

ANITA DESAI'S *CRY; THE PEACOCK*:

ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that links feminism with ecology. Several movements all over the world describe that ecology continues life on the earth. The French writer, Francoise d' Eaubonne has coined the term 'eco-feminism' in her work '*Le Faminismeou La Mort*' (1974). It was further developed by Ynestra King in about 1976 and became movement in 1980. Ecofeminism attempts to demonstrate an understanding of the interconnections between the domination of human being and nature by sex, race and class. It is based on certain fundamental existence of important connection between oppression of women and oppression of nature by the masculinist methods and attitudes.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Imagery.

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Perspectives:

The study of women and nature is the backbone of the ecofeminism. According to Jenet Biehl, there is a mystical connection between women and nature. Rosemary Ruether points out that spirituality and activism can be combined effectively in ecofeminism. Vandana Shiva (Indian philosopher) says that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it. Women are more careful and delicate towards nature and its creation than men. Women and nature are exploited and oppressed by the age old tradition of patriarchy and society. Mother Nature is the common personification of nature that highlights 'life giving' and 'life nurturing' aspect in the literary works. This may be the common thread that makes ecology as a feminist issue. On this basis, ecofeminism can be defined as a 'value system' to realise exploitation of nature and man's attitude towards women.

The word 'nature' is derived from the Latin word 'natura' i.e. essential qualities or innate disposition or life on the earth. Nature comprises the natural, physical or material world that exists on the earth. Right from the existence of the human race, nature has been a source of energy and life on the earth. The cycle of day and night, seasons, birds, animals, plants, flowers, trees and green vegetation highlight the importance of regularity and continuity of life on the earth. These natural surroundings of human being influence and affect their life. The great poet and philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan is a fine example that describes the relationship between nature and human being.

Anita Desai derives her images from the variety of sources. Her most important source is nature. By means of imagery, Anita Desai brings abstract, indefinable

situations and elusive character traits down to the level of tangible reality. Imagery helps to establish the setting and to built up the atmosphere which are vital aspects of her novels. It also helps her to present her themes and ideas effectively. She also uses imagery as a predictive and shadowing device. There are several examples in '*Cry: the Peacock*' to show that images foreground certain crucial events, changes in the attitudes of characters and also portend the conclusion. Imagery brings out the narrator's or writer's attitude towards the character and thus helps in establishing the tone and point of view. It also analyses more vivid and introduces an element of concreteness and sensuousness in the novel.

Imagery in '*Cry: the Peacock*'

The relation between women and nature is at the centre of *Cry; the Peacock*. An eco-feministic approach marks the importance of the nature which is one of the major themes in the novel. Nature imagery helps the readers to look into the realms of the female psyche. Anita Desai has used nature literally or metaphorically to describe the human conditions and predicament. She has used clusters of images to peep in the mind of Maya, the protagonist of the novel. The nature images such as birds, flowers, plants, trees, stones, sea, fruits, and poetry are used to explore the mid of the protagonist. These images can be groped as animal, bird, colour, flower, plant and tree imagery. Anita Desai uses animal and bird imagery in her novel. She uses bird imagery to describe Maya's affinity with the people while animal imagery to express her latent fears, nausea, and hatred for the obnoxious and repelling people.

Animal Imagery:

The first animal imagery is death of Toto, Maya's pet dog which is used not a structural device but also to describe the theme of alienation and Maya's psychic disorder. The death of Toto fills Maya's mind with fear of death. She fails to realize that death is a natural phenomena one has to accept. Animal images weave a terrifying pictures that mount fears and insanity of Maya. Dog, snakes, rats caged monkeys, wild cat, bear etc. describe Maya's romantic notion but it is got oppressed in an outer world of detachment and insensitive. The *rats* (p 183) become the objective correlative of Maya's own spirit, violent and restless foreshadowing the impending tragedy. The rats prefer to live in darkness. The cabaret dance which Maya witnessed with Gautama and his friends is a frightening, sickening experience to her. The '*wild cat calls*' of the

cabaret dancers is explicit to the sexual exploitation and oppression of the cabaret women dancers. The scene brings to her mind a painful memory of a bear dance, she saw as a child. It reminds her loss of freedom of her childhood :

"The bear balance on its tired feet, his snout up in the air as though in prayer and his unexpectedly small frail paws curled, like a sleeping child's ... shaggy, clumsy, old and exhausted." (p. 86)

The image of the caged monkeys at the railway station completes the picture of Maya's intense suffering at her assumed captivity -

There I was amongst them, amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in an infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh and rattled them, shook them, crying over and over again, 'let me out', I want to live, Gautama, I want to live!' (p.156)

Bird Imagery:

A lizard, the pigeons, the doves and the peacock are the bird imagery that clear the unconscious mind of Maya. The astrologer keeps '*flicking the fold of his robe over his lions*' (p.31) as '*a lizard flicks its tongue at a petrified victim*' (p.32). Thus the astrologer assumes the role of tormenter and Maya sees herself as the victim '*stickly net of his shadow*'(p.32). The pigeon's '*nests that were filled with babies* (p.35) fills her mind with a longing for motherhood '*the doves in the mood of mating, cooed to each-other until I was distracted I counted them as omens of ill-fortune , of separation...*(p.35)

Apart from these images, the thematic image, the dance of the peacock, defines the tragic predicament of Maya. In legend, the peacock waits for the monsoon. It's frenzied dance for a male is a sign of its own impending death.

