

AN ECO-FEMINIST OUTLOOK IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF ANITA DESAI

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Abstract: The terms Ecology and Eco-criticism have gained much critical attention from literary critics. They have tried to study the close bond between nature and man textualized by the men of letters in their works. The relationship between living organisms and the natural environment is termed Ecology and the relationship between living organisms and the physical environment is reflected in literature through eco-criticism. Stories about the indispensable connection between man and the eco-system that he lives in can be identified in all eras. An unwritten bond keeps men connected with nature even in the digital era. The ecological concerns in Anita Desai's two novels *Cry the Peacock* and *Fire On the Mountain* is highlighted in this research paper. In contemporary literary jargon, the term Eco-Feminism has gained a wide range of attention in terms of the degradation of nature and women. The hypothesis of the paper is to highlight the exploitation encountered by women and nature by the male dominated society.

Keywords: Ecology, Environment, Exploitation, Depletion, Eco-Feminism.

The term Eco-Criticism as a study of the relationship between literature and natural environment began in the mid 1990's. An eco-critical approach towards Anita Desai's works brings out the importance of environment as one of her major themes. Even the unexplored world of female psyche is understood best by the reader through the use of nature imagery. The life of human beings is deeply rooted in nature. The Indian culture and tradition follows the teaching of the Vedas and Upanishads which instructs that Nature is a form of God. Thus in the Indian mind Ecology is co-related with spirituality, as human beings were forbidden to exploit nature. The invasion of the nation by different rulers and their influences upon the Indian culture created dissonance between man and nature, in spite of the strict precepts against the exploitation of nature.

The predominant factor in the earth is environment. The formation of almost all the civilization near river sides indicates the importance of Nature. The culture and tradition of a country is based on the environment of that particular place. Man's emotion, his language, his life style are also largely decided by the environment. Thus environment plays a part and parcel in one's life but it has been slowly eroded by human beings in the name of upgrading standards of living and material comforts. An Eco-feminist analysis is used to analyse the combination of eco-criticism and eco-feminism where it can be seen that the oppression of nature and women are intimately bound. A close association of nature and literature is depicted in the literary works of poets and writers of all ages belonging to different cultures. The aim of the writers is to create a rapport between nature and society.

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Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* contains a concern for natural depletion taking place in today's world. A strong presence of nature is vividly seen in the dramatic action of the story. The novel falls into three sections. "Nanda Kaul at Carignano", the first section deals with the lonely life of Nanda in Kasauli. The attitudinal change of Nanda Kaul towards Raka is depicted in the next section "Raka comes to Carignano". Nanda's childhood friend IlaDas' tragic end is portrayed in the third section "Ila Das leaves Carignano". Anita Desai has borrowed images and symbols from nature and thus there is a dominance of nature imagery which acts as an important part of the theme. In this novel, "the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end" (Indira 96). Desai's skilful dramatization is displayed in such a way that the experience of certain women are shown to encounter disaster basically due to the inflexible attitudes. "It displays skilful dramatization of the experience of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life" (Bidulata 77).

Desai knows that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" (Tintern Abbey 122-123) This may have been the reason for sending her protagonist Nanda to Carignano far from her long tedious life. She finds in Nature a true solace and a true lover. She pauses under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and curiously listens to the sound of the cicadas' merging under the mesh of the pine needles without having any intention to watch the activities of human beings. She becomes a close listener of Nature trying to find out an alternative solace to her pain-trodden existence. "She wanted no one and nothing else- whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (FOM 3) Nanda believes that nature has a healing power and it prompts her to "be left to the pines and Cicadas alone" (FOM 3). To escape that pain, she longs to live undisturbed. In spite of her willingness to live a peaceful life, without the intrusion of the past, nature and its movements have taken her to the past which was filled with suffocation and oppression. For instance, Nanda Kaul visualises a worm which is tormented by a hen which indicates the suppression experienced by her at the hands of the patriarchal society. She longs to be one among the pine trees, "She was grey, tall and thin-she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (FOM 4). Even Raka, her great granddaughter's arrival is an unwelcome sight to her. Nanda Kaul senses that Raka has suffered from typhoid and has been asked to stay at Carignano in the Kasauli Hills. Still, Nanda feels reluctant to welcome her. Her anger and disappointment can be recalled through these lines as: "One long finger moved like a searching insect over the letter on her lap, moved involuntarily as she struggled to suppress her anger, her disappointment and her total loathing of her daughter's meddling busy body ways, her granddaughter's abject helplessness, and her great granddaughter's impending arrival here at Carignano" (FOM 16). Images related to the worm and the insect reflect the negativity impaled within Nanda Kaul's

