis[ing] no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interest" (Durkheim 167). The affective signature of this condition is not rage but an overwhelming, pervasive emptiness: the egoist "is not violently opposed to society, he is indifferent to it" (Durkheim 284).

In *Cry, the Peacock*, this Durkheimian egoistic void finds precise embodiment in Maya's inner world. The novel opens with the death of her dog Toto, and Maya recognises immediately that her grief is not merely for the animal: "a shadowy something . . . probed me into admitting that it was not pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps as yet not even experienced" (Desai, qtd. in Biswal and Pattnaik e127). This intuition of layered, structureless grief is the first signature of egoistic isolation. It highlights the sense that one carries sorrow without social address, without communal rite, without anyone to share its particular texture.

Following the deaths of her mother and father and her brother's departure to America, Maya is left with no genuine social network. Her bonds had been directed almost entirely inward, toward her father's indulgent, over-protective love, and marriage to Gautam, a rational, middle-aged lawyer, fails to provide integration of any kind. When Maya in desperation tries to name her need,

she does so with raw directness: "Oh, you know nothing of me and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved. And you don't love me" (Desai 96). This outburst is precisely the egoistic condition in speech: the cry of an individual whose emotional life has no social anchor, no reciprocal response, no collective frame to give it meaning.

Durkheim observes that "Life is said to be intolerable unless some reason for existing is involved, some purpose justifying life's trials" (Durkheim 169). Maya's domestic life provides no such purpose. Gautam's emotional detachment transforms the marital home into what Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies as a representative space of Desai's departure from social realism toward the interior: what matters is not the social world outside but the "inner climate" of the protagonist, a climate that Desai renders with what Mukherjee calls "clinical precision" (*The Twice-Born Fiction* 156). In

Maya's case, that inner climate is one of total social starvation that Durkheim identifies as the seedbed of egoistic self-destruction.

3. The Weight of the Ideal: Altruistic Suicide And Sacrificial Femininity

Where egoistic suicide results from too little social integration, altruistic suicide arises from its paradoxical excess. Durkheim defines it as a form of self-destruction wherein the individual is “carried away by currents of enthusiasm” and “sacrifices his life voluntarily for the benefit of some ideal” (Durkheim 218). When the individual is “excessively integrated,” their own personality loses intrinsic value: “The individual, therefore, is expected to sacrifice his interests to those of the group, and, if need be, his life” (Durkheim 218). Durkheim's canonical examples such as the widow on the funeral pyre or the soldier dying for honour, are all public, ritualised, and collective.

Maya does not conform to these formalised models, but she has been prepared, through every mechanism of her socialisation, for a domestic version of altruistic self-negation. Following

her father's death, she internalises the imperative to “keep the house going” (Desai, qtd. in Haque 198). This is not a chosen vocation but a non-negotiable social script. The duty to subordinate the self to domestic order has been sewn into her identity so thoroughly that when she fails at it, she does not blame the script; she blames herself. Jain notes that this form of psychological breakdown is a constituent element of Desai's broader theme of “female entrapment in familial structures” (*Gendered Realities* qtd. in Biswal and Pattnaik e127): structures so total that the self is consumed not dramatically but quietly, through years of trained self-effacement.

This is precisely where Lehmann's feminist critique of Durkheim becomes indispensable. Lehmann demonstrates that altruistic suicide is treated asymmetrically in Durkheim's framework: the soldier's self-sacrifice is coded as “glorious” and rational, while the widow's sati is coded as primitive and irrational even though the sociological mechanism is identical (Lehmann 912). Applied to Maya, this asymmetry becomes devastating. She has been conditioned to silence her desires, to “listen, to be silent, to look concerned without being inquisitive” (Haque 200), but this altruistic conditioning carries none of the public recognition, communal ritual, or social validation that Durkheim's canonical examples presuppose. She is trained for sacrifice without any of its compensations.

When the astrologer's prophecy resurfaces, that one of the couples must die in the fourth year of their marriage, Maya filters it through this altruistic conditioning. She does not simply fear death; she calculates it as a social duty. Her final rationalisation is stark: “It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who meant to live. You see, to Gautama it did not really matter. He did not care, and I did” (Desai 215–216). This is the logic of altruistic sacrifice turned inside out: she kills not herself but Gautam because she has decided that the one who cares more about life is the one who must be preserved. Desai domesticates and feminises altruistic suicide,

relocating it from the public pyre to the drawing-room and in doing so, exposes the gendered absurdity of a system that demands sacrifice without offering any of its traditional social rewards.

