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Nature and its relevance in Anita Desai's selected novels

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the most gifted and prominent novelists in Indian English Fiction. Born to a mixed parentage, Bengali father and German mother, on 24th June, 1937, Anita Desai was well versed in four languages: Hindi, English, Bengali and German. Despite this, she chose to write her novels, stories and children book in English. She is not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term. The major themes of her novels are isolation, lack of communication, inner struggle, man woman relationship and marital discord. Anita Desai stands ahead of other women writers for her focus on the inner climate of her characters. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. Anita Desai often employs a psychological technique to delve into the inner thoughts and emotions of her characters. She explores the mental state of her female characters using vivid and symbolic nature imagery to convey their emotional landscapes. Anita Desai uses nature imagery in her novels to depict the moods of her protagonists. All her protagonists are nature lovers and they understand nature as an extension of their self. They are conscious of the trees, flowers and animals around them and often Desai uses the moods of nature as symbols to express the moods of her protagonists. The present paper is an effort to bring forth some of the important nature imagery used by Anita Desai to describe the mental state of her character Maya in *Cry the Peacock*.

Keywords: Symbolism, eco-criticism, inner weather, inner landscape

Introduction

The term 'eco-criticism' was first coined by author William Rueckert (1926-2006) in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' (1978). The eco-criticism movement of the late twentieth century was marked by an appreciation of nature and all its beauty. Ecocriticism investigates the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed in literature. One of the main goals of ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. This form of criticism has gained a lot of attention during recent years due to higher social emphasis on environmental destruction and increased technology. It is hence a fresh way of analyzing and interpreting literary texts, which brings new dimensions to the field of literary and theoretical studies.

From the beginning of human civilization, nature has been viewed as a primary source of living and income. There is no end of utilising natural resources as a free gift of nature. It has been used and misused by man since long. Consequently, nature is gradually fading away from its natural setting. Many authors have expressed their sincere concern for depleting natural resources due to man's unsatiated greed and growing population.

Anita Desai is one of the few Indian writers in English, in the post-colonial era, whose fictions are replete with physical environment and human interaction with it., especially the female characters. Nature images in her fiction allows the reader to peep into the unexplored realms of feminine psyche. Anita Desai's images such as zoological, botanical meteorological and coloured represent actions, approaches, feelings and state of mind of particular characters or situations. Through the evocation of images, Desai transcribes the human condition and predicament.

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Literature Review

Several studies on her works have been done so far. Some of them are as follows

R. S Sharma has found the essence of Anita Desai's fiction in its explanatory nature. In his book *Anita Desai* (1981), he has tried to show a tension between prose of form and poetry of life as acting upon the lives of the characters of Anita Desai. He also shows Desai trying to achieve a unity between the two through a series of parallelism and contrast at thematic and structural level.

Madhusudan Prasad, in his book *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (1982) studied Anita Desai's novels from various perspectives. He highlights her existential concerns in her novels. He emphasizes the imagery, symbolism, narrative techniques, lyrical prose and other aspects of her art.

The novels of Anita Desai have been interpreted from the psychological perspective in the book *The Novels of Anita Desai* (1988) by Usha Bande. She considers her novels from the point of view of Third Force Psychology evolved by Karn Horney.

In the novel *Cry, The Peacock*, Anita Desai narrates the story of Maya, a young and sensitive woman married to Gautama, a busy and prosperous lawyer, who is twice her age. As a child, whose mother had died and her brother settled abroad, Maya grew up with a lot of affection from her advocate father, Rai Sahib. This loving attention, however, hovers over her married life like a deadly shadow as her husband fails to satisfy her intense longing for love and life. She makes attempts to fit into the social circle of Leila and Pom, however, she finds it difficult to adjust with the pettiness of men and women. She finds the women in the party hosted by Mrs. Lal laughing at the poverty of others, showing off their wealth and admiring vulgarity and depravity. All of these prove to be powerless to dispel her nightmares. Possessed by the vision of an albino astrologer who predicted the death of either her husband or herself, she is unable to sleep in peace. Tormented by a fear of death, she loses her sanity and transfers a death wish onto Gautama. She unconsciously contemplates his murder, until the day an intense dust storm arises. She asks Gautama to accompany her to the roof terrace; pausing at the parapet, she pushes him over the edge to "pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom" (Desai 184). The novel depicts the protagonist's mental and emotional landscapes and their intensities through nature images. Maya's inner landscape, being incompatible with life's social realities, causes her to suffer from psychic turmoil and abject loneliness.

Nature images in *Cry the Peacock* explore the emotional world of Maya, the protagonist, and travel down her psychology to unravel her distorted world. The first zoological image that we come across is Maya's pet dog Toto on whom she showered her love. Maya was childless even after four years of her marriage with Gautama but as luck would have it, Toto died leaving her alone. The death of Toto introduces the theme of alienation and the death motif.