psyche. Thus the suffering of the worm reflects the suffering of the woman Nanda. Desai uses many symbols which are related to nature. The feelings expressed by the characters are explained through the elements of nature. During the arrival of Raka, Nanda raises a series of questions “Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?”. Desai compares Raka to a mosquito. Raka is “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to lease and worry” (FOM 44). Once again Nature imagery is used to pinpoint the threat felt by Nanda Kaul. Environment too does not allow Nanda Kaul to become an intrinsic part of it. She is compelled to observe only from distance. She is interested to go with Raka for a walk but she fails to climb the monkey park. Her inability increases her alienation.

Ila Das, friend of Nanda Kaul refuses to make compromises with the patriarchal society. It leads her to be raped and murdered by Preet Singh. As a social welfare officer, she tries to stop the atrocities against women. She tries to prevent a child being married off to an elderly person in exchange for land. The murder and rape takes place in an environment that is wild in effect in the wilderness of Nature. Thus Nature which can be solace to a woman can also become an intimidating force. This is what prompts Preet Singh to rape an elderly lady and to murder her. Desai’s novel, *Cry the Peacock* signifies the inner spirit which is more crucial than the outer actions. The mood of sensibility roar like thunder and breaks like lightning. Desai makes a close association between inner climate of feelings of the protagonist and Nature and environment. She tries to create a style to convey this intimate relationship. The pain and trauma of the female psyche is depicted through natural imagery. When compared to men, women are more attached to Nature. In the novel *Cry the Peacock* Maya desires to visit the hill-station but it is not equalled by Gautama. “On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre” (CP 89). The inertness of Desai’s male characters towards woman and nature is shown. A man uses both for his own benefit. The inseparability of life and death is symbolically shown through Maya’s thoughts. While sitting in the garden, she suddenly remembers that the Queen of the Night is a beautiful plant, but the snakes are fascinated by its fragrance. This is exactly what happens in the inevitable relationship between life and death. Life is beautiful but death is inalienable from it. It shows that where there is life, there is death. White is used as the symbol of death. Thus the dog is white in colour and the flowers of the Queen of Night are also white. In Maya’s view, Nature’s creation of life seems to attract death.

Maya’s problems are psychical but not physical. They originate and exist because of the incompatibility of temperaments. The difference in age works as a big gap in their lives. Maya is romantic and hungry for love whereas Gautama is realistic and cold. Instead of comforting Maya in her grief over the death of a pet dog Toto, he is concerned with a cup of tea. Toto is considered insignificant and replaceable by Gautama. Maya could not tolerate the loss of her pet dog and she

“saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house” (CP 7) A motherless child Maya gets all the shower of love from her father. She has been brought up as a princess. “As a child, I enjoyed, princess like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of the princes and royal queens” (C.P.41) . A brilliant, ambitious and serious- minded lawyer, Gautama married the toy princess and leaves her emotionally and spiritually starved and insecure. Living in the world of frustration and disappointment, Maya feels loneliness and says, “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 his despair” (CP 13). No one is there to console her and she becomes totally frustrated and she tells Gautama, “Oh, Gautama, pets might not mean anything to you, and yet they mean the world to me” (CP 19). Gautama feels irritated and he says “You go chattering like a monkey and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking”(CP20). Gautama’s references to Nature are negative “chattering like a monkey” whereas Maya’s attitudes are close and positive.

Anita Desai has an insight into human psyche. In her novel, feminine trauma is correlated with nature imagery which signifies the concept of eco-feminism. The close bonding of woman and nature is depicted through out the major frames of the novel while the male is shown alienated from nature. Women have not been considered as equal partners in the patriarchal society. In the family and the society they have been treated as the second- rate members. Nature has also been exploited by the same male dominating society for fulfilment of their needs and luxury. The suppression of women and nature is deeply correlated.

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