4. A World Unmoored: Anomic Disintegration and the Clash of Modernities

To fully grasp the mechanism of Maya's unravelling, we must turn to anomic suicide. While egoistic and altruistic suicides deal with the integration of the individual into society, anomic suicide centres on a crisis of moral regulation. Durkheim postulates that “man's activity's lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings” (219). Anomic suicide erupts when familiar rules collapse and “In anomic suicide, society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein” (Durkheim 219). Without clear boundaries between the possible and the permissible, Durkheim observes, “To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (209).

Maya inhabits a liminal space that is simultaneously traditional and destabilizing modern. It is the characteristic anomic condition of transitional postcolonial India. On the surface, her world is governed by conservative patriarchal norms: arranged marriage, the absolute authority of the elder male, the strict decorum of the upper-class Indian wife. Beneath this surface, the moral order has fragmented. Singh observes in his study of Durkheim in the Indian context, rapid socioeconomic transformation has “disrupted traditional institutions like family, caste, and religion that previously provided social cohesion,” creating “spaces of alienation, uncertainty, and stress” that leave the individual without regulatory guidance (Singh 1). Maya is caught precisely in this space.

The old contract, that a submissive wife will be protected and emotionally sustained, has been nullified by Gautam's cold, modern rationalism. No new contract replaces it. Maya's desires

for emotional communion and spiritual connection expand into this unregulated void. Desai renders this anomic deregulation through the chaotic, associative texture of stream-of-consciousness narration. In one of the novel's most revealing passages, the doves in the garden become omens of catastrophe:

I counted them as omens of ill fortune, of separation, for their coo was a tedious repetition of the fatal words, 'Go away!' All day they repeated their warning, and I longed to drive them away, yet dared not disturb their amour. (32)

Durkheim writes, when the familiar standards collapse, the scale is upset; but a new scale cannot be immediately improvised . . . The limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate. Consequently, there is no restraint upon aspirations. (213)

This is precisely Maya's condition. Her desires for emotional communion and spiritual connection expand into this unregulated void, finding no boundary, no social mirror, no moral grammar by which to measure themselves.

The world is saturated with unbounded meaning; everything is omen, everything portends catastrophe. This hyper-sensitivity is not madness but the cognitive signature of anomie, It represents a mind which is unable to filter experience because its regulative structures have collapsed.

Maya herself names this condition with painful precision: "All order is gone out of my life, all formality, there is no plan, no peace nothing to keep me with the pattern of familiar everything

living and doing" (195). For Durkheim, society alone can perform this moderating function, for "it is the only moral power superior to the individual, the authority of which he accepts . . . it alone can estimate the reward to be prospectively offered to every class" (219). Maya has been denied precisely this social regulation. She is stranded between a fading traditional order and a modern marriage that offers no replacement, her passions have no force exterior to herself to limit them. "To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable," Durkheim warns, "is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness" (209).

5. The Suffocating Chamber: Fatalistic Hyper-Regulation and Suppressed Feminism

Maya's tragedy crystallizes most powerfully through the lens of fatalistic suicide. It is the most theoretically compact and, as Lehmann demonstrates, the most politically suppressed of Durkheim's four types. If anomic suicide arises from a failure of regulation, fatalistic suicide is born from its oppressive excess. It occurs "when a person is excessively regulated, when their futures are pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" (Durkheim 239n). Durkheim associated this historically with enslaved populations. Desai maps it onto the domestic sphere of the Indian woman.

The significance of Lehmann's critique is nowhere more acute than here. She demonstrates that in *Suicide*, Durkheim's empirical data on women compelled him to formulate a specific theory of "female fatalism" acknowledging that women confined to rigid domestic structures showed precisely this pattern of suicide-by-oppression. But in his later essay "Divorce by Mutual Consent" (1906), he "retract[ed] his theory of female fatalism, reinterpret[ed] his data, and neutralize[d] the troublesome, feminist, political implications" of his earlier findings (Lehmann 904). What

Durkheim suppressed politically, Desai restores literarily. Maya's entrapment is his suppressed category made flesh.

Maya's future is "pitilessly blocked" not by iron bars or penal law, but by the invisible, asphyxiating web of patriarchal expectation. Her immense passions — her visceral connection to nature, her philosophical dread, her desperate need for empathetic connection — are violently choked by Gautam's hyper-rationalism and the broader dictates of class decorum. When she tries to voice her grief at Toto's death with what Gautam deems disproportionate hysteria, she is patronized or ignored. The whole novel dramatizes what Durkheim identifies as the condition of the fatalistic subject: an individual who has "no way to set up an environment of his own in the shelter of which he may develop his own nature," reduced to "an inseparable part of the whole without personal value" (179). Maya is precisely this as she is absorbed entirely into the domestic script of wife and mistress of the household, denied the interior space in which a self might form and breathe. Durkheim reserves his sharpest language for what this produces: suicides, he writes in his fatalistic footnote, that are "attributable to excessive physical or moral despotism" (Durkheim 239n). Gautam's cold

rationalism is not physical tyranny but it is moral despotism of the quietest, most suffocating kind, that does not raise its voice because it does not need to.