Pia, pia they cry. Lover, lover, Mio I die, I 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. (p.95)

The dance of the peacock merged with the symbol of Shiva's dance which Maya views at the end of the novel before the final catastrophe. The meaning becomes clear when Maya's view the dance as the death which symbolises death and freedom for her tortured psyche. Maya identifies herself completely with the peacocks and hear her own fate in their agonizing call love and death, (p. 96). The principle of life is based on the constant juxtaposition of life and death. Life itself combines death. Maya feels so close to the peacocks that she waits for the first rain and the dust storm before she takes the step of killing Gautama. As she wants to experience the promise of life given by the rain, she pushes Gautama to fulfil the other demand of the rain clouds. The desire or determination to murder Gautama has been in her subconscious state of mind. In the beginning of the novels she says that the act of murder for basic things like love or life, passion or revenge should be existing and adventurous.

Flower Imagery:

Like animal and bird imagery, flower imagery too denotes the changed perception of Maya. The terrible prophecy and the fear of death along with resultant anguish make her vision of life diseased. The purple flowers of *bouganvilleas* look 'like warn blood bathing her' (p.21) and movement of the small star-like flower seems to her as the slow mysterious movement of 'nocturnal snakes' (p. 12). She tries to have the petunias. All these flowers remind her death which seems to tell that her life is limited. All these flowers remind her life in death and she is unable to reconcile herself between her childhood home 'the graceful winter' and her husband's house 'the arid summer'.

Colour Imagery:

It has its own symbolic import that forms a symbolic pattern of imagery. Darkness is equated with isolation, madness, desperation and death.

'Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke of distance, separation and loneliness... the longer I gazed, the further they (the stars) retreated, till there was only the darkness hanging, like a moist shroud, over our heads.' (p. 22)

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Frequent references to the darkness indicate her insanity, fear of her mind and cut off from the external world *'.... the long black vacuum'* (p. 185) the concluding lines of the novels evoke a resigned, death like atmosphere.

' There was silence and then the dark quiet then both (Mother and Maya) disappeared into the dark quiet. All around the dark was quiet then'. (p.212)

The white colour embraces gentle as well as evil qualities. Meena Bellippa observes *'the emotion of the novel is central in white'*. The fluffy whiteness of Toto when alive is enduring but its white corpse is fighting. When the silk-cotton pods burst

'... the airy fairy puffs of silver streaked whiteness were released and sailed through the air like angelic soft-feathered birds'.(p. 34)

Through the use of white colour a host of images describe sensuous pleasure of Maya. The prophesy of the albino astrologer, Maya changes her vision and looks albino prophesy i.e. death in every object of nature. Even morning light strikes her like *'a white hot block of heavy metal'* (p.127). In her delirium, she images wild *'white'* horse *'galloping up paths of stone'* (p.180). Thus white become an inextricable element of her insane consciousness.

The images of moon and stars gearing *'white'* colour from an important of colour imagery. They contribute images of *light* but Maya's sick consciousness can't enjoy it. All the time, there is distance between herself and Gautama or her isolation and fear of death moon reminds her impending death

'shooting-star, rockets, comet great fountain of light, light, diamond, brilliant, sapphire light, Darkness, chaos-gone ... this was it, the ultimate, absolute joy...were one more flower to unfurl that night, one small bird to cry, if one bright star were to be shattered and fall now – I could not have borne it, no. I was filled, filled to the point of destruction. ...let it remain so. Let it remain so... (p. 23-24)

The colour *'white'* does not suggest any particular atmosphere or attitude, but takes an different suggestion as the context changes.

The secondary colours that one used in the novel are 'grey' and 'red'. The use of these colour images describe the emotional responses of Maya towards people things, events and situations. Grey symbolizes Gautama and his arid philosophy of life. Red colour symbolises Maya's passion for life and her inherent violence. She is furious at Gautama's choice of colours, melodies and tones of nature.

'Grey, Grey, allowas Grey for Gautama, Who lives so narrowly'(p.196).

Plant Imagery:

The use of botanical imagery describes Maya's inner restlessness: '*leafless tree*', '*silky cotton trees with huge bosom*' suggest the painful reality of her arbitrary. The male papaya trees, withered pink carnations and red roses reflect her repressed sexual desires. The repeated use of the words '*chaste*' and '*virginal*' with reference to flower and the moon suggests erotic starvation of Maya. Her longing and despair are projected in an image of moon

'Butterfly, moon rising, falling, how waning, now waxing. The eternal flux, the eternal decay of a world of rubies and butterflies'(p.94)

Her inability to capture the external world of rubies and butterflies is juxtaposed with her unattained closeness with her husband.

By using images from nature, Anita Desai has expressed the sensibility of a young woman acutely. Maya is chaste and sweet virginal flower but she is a victim of two egoistic strong minded men in the practical world. Both try to mould Maya, according to their fancies and in the process crush the delicate, sensitive young girl. Unable to adjust with them, she goes limp and lifeless. Anita Desai explores Maya's helpless situation through the nature imagery. She has interwoven themes, language nature and Maya very effectively in the novel. Nature becomes inseparable part of the novel. The use of perfect ecological framework describes her ability to carve such as deep emotions within the dexterous use of imagery.

To conclude, the present research paper highlighted the pivotal relationship between nature and women. Nature and women share several common things related to creation and destruction. The acute exploration of women's psychic nature is possible to describe with the help of the nature. The ecofeminist theory highlights the

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ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment which is described in Women writing Indian fiction in English. Thus eco-feminism provides an important counterpoint to the study of theory and activism related to feminism and ecology.

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