

Ecofeminism; A Paradigm of Women-Nature Nexus: Prospective Analysis of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is an analytical approach which has been in use for some time but is still at a preliminary stage. An ecofeminist analysis would involve the combination of ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical frame, where it would be imperative to interpret that the oppression of nature and women are intimately bound. The present article aims to study the exploitation confronted by the woman in Indian society in correlation with nature which is also oppressed and exploited by male dominated society. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* studies such predicaments which lead the woman and nature both to astray.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Nature

1 Introduction

The intimate consociation of nature and literature is depicted in the literary works of poets and writers of all ages, belonging to different cultures of the world ubiquitously. The aim of the ecocritics is to illustrate the aforementioned rapport of nature and society as

contextualized by the writers in their works. In this frame of reference, the terms which have gained utmost importance are ecology and ecocriticism. In the present day scenario, Ecology portrays the manner in which plants, animals and humans are linked to each other and their habitat. This consanguinity is virtually complementary so that any imbalance in one disturbs the other automatically. Unwittingly, changes in the environment have impinged upon civilization so intensely that it might lead to its absolution from the face of earth. Hence, the concern for ecological subjects has become a crucial issue today. Literature renowned for imitating the contemporary problems could not have remained untouched from this concept. This uprising threat to humanity from unceasing misuse of our ecosystem has seized the attention of the writers in recent past. The textualization of aforementioned environmental problems in literary works has given rise to a new division of literary theory, namely ecocriticism.

However, the most important approach with in ecocriticism and ecological activism is that of the ecofeminists. The term ecofeminism was coined by the Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. She used it "to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet" (Merchant 184). The perception of equating women with nature antecedes to the times of archaic classical mythology. Nature is portrayed as a woman as its fundamental functions encompasses reproduction and nurture. Similarly women's duties are contemplated as natural to her. Thus, the liaison of nature and women is best described by the phrase: - Nature naturalizes women and women feminize nature. One approach to discuss the relation between women and nature is to interpret the coextensive demeanour they have been wielded into in patriarchal society.

Women's role has been to fulfill the demands and aspirations of men. Correspondingly, nature is supposed to have an innate constitution of catering to human needs. Hence, both

women and nature are exploited by men leading to a mutual association between oppression of women and deterioration of nature.

Ecofeminist theory originates from this vital hypothesis that both women and nature are uniformly harassed by male ways of thinking and deeds. The central claims which constitute the heart of this analysis are:-

- The coercion of both women and nature are annexed.
- To unearth the aforesaid association in order to explain both the oppression of women and nature.
- Feminist analysis must cover ecological vision.
- A feminist context must be an element of any proposed ecological solution.

A profound investigation at each of these claims will highlight the concerns of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism as perpetuated in *Cry, the Peacock*

In the patriarchal society, women have not been seen as the equal partners. They have been treated as the second-rate members in the family and the society. Simone de Beauvoir's observation is very illuminating and cited in *Feminism; Theory. Criticism, Analysis*: "The situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other." (33) In a similar way nature has been exploited by the same male dominating society for fulfilment of its needs and luxury. Hence the oppression of woman and nature is deeply correlated. The cries of both go unheard and their pain go unfelt. This symptom generally remains unnoticed by male writers, but female writers x-ray the genuine feminine and nature's anguish. It is an integral part of their lives.

Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* signifies the inner spirit, the mood of sensibility that roars like thunder and instantly outbreaks forward like lightning. It is more crucial than the

outer climate or the visible action. Since her consociation is with the inner climate of feelings rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to imitate the style to convey the intimate relationship of the protagonist with nature and environment. The relationship of female and non human entities clearly depicts the fact that woman is more severely attached with nature as compared to man. The pain and trauma felt by the female character is represented through a natural imagery mimicking similar condition.

Maya is a motherless child but her father showers all his love on her. 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 regal queens” (41).The princess of the toy is married to an imaginatively starved, emotionally barren and cool headed, middle aged man, Gautama. Gautama, a brilliant ambitious and serious-minded lawyer, leaves Maya emotionally and spiritually starved and insecure.