Maya is on the threshold of emotional breakdown being unable to bear the reality of her pet's death. As a married woman, her motherly instincts remain unfulfilled which she saw in her pet dog Toto, a transferred love object. Since love is an overwhelming powerful element in the life of women, it must get an instinctive outlet. As the novel begins the scavenging arrangements are being made to carry away

Maya's pet dog. She begins to cry which is a sign of her motherly attachment for the dead dog. The incident describes the agony and depression suffered by Maya on the death of her pet dog, Toto. After tea, doing the needful for the disposal of Toto's dead body, Gautama says "it's all over, come and drink and stop crying, you mustn't cry" (Desai 6). Gautama fails to understand the situation. Maya is so obsessed with the death of her dog that she fails to realize that death is a natural phenomenon that comes to all:

"All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved into the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. So, she moved the little string bed on which it lay under the lime trees, where there was a cool, aqueous shade, 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." (Desai 7)

Through the symbolic use of nature, Anita Desai throws light on the perennial cycle of life and death. The spring season symbolizes creation and new life. Another example for nature versus human being is when one day Maya goes to dinner party at Lal's with her husband, there she sees orchids and she feels restless to think about them. She tells Gautama, "There were orchids in a basket on the veranda.... But Mrs. Lal said they never flower. They are hill orchids, you see. They will soon be dead" (Desai 63). This statement of Maya is very evocative. Through orchids Anita Desai paints Maya's real life. These are hill orchids but have been brought to the different environment and so cannot survive there. Maya belongs to a different life style and is unable to adjust herself to her present life. The orchids do not flower, and this is symbolic of Maya's barrenness. The botanical image of the "sapless and sere neem tree" and the image of "the silk cotton trees" whose "huge, scarlet blooms" were "squashed into soft yellowish miasma" (Desai 34) symbolically project the inner void and isolation of a childless housewife.

She enjoys the temporary beauty of dew drops on the petals of roses and blades of grass; nature also plays a vital role in the life of Maya. It always tries to entertain Maya, by giving its shades, smell through flowers, gentle breeze, and warm welcomes in the verandas of Maya's Garden. In four years since Maya and Gautama were married, Maya feels certain that one of them has to die she never thinks the possibility of averting the calamity by accepting the advice of the albino and seeking the grace of the merciful god almighty. She dares not speak of it to Gautama and there were no friends with whom she could share her fears. The albino becomes the nightmare and his prophecy haunts her repeatedly. "It seemed real, I could recall each detail, and yet God, Gautama, father surely it is nothing but a hallucination. Surely not, I sobbed" (Desai 12)

Maya was dejected and desperate in the beginning of her married life. Gautama is no company for Maya. They are mis-matched. A peasant is married to a princess as far as the tastes are concerned. Maya had a desire like other women for sex and also for a child. She had several images of man-woman relationship in her mind. A man winked to a woman who followed him to a shuttered house. She had heard the peacocks and peahens crying "Pia, Pia", lover, lover. But Gautama was fast asleep invulnerably before she came to him after changing her dress.

The images of petunias and lemon blossoms suggest the temperamental isolation between Gautama and Maya. There was not one, but several important issues on which Gautama and Maya differed from each other. Gautama thought that Maya's upbringing had insulated her from the harsh realities of life, "Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities of life?" (Desai 58)

She had the desire to attend the Mushaira going on outside her room, but a woman had no place among men, no matter she had greater capability to appreciate the Urdu couplets. She found that Gautama in particular had asked her by his gestures that she should not stay. She was shocked as if she had truly found a blemish in her unscarred skin. She felt that Gautama had no love for her because she didn't have the longish face of a learned woman. To add insult to injury, he made a long speech against the sentiment of love, laced with the quotations from the Gita, to tell Maya that she should not expect love which he calls attachment, from him. He did not know that Krishna had love for all, even for those whom he had to kill to make them free from their vicious lives of sin.

He tries to dominate Maya in all aspects, follows the principles and philosophy of detachment. The author shows the character Gautama as a ruler, as holding the power of a husband and shows Maya as a ruled one and as a typically Indian wife. The starkness and barrenness in nature correspond to the pattern of life and the protagonist's level. The author points out the quality of the nature and its impact, it rules the mind of Maya and she becomes unknowingly moved towards nature as a ruled one. Another example which is shared in the novel is that it abounds incidents that show how her longing for outdoor life is constantly frustrated mainly by Gautama. As a child she had enjoyed the scenic beauty and cool weather of Darjeeling and now she longs to go there with Gautama. To her imploration to take her to the south, Gautama coolly suggests that she has to wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to Delhi. He apparently sees no strong reason to undertake a tiresome journey down south in the sweltering summer. This incident shows how Gautama tries to dominate as a ruler and Maya as a ruled one. Desai's protagonists are always suppressed by male- domination.

Maya associates her happy sensations and pleasant emotions with birds, plants, flowers, fruits and poetry. Animal imagery acts as a significant outlet to express her latent fears and hatred. The colour symbolism, dance symbolism, the symbolic function of stars and moon provide much needed density to the thin texture of the novel.