Maya's own testimony is the most damning evidence. Stripping her appeal down to its barest elements, she cries out: "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying" (84). This compressed outcry contains the entire sociological argument: she calls on every male authority figure her society offers, and all three have failed her. She is simultaneously dying (fatalistic oppression) and desperately in love with life (the passion that is being choked). The social structures do not just fail to sustain her but acts as the instrument of her destruction.

Jain's observation that female entrapment in familial structures is a defining theme of Desai's work (*Gendered Realities* qtd. in Biswal and Pattnaik e127) gives this fatalistic dimension a broader literary-historical frame. Maya is not an aberration; she is a type. Desai is theorising, in the language of fiction, what Durkheim suppressed in the language of sociology.

6. The Convergence on the Parapet: Homicide-Suicide as the Final Syntax

The four Durkheimian forces do not operate sequentially in Maya's psyche; they converge simultaneously at the novel's terrible climax. When Maya pushes Gautam from the roof terrace, the act is at once egoistic (born of radical social isolation), quasi-altruistic (structured by a warped logic of sacrificial duty), anomic (the explosion of unregulated desire), and fatalistic (the only exit from a pitilessly blocked life). Desai achieves, through this single act of violence, what Durkheim's sociology could not fully theorize: the gendered anatomy of self-destruction in a transitional postcolonial society.

Maya's own justification for the killing is chillingly coherent from within her own psychic framework: "It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who meant to live. You see, to Gautama it did not really matter. He did not care, and I did" (Desai 215–216). This is not the language of madness but of a mind that has internalised its society's deepest logic: that life belongs to those who can be socially useful, and that Gautam, who neither integrates her nor regulates her nor values her, has forfeited his claim to it. The prophecy, functioning as the ultimate fatalistic agent, has hardened the structure of her oppression into a binary choice: one of them must die. In the absence of any socially legitimate exit, the parapet becomes the only door.

The peacock's cry, the haunting, recurring symbol that gives the novel its title, carries the full weight of this convergence. Structurally, it functions as what Reshu identifies as the

"Suppressed female voice": the embodiment of desire, grief, and beauty that patriarchal domesticity has rendered unspeakable (Reshu). When it finally erupts, it does so at the absolute cost of the self. Desai's genius is to make this eruption simultaneously tragic and inevitable. It becomes the logical endpoint of every sociological force she has set in motion.

7. Conclusion

Cry, the Peacock stands as a monumental literary achievement. It is a profound enactment of Durkheim's sociological theories of suicide, and simultaneously a quiet but devastating critique of their gendered blind spots. Far from being a simple tale of individual madness, Maya's harrowing journey is a meticulously constructed case study in the intersection of social forces that destroy a vulnerable mind.

Her trajectory encompasses all four Durkheimian forces. Her *egoistic* despair isolates her in a private hell of unshared symbols and unmet needs. Her *altruistic* conditioning burdens her with the impossible, gendered expectation of silent self-effacement and without any of the social recognition that historically accompanied such sacrifice. The *anomic* collapse of moral and emotional regulation leaves her desires unbounded in a modernising world that offers her no legitimate role. Finally, the *fatalistic* tyranny of her domestic confinement "pitilessly blocks" her future, choking her passions until violence becomes her only language.

By bringing Lehmann's feminist critique of Durkheim into conversation with Desai's text, this paper has argued something more precise than a simple application of sociological theory to literature. It has argued that Maya's tragedy exposes the limits of classical sociology itself: that its most capacious category for understanding women's oppression, fatalistic suicide, was precisely the one Durkheim was compelled to suppress. In this light, Desai's novel is not merely a

psychological portrait; it is a sociological argument, made in the language of fiction, stream-of-consciousness narrative, and lyric imagery, and all the more powerful for it.

Cry, the Peacock forces its readers to confront the invisible societal walls that cage the vulnerable mind and the theoretical frameworks that have, for too long, kept those walls invisible. In Maya's final cry from the parapet, Desai gives voice to what Durkheim's sociology refused to say: that the most thoroughly socialised victim of suicide is the woman who has been trained, all her life, to be nothing but a social creature, and then denied the society she was trained for.

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