



Ecofeminist Landscapes in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*

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Abstract

In modern parlance, landscape can be understood in various contexts that range from urban and rural, to emotional and repressive, to revolutionary. The concept of landscape is thus an entanglement of nature and culture. It is simultaneously a spatial and mental entity and involves a temporal dimension (Tress & Tress, 2001). Through a close reading of Anita Desai's novels *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, this paper investigates the environmental landscapes of the tropical Indian settings, and the psychological landscapes of the two female protagonists. The novels self-exploratory journeys of the central female characters Maya and Sita, bring forth the anguish of middle-class Indian women who live a life of lack, loss and longing in an oppressive patriarchal system that does not give them space to express themselves or be heard. Through these narratives, the paper examines how landscapes of the feminine psyche, landscapes of tropical India and landscapes of middle-class Hindu women present an ecofeminist quest for integration of self through nature.

Keywords: Cultural Landscapes, Psychological Landscapes, Ecology, Ecofeminism, Environment, Nature-Culture, Anita Desai, Tropical India

Introduction: Ecofeminist Landscapes

Anita Desai, winner of the 1978 Sahitya Akademi award, is especially noted for the fine projection of female characters in her novels. The language of interconnection in her writings evokes emotions that reintegrate human existence with the natural environment. As a result, humans in her novels are part of the ecosystem, rather than being discreet identities merely projected onto an environmental panorama. Her two novels *Cry the Peacock* (1980) and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1982), examined from an ecofeminist perspective, highlight the natural, cultural and psychic landscapes observed in her writings.

In these two novels, landscapes range across various contexts, from oppressively hot urban environments, to rural tropical escapes, and these in turn are always an aspect of psychological landscapes informed by culture. Anita Desai's two main female characters' inner lives, filled with turmoil, are finely expressed in tropical nature images and landscape memories.

The self-exploratory journeys of the central female characters Maya and Sita, bring forth the anguish of middle-class Indian women who live a life of lack, loss and longing in an oppressive patriarchal system that does not give them space to express themselves or be heard. Through these narratives, this paper examines how landscapes of the feminine psyche, landscapes of tropical India and landscapes of middle-class Hindu women present an ecofeminist quest for integration of self through nature.

In this paper I understand the concept of landscape to involve an intertwining of nature and culture. It is simultaneously a spatial and mental entity and involves a temporal dimension (Tress & Tress, 2001). Anita Desai's novels specifically evoke ecofeminist landscapes, where her female characters express themselves through nature images called up from the tropical Indian environments that they inhabit. Her novels also call up the long history of nature-culture landscapes in the Hindu Indian tradition, and how these have changed from ancient times, to be denigrated under the influence of colonialism, and patriarchy. Such an historical panorama reveals that both woman and nature have been repressed over time. The major concern of ecofeminism is to listen and give voice to women and nature.

Nature in Ancient Hindu Scriptures

Illuminating insights on the deep-rooted relationship between humans and their natural environment have long been made in India, which has been celebrated as a land of

spirituality. In ancient texts like the Puranas, several passages are dedicated to the cause of the environment. In the Matsya Puranas¹ the Goddess Parvathi says:

“Daśa kūpa samā vāpī, daśavāpī samohnadrah |

daśahnada samaḥ putroṃ, daśaputro samo dramuḥ |” (Vrksayurvedah-5)²

The shloka emphasizes the significance of forests that are capable of protecting the entire universe. According to the poem, if one large reservoir of water is worth ten wells, and one son is like ten reservoirs, then one tree is equal to the power of ten sons (Narayanan, 1997). Similarly, the 90th sukta of the first mandala in the Rig Veda comments on the power of the natural environment and expresses gratitude for providing human beings with a wealth of natural resources. The sukta mentions that human beings worship nature and seek the blessings of wind, rivers, sun, plants and cows to live a contented life:

madhu vātā ṛtāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ |

mādhvīrṇaḥ santvoṣadhīḥ ||

madhu naktamutoṣaso madhumat pāṛthivaṃ rajaḥ |

madhu dyaaurastu naḥ pitā ||

madhumān no vanaspatirmadhumānastu sūryaḥ |

mādhvīrghāvo bhavantu naḥ ||

śaṃ no mitraḥ śaṃ varuṇaḥ śaṃ no bhavatvaryamā |

śaṃ na indro bṛhaspatiḥ śaṃ no viṣṇururukramaḥ || (Rigveda 1, 90, 6)

Along similar lines, the Atharvaveda³ describes how mother earth is always willing to bestow on its children the gifts of water and food, the basic necessities of life:

“yasyaam Samudra Uta Sindhur-Aapo Yasyaam-Annam Krssttayah Sambab/ huuvuh | Yasyaam-Idam Jinvaṭi Praannad-Ejat-Saa No Bhuumih Puurva-Peye Dadhaatu”
(Quoted in Patil, 2019, p. 27).

All Vedas valorize the basic elements of the environment which are the life source for humans. The scriptures insist that human beings and nature are inseparable and are

¹ Matsya Purana is one of the oldest surviving texts in the Puranic genre and forms an important place in Sanskrit literature of Hinduism. Matsya means fish, and the text is named after the half-human and half-fish avatar of Vishnu.