Maya recollects her dream-like childhood. She recalls fondly her father's hair, "he is like a silver oak himself, with his fine, silver-white hair brushed smoothly across his bronzed scalp." (p.37) Her adoration for him is reflected in comparison of her childhood life to a "Moghul Garden". She says, "as a child, I enjoyed princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian-Nights..." (Desai 41) Maya thinks about her brother, Arjuna. She compares her brother to a 'wild bird' because he constantly tries to escape from the stifling rich world of his father. He made friends with boys of poor persons and defied his father. He hated easy and comfortable life, rode a bicycle took interest in football matches, loved walking on dusty streets. He ran away from home to America. Arjuna's attitude is brought through reference of kites, "Mine were awkward kites that never lost their earth-bound inclination. Arjuna's were birds -hawks,

eagles, and swallows in the wind.... Which sailed high, high, together..." (Desai 114) These images suggest their inner needs. Maya is a creature of the earth but Arjuna wants to fly away into distant realms and attain some meaning in life.

The image of an iguana is used to express Maya's psychic disorder reaching a climax. The image of a domestic cat is metamorphosed into horrifying iguanas. When Maya sees the cat slinking in the room, she wails out: "Iguanas, my blood ran cold, and I heard the slither of its dragging tail even now, in white day light." "Get off - I tell you, get off! Go!" (Desai 147) Maya stands for the domestic cat that under pressure goes wild and neurotic like the iguanas. The iguanas suggest her neurosis and melancholy. The animal images in Maya's mind indicate her submerged instinctive drive. The image of the caged monkeys on the railway platform stirs and excites her agony. The monkeys were being taken to the laboratory. The monkeys are packed in a train in such a way that they don't have enough space to even sit. The plight of the monkeys moved her to pity. She too is caged within her nostalgic remembrances. It also signifies her loss of privacy, her loss of isolated life, a life of domestic imprisonment. As a result, the monkeys boisterously struggling inside the cage for liberation remind Maya of her own alienation and estrangement.

Anita Desai also uses various dance images which repeat itself to indicate the growing impatience and fatality in Maya. One of these images is the 'Kathakali Dance'. The images of 'Cabaret Dance' and 'Bear Dance' depict the cruel exploitation of the society. Another mythological image is used to explain the dance of death. The image is the 'Dance of Shiva' which is used as a symbol of liberation. The 'Dance of the Peacocks' described is the most significant of all the images around which the title of the novel revolves. Maya's love of life is reflected in the splendid dance of the peacock whose 'Dance of Joy' is the 'Dance of the Death'. Desai aptly narrates:

Pia, Pia", they cry. "Lover, lover, Mio, Mio - I die, die - how they love the rain - these peacocks. They spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance, but, like Shiva's, their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end (Desai.95).

Gautama remains mute to the cry of peacock because he is isolated from the milieu. He has neither sexual urge nor sensual desire. Hence Maya, the 'peahen' fails to get any response from Gautama, the 'peacock'. The meteorological image of dust-storm is used artistically in this novel. It denotes the fierce storm rising in Maya's subconscious mind, her desire for "release from bondage, release from fate, release from death and dearness and unwanted dreams" (Desai219). Maya welcomes the storm with the pleasure of a dancer and notices in it the source of both agony and ecstasy.

As Maya grows anxious about self-preservation, she more strongly perceives Gautama's death. The recurrent image of an owl is also a sign of death. Before Maya pushes Gautama, she draws his attention to the owl: "Listen, I said, stopping at a sound." "Do you hear that? It's an owl" (Desai. 178). The owl is the haunting image of death. The animal motifs recur in the novel to help readers connect with the raw experience of anguish and alienation. Maya finds the peacocks "shrieks of pain" to be "blood-chilling" and after Gautama's death - she eases her frustration by

pondering how peacocks break their bodies in order to relieve their pain. An image that is portentous.

Gautama's continued indifference to her advances exasperated her to the degree that she thought, Gautama had no contact with the world or with Maya. She cried with the peacocks for a mate but Gautama did not hear it. This situation agitated her so much that she started feeling the pressure of circumstances on her mind. At times she felt why should she love Gautama. In the final moments, she and Gautama went up the stairs to have a stroll. Gautama did not notice the odour of limes, the melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, did not have time to count the stars, he was lost in a case. As he started explaining the case, Gautama made a mistake. Maya felt he had come between her and her moon that she was almost worshipping. As Gautama lost the balance, she could not get hold of him. Thus, Gautama died.

So, nature is always in co-existence with the tit bits of everyday life and also colourfully portrays every aura of human existence and mental stages and reflects it in the ambience in which humans live. Women show an enhanced sensibility towards nature. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is an intuitive and poetically sensitive woman who enjoys spending time with nature elements, birds and animals, fruits and flowers, and her pets.

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