Perhaps their great difference in age worked as a big gap in their lives. Her problems are not physical but psychical. They originate and exist because of the incompatibility of temperaments. Maya is romantic and hungry for love whereas Gautama is realistic and cold. Sensitive as the legendary pumpkin wine, she is threatened to dry up at the mere show of a finger and is unable to differentiate between the desirable and the plausible. Instead of comforting her in her grief over the death of a pet dog, Toto, Gautama is concerned with a cup of tea. He considers the pet dog insignificant and replaceable. He is unable to comprehend the value of emotional attachment. As Maya is a childless woman, she loves Toto more than people in general love their pets. 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.” (7).

She wants Toto to be buried in a befitting manner. The death of her pet dog reminds her of loneliness. She had to bear in the early parts of her life: “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 this despair”. (13) The pet’s death shatters Maya beyond measure. She is left alone in the world of frustration and disappointment. No one will come to console her. Everyone has his or her own fad. So she tells Gautama, “Oh, Gautama, pets might not mean anything to you, and yet they mean the world to me”. (19) This irks him and he says, “You go chattering like a monkey and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking.” (20). The close association of Maya with her pet dog represents her proximity to nature and environment.

Gautama is detached, philosophical, rational and inconsiderate. He symbolises the oppressor, of both woman and nature. His constant harping on detachment as preached in The Bhagvad Gita and his discouraging response to her requests and suggestions including the desire to go to the hill station points to an inert attitude toward nature. There is no place for Maya in the world of Gautama. He neither understands her nor wishes her to enter his world. Thus his world is totally strange to Maya: “On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre” (89.) Maya, a childless woman and having no vocation to pursue, finds herself in utter suffocating loneliness.

Gautama treats Maya as a child and she resents it. Once both of them were walking together and Maya talked of the flower, Gautam plucked it and gave it to Maya saying, ““Who should deny you that?” he said, and smiled at me as to a winsome child.” (102) Then in the debate, Maya said, “And you will think me a tiresome child for it, for showing what you once called my ‘third-rate poetess’s mind’... (96). Maya’s likings and hobbies takes her more close to Mother Nature.

Anita Desai has an insight into human psyche. At many points in her novel, she correlates the feminine trauma with nature imagery, which signifies the concept of ecofeminism in her novel. She equally shows the inertness of her male characters towards woman and nature who uses them for their benefits only. The death of Maya's pet dog aggravates her mental condition. It makes her increasingly conscious of the mysterious working of destiny. Gautama's rational mind initially fails to suspect it. When he realizes it, it is too late to mend. He is totally indifferent and insensitive to natural beauty, smells, colours, and sounds in the way so characteristic of Mr Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*. Maya realizes :

“Already we belonged to separated worlds, and his seemed the earth that I loved so, scented with Jasmine, coloured with liquor, resounding with poetry and warmed by amiability. It was mine that was hell. Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment—these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain.” (88). Gautama dismisses the possibility of stars influencing human lives but the terror persists deep in Maya's consciousness and paralyzes more and more the normal motions of her mind and heart. The intimate consociation of woman and nature is depicted in major frames of the novel while the male is shown alienated from nature.

Maya's predicament is to come to terms with the astrologer's prediction and to enjoy the moments of life on earth with her practical minded husband. But she, as a creature of “song, dance and flowers” meets with the situation which is beyond her control, and consequently goes mad. Maya's feelings about Gautama are revealed through her words. To her, his hand appears “as cool and dry as the bark of an old shady tree”. (22) Maya reveals her neurotic mind through the appropriate use of words, “Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of tone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering tapering edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock... Danger!”

(150).The vocabulary clearly shows the use of natural icons to depict human condition and character.

Anita Desai presents Maya's conflict using nature imagery. In sum, the key to understanding Maya's character in light of ecofeminism represents her exploited self as like nature's severe damage through the conceptions of patriarchal society. She being a miserable and lonely woman finds herself close to nature and describes each aspect of her life through natural icons.

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