² Vrikshayurveda is the study of plant life, and especially the benefits of trees. There are frequent references to the system of Ayurveda in ancient Indian literature such as Atharvaveda, Bhatsamhita, Samgadharapaddhati etc. which study botanical and agricultural aspects; and the Samhitas which concentrate on medicinal aspects.

³ The Atharva Veda is the fourth veda and is the knowledge source concerning procedures of everyday life.

an integral part of each other. Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita,⁴ “My energy enters the earth, sustaining all that lives: I become the moon, giver of water and sap, to feed the plants and the trees” (Quoted in Patil, 2019, p. 27). All these scriptures not only speak of nature, but importantly, hold nature within a landscape of spirituality.

Hindu sacred texts venerate elements of nature and ascribe holiness to primal forces. Several references can be found in the Varaha Purana, Vishnu Dharmottara Purana and the Dharmashastras condemning any act of environmental destruction, and Hindu Puranas warn of ecological destruction portending an apocalypse. The Kurma Purana states: “then greed and passion arose again everywhere, inevitably due to the predestined purpose of the Treta (Third) age. And people seized the rivers, fields, mountains, clumps of trees and herbs, overcoming them by strength” (Narayanan, 2001, p.180; 1997, p. 291). There are multiple instances where the cyclical patterns of life and death are mentioned with an emphasis on the destruction of nature being linked to destruction of life. All these texts invariably lay emphasis on caring for the environment and performing rituals and ceremonies to build a harmonious relationship with the natural habitat for: “When *dharma* declines, human beings despoil nature” (Narayanan, 2001, p. 181).

However, the ideological framework that had sought to nurture all life by caring for nature began to crumble under the rise of a hegemonic patriarchal and elitist system. A shift in focus could already be observed in the way oral traditions, which had been carried across generations, gradually began to be taken over by the holy texts – written and preserved by males of elite castes. Hindu religious treatises gained dominance as primary texts with custodians exercising their power of knowledge. This tendency which also led to the exploitation and suppression of the weak became ingrained during British colonial rule. The colonial system held that the male occupied the central position in a society built upon a hierarchical power structure – which, in India, led to the normalization of oppression and suppression of women, lower classes and castes, and of nature. Colonization thus erased the age-old traditions and ecological concerns and replaced them with new theories that placed man (literally the male human) at the centre of the universe. This approach led to the displacement of nature to a subservient position which is reflected in the lack of any mention of the environment in the constitutional provisions made in post-independent India. It was not until 1976 that nature was added as the 42nd amendment, which declares that: “The State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country” (Constitution of India, 1950).

⁴ The Bhagwad Gita is a 700-verse Hindu scripture that is part of the epic *Mahābhārata*,

Women and Environment

Women and nature have been revered in India since ancient times. Mother earth, along with all untameable resources of nature were ascribed with purity and divinity, and rituals were built around them. The prevalence of the Siva-Sakti image in Hindu religion is a harmonious blend of the male and female (which itself challenges the notion of binaries based in Western philosophy) presenting the divine energy of the universe. Sakti, the female energy, is the embodiment of the material environment and cosmos; Siva is the transcendent masculine aspect. The omnipotent presence of a material and spiritual universe is presented in this non-binary image. At the same time, nature and female energy are linked through the presence of Sakti, the mother of the cosmos, who is respected and treated with great awe, and often venerated – especially in Indian matrilineal societies. It is also important to mention here that although motherhood has been highly honoured in the Hindu way of life, it can be argued that this is based on the woman's virtue of self-negation – the ability to persevere for the betterment of family, the willingness to sacrifice and serve others. It is in this light of being a giver that mother earth or mother nation is revered: "The female force being a sacred site that is always there to nurture, purify and act without any requirement for sustenance in return" (Sherma, 2000, p. 97). This idealization of self-sacrifice in association with motherhood and mother earth has been instrumental in the way Indian women have been conditioned to carry the role of nurturer and remain alert to any rampant abuse of the environment.

One of the earliest records of women protecting their environment can be traced back to 1731 among the Bishnois, a tribe that lived in the scrub forests near Jodhpur in Rajasthan. When the king of Jodhpur ordered his men to cut down trees to build a new palace, Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village embraced the sacred khejri⁵ trees in order to save them. Other women joined her and in the strong resistance 363 women were killed. Amrita Bai and her band of Bishnoi women can be considered the first female environmentalists of the world. It was this movement that later provided inspiration to Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi to show solidarity in the Chipko movement of 1973. The Chipko⁶ movement that gained power across India as a form of environmental protest was concerned with the preservation of forests and the ecological balance. The dense forests of the Terai region of Uttarakhand in the Himalayan foothills became the target of timber merchants. The large-scale deforestation following commercial logging led to the constant threat of floods and landslides. The Chipko movement was led by local women who hugged trees as a gesture to show compassion to the trees and to save them from being cut down by contractors for timber. Women, being solely in charge of

⁵ *Prosopis cineraria* is the state tree of Rajasthan (where it is known as Khejri). The tree is considered to be the lifeline of Rajasthan. It provides firewood and also acts as cash crop.

