



NATURE AND WOMAN: AN ECO-FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

Dr. Dipti Ranjan Maharana

(P.G. Dept. of English, U.N. Auto. College of Sc. and Tech, Adaspur.)

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ABSTRACT



Eco-feminism is entirely a new movement that is born out of the high interest given to both feminism and 'ecological or environmental' movements in the last few decades. Eco-feminism is ecological because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and feminist on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favouritism. Feminists are interested in why women are treated as inferior to men, and why they have only been partially included in the sphere of culture. Environmentalists are interested in why nature is treated as inferior to culture and why humanity has not commonly been included within the definitions of nature. As a social, political and philosophic movement Eco-feminism considers the oppression of women and the destruction" of nature as interconnected facts. This paper analyzes and reviews Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain* (1977) in the light of eco-feminist theories. The novel explores how oppressive practices linked to patriarchal society operate forcefully on levels of gender and environment. Especially in India the identification of feminine principle with nature has its own relevance. For years the link between the world of women and the natural environment has been central to the activity and thinking of eco-feminists. Works by eco-feminists like Susan Griffin (1976), Mary Daly (1978), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ynestra King (1981), Ariel Salleh (1984), Karen Warren (1987, 1990), Val Plumwood (1993) and others stress the fact that ecology is a feminist issue. Nature is portrayed as a woman since its fundamental functions encompass reproduction and nurturing. Similarly women duties are envisioned as natural. In fact, eco-feminism as a theory developed from various feminist activisms: peace movements, labor movements, anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Political, Philosophical, Womann, Nature, Environmental, Ecology.*

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper attempts an eco-feminist reading of the woman and nature interconnectedness in Anita Desai's novel, "Fire on The Mountain" (1977) which won the National Academy of letters Award in 1977 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978. The novel depicts the darker shades of nature as connected to the darker aspects of the women concerned and their parallel domination and victimization. The text will analyze women's relationship to language and the numerous images that are rich in connotations. The paper looks at the link between women, animals and violence through a lens of material postcolonial eco-feminism. Not much attention has been paid to this topic under the rubric of eco-feminism, especially in tandem with postcolonial issues¹. Anita Desai's novel "Fire on the Mountain" (1977) provides an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial issues espoused in the fiction of male writers through a gendered perspective, while simultaneously considering the specific processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions.

ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS AND ANITA DESAI

The research and analysis done in this paper foregrounds a comparative approach, where Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is the lens through which Lee Yew Leong's short story "Honey, I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now" (2010) is read. The notion of violence is key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of women and animals in both Desai's novel and Lee's short story. A key argument that is furthered in this paper is that the "other" in the form of women and animals is central to both the novel and short story even though in both works women and animals are portrayed as apart from society. Furthermore, the woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read, while, in turn, the politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. The protagonists occupy ambivalent positions in both stories since these women belong wholly to either to the cultural or the natural worlds. They defy any romantic or celebratory categorizations of women within the natural sphere that includes non-human animals.

Anita Desai is one of the world's remarkable and one of the best Indian modern novelists in English spanning over many decades. She is an Indian novelist, a short story writer and a screenwriter who has influenced generations of latter day writers. She has enriched Indian fictional world with her significant literary outputs. Anita Desai, originally an Indian citizen, migrated to America and has been living in America. She can be considered to be an expatriate writer of the Indian origin. Anita Desai was born on 24th June 1937 in Mussoorie; a hill station situated in the foothills of the Himalayan ranges, near Dehradun, in the North Indian State of Uttaranchal, India. She was formerly known as Anita Mazumdar, daughter of Dhiren N. Mazumdar, a Bengali business executive, and the former Toni Nime, a German expatriate and a teacher.

Anita Desai's mother was a German Christian and her father a Bengali Indian. There is an advantage with the mixed parentage of complex origin when she writes about India and Indian migrants to the West. She was educated in Delhi and married Ashwin Desai, a Gujarati businessman and gave birth to four children.

Desai was multilingual. Since 1950s she has lived in many cities like Calcutta, Mumbai, Chandigarh, New Delhi and Pune. Some of the cities are well described in her novels. When she was just a child she spoke German at home and Urdu or Hindi with friends as well as Bengali and English at the school. In her interview with Jasbir Jain, she commented that all Indians are either bilingual or trilingual and one tends to employ more than one language to express and selects a word apt for the moment, which is both evocative and descriptive at the same time.

She has contributed a large literary output and has published ten novels and other literary works. She was awarded in 1978, National Academy of Letters Award for the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Anita Desai is a member of the Advisory Board of English, the National Academy of Letters in New Delhi. She is a member of American Academy of Arts and Letters. Anita Desai is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She got the Sahitya



academy award in 1978 for *Fire on the Mountain*. *Ivory Merchant*, and lasts but not the least filmed her novel *In Custody*; Anita Desai is a proud mother of Kiran Desai, the Booker's prizewinner. In 1978, Winfred Hotby Memorial Prize was given for the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. For *The Village by the Sea* she won the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.

She was shortlisted for Booker Prize three times in 1980 for *Clear Light of the Day*, in 1984 for *In Custody* and in 1999 for *Fasting, Feasting*. In 2003, she was awarded the Benson Medal for Royal Society of Literature. Anita Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College and Smith College. At present, she divides her times between teaching at the IT - USA and Cambridge and also writes for the New York review of books. Her characters revolt against established traditions regardless of the results of such rebellion. They fight against cultural ideals that come in the way of freedom. Withdrawal is a powerful weapon for many of these women characters. Desai's women want freedom within the community of men and women, as it is the only way that will succeed in fulfilling them as complete individuals. In fact, Desai's model of an emancipated woman, Bimala in the novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980), is an unmarried woman. Her married women characters like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Monisha in *Voices in the City* (1965), Nanda in *Fire in the Mountain* (1977) and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) become depressed, violent or self-destructive. Major part of Anita's fiction deals with the alienation of middleclass women.