⁶ The first Chipko protest occurred in 1973 near the village of Mandal in the Himalayan range of Uttarakhand.

cultivation, livestock and children, found it difficult to manage homes without sufficient basic needs like fuelwood, fodder and water. Though the movement has been globally recognized for its peaceful means and widespread participation of women, and for how it helped bring ecofeminism to the forefront of world environment debates; it has been questioned whether the movement was purely environmental, or was not more broadly a protest against capitalism and the need to maintain local control and show solidarity for survival. It is timely to remember that nature and culture are intimately entangled, thus economics and politics (including the politics of gender) are intertwined with ecological concerns.

The Concept of Ecofeminism

In his discussion on modernism and ecology, Max Oelschlaeger (1991) presents two conflicting ideologies that exist regarding the relation of humans and the natural world. Gilbert White's concept of Arcadian ecology advocated a harmonious relationship between 'man' and nature which "moved not toward increasing scientific rigor and causal knowledge but toward an empathetic view of wild nature" (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 104). On the other side of the equation is imperial ecology, represented by Carl Linnaeus, who believed in 'man's' dominance over nature and all other organisms and hence presented a "tradition that sought the mastery of nature" and did not "recognize that humankind is part of nature" (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 105). Both these views of humans and nature as separate entities – one in which humans show empathy towards wild nature and the other where humans master the environment – are problematic. They are based on the binary notion of human/nature which is ingrained in Western philosophy and leads to imaging nature as either in need of preservation (which excludes humans from landscapes), or as an inert material resource (for human consumption). However, nature-human entanglements – like the principle of Siva-Sakti cannot be divided. Humans and nature are an inextricable relation.

This sense of relation is evident in ecofeminism. As a movement ecofeminism is an outcome of the ecological crisis that has been brought about by rampant industrialization and consumerism that pervades the modern world. The term was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her ground-breaking work *Le Feminisme ou la mort*/Feminism or Death (extracts in Marks & de Courtivron, 1980). The plea was to save the planet, the premise was that women share a special connection with nature. Ynestra King organized the first ecofeminist conference 'Women and Life on Earth' in March 1980. As King points out:

Ecofeminism is all about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors...and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the

military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way (King, 1983, p. 10)

Greg Garrard explains the difference between modernist binary notions of man/nature and male/female (the same notions that ecology and ecofeminism seek to disrupt):

The first distinguishes humans from nature on the grounds of some alleged quality such as possession of an immortal soul or rationality and then assumes that this distinction confers superiority. The second distinguishes men from women on the grounds of some alleged quality such as larger brain size, and then assumes that this distinction confers superiority upon men (Garrard, 2012, p. 26)

What brings environment and women together under one theoretical perspective is the fact that women are the first-hand victims of environmental deterioration. In lesser developed countries, where half the population struggles to make a living – women and nature are closely intertwined. Women take the role of nurturers, caretakers and life-givers. In agrarian and domestic settings, the lives of these women are hugely dependent on nature for fuel, food, fodder, and water. The introduction of large-scale farming technologies leads to the deterioration of nature and of the role of women. As Vandana Shiva observes, “Peasants and farmers are thus robbed of their means of livelihood by the new technology which becomes an instrument of poverty and underdevelopment” (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p. 29). The ecofeminist philosopher, Karen Warren espouses that a conceptual framework is “a socially constructed lens through which we perceive ourselves and others”. This framework is dependent on several factors like gender, race, class, age, orientation, nationality and so on. If this conceptual framework is oppressive it will justify and maintain relationships of domination and subordination. When this oppressive framework is patriarchal – it “explains justifies, and maintains the subordination of women by men” (Warren & Cady, 1996, p. 2). This conceptual creation means that the “society is constructed on hierarchy and dualism” (Eaton & Lorentzen, 2003, p. 2). Ecofeminism is thus “a double political intervention – of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism” (Sturgeon, 1997, p.169). Unlike other movements, ecofeminism is “structurally pluralistic rather than structurally reductionist or unitary: it emerges from a multiplicity of voices, especially women’s voices across cross-cultural context” (Warren, 1994, p. 84). Globalization too has a major influence on our thought processes and representations of human existence. Ecofeminist writing in the age of globalization expresses serious concerns over the exploitative nature of multinational and transnational organizations. The impact of their industries is grave – large-scale

destruction, marginalization of women, and subjugation of indigenous and tribal communities who share a deep affinity with the environment. Literature produced by women writers shares this agony of alienation and sense of loss. In the Indian context, environmental issues are closely linked to caste, class and gender-based subjugation. Ecofeminism, then, works as a framework or an ideology that attempts to create a deeper understanding of the innate androcentric patterns of behaviour of humans and their connection with the exploitation of nature.

Eco-Consciousness in the Fiction of Anita Desai

Ecological concerns in Indian English-language fiction can be traced back to the works of Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and Kamala