This paper also throws light on Dr. Vandana Shiva's concept of eco-feminism, which complements the idea of interconnectedness of women and nature. Ecofeminists link their project as much to the politically oriented positions associated with social ecology and eco-marxism as to ethically and spiritually oriented deep ecology. As Giorel Curran explains, eco-feminism is best divided into two categories to allow for substantially different approaches of its two central discourses which can well be applied to the novel: a) 'cultural feminist approach' as represented by Nanda and Raka, two central characters in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*

symbolising the innate connection of women with nature and seeks to make this connection as the basis of a new approach to nature, characterised by the caring and emotional capabilities of the females; b) 'socio-ecofeminist approach' as represented by Ila, the counter of Nanda's character representing the opposite of her who rejects the patriarchal authority as a form of biological and cultural reductionistic affair. This approach attacks all forms of oppression as a manifestation of political, economic, social and historical construction (Curran 116).

Ecofeminism emphasises environmental justice in the feminine sphere. Ecofeminism is the marriage of feminism, radical environmentalism and targets the oppressions meted out by the patriarchal society on woman the crisis of which is reflected through the environment around us. Ila Das's rape in Desai's novel is mercilessly carried out in the darkness of the fields that are supposed to sustain life. The atrocities that the women suffer in Desai's novel find their culmination in Raka who sets the forest on fire in the end (Kaur, 389).

ANITA DESAI'S "FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN":

Desai's "*Fire on the Mountain*" centres on Nanda Kaul, who retreats to a former British hill-station, Kasauli, supposedly to spend her old age in peace and isolation in her house called Carignano. Her quiet life is interrupted by her great-granddaughter Raka, who is sent to her to recover from an illness. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Nanda Kaul's husband has had a life-long affair with a mathematics teacher, Miss David. Thus, Nanda's exile to Kasauli, though presented as an act of choice, is actually forced on her. She comes to terms with the reality of her self-enforced exile when she hears that her old friend Ila Das has been raped and murdered. At the same time, Raka sets the forest surrounding the house on fire. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the character of Raka and her connections with animals and violence.

It is important to note that in the book "*Fire on the Mountain*", however, Desai does not stop and foreground the conclusion that marginalized and "othered" women are necessarily only victims of



gender-related violence. Through Nanda's great-granddaughter, Raka, the text introduces a different form of female existence and even agency that differs profoundly from Nanda's. Nanda Kaul describes Raka's name, which means the moon, to be an "utter misnomer" because of "her resemblance to an insect" (Desai, 39). The zoological images ascribed to Raka are not static; they change as Nanda's feelings for Raka change and as Raka's own character goes through a subtle change from being a quiet child to eagerly exploring her surroundings. Nonetheless, Raka is still likened to a wild thing and her gestures are depicted as being animalistic. She forages for food in the forest, "drop[s] on all fours [to come] scrambling up the hill" (Desai, 73), and doubles over to lick the scratches and wounds on her arms and legs like an animal (Desai, 50). It is this very nature of being wild and animalistic that makes Raka evasive and she opts for the unruly, wild and untamed landscape surrounding Kasauli instead of the "safe, cozy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment" (Desai, 91).

At this point, Raka rejects the socio-cultural domain and the text seems to suggest that it is impossible to contain her as she actively frees herself from all close ties and boundaries that shackled Nanda at some point. Raka is shown to be upset at the distress of the animals around her or at the violence meted out to them. Through these incidences of animal abuse, Desai connects the issue of intertwined oppressions of animals and women, demonstrating that it is instructive to consider incidents of male-induced violence no matter where it is directed. Two scenes from the novel, at the Pasteur Institute and the Kasauli Club, depict the culmination of such male violence. When Raka inquires about the Pasteur institute from Ram Lal, he tells her, "It is where doctors make serum for injections. Once a dog had gone mad and bitten everyone in the village. The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too, many animals. They use them for tests. Oh, they are always boiling".

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion the readers find that Raka and Annie (even Wei Hsiong, to a certain extent) are removed and distanced from society, and as such are characterized as "others" and yet are centred in the works by Desai and Lee. This paper has explored the connections between these women and animals without the aim of privileging one over the other. It is important to note that neither author offers any utopian solutions to any of the characters' predicaments. Eco-feminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine attitudes. Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" (1977) depicts gradual destruction of the eco-system of the Kasauli hills and its eventual destruction by the devastating forest fire. The characterization in the novel also echoes this gradual desiccation. The response of the female characters to life has been externalized with natural images to proliferate their inner consciousness. Desai's characters carry on a dual life; the inner and the outer. The three protagonists are trapped in dualistic pattern in which man symbolizes brutality, dominance and violence. In fact, the novel, "Fire on the Mountain" addresses and unfolds an amazing variety of issues; motherhood, femininity, isolation, death, exile, violence, patriarchal domination and exploitation of nature. It also embodies dualistic issues; nature versus civilization, wilderness versus domesticity and free will versus fate. By re-reading and re-interpreting these writings to unsettle the binaries of culture/nature and human/animal through the fictional representations, the women's ambivalent position emerges in the authors' works. Both Raka and Annie cannot be said to be romantically aligned with nature and the natural sphere. The notion of violence has been the key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of both women and animals, where violence exposes the patriarchal instrumentalist mindset regarding both women and animals. Women's and animals' suffering due to this violence is then inextricably linked to pay attention to wrongs against women as well as animals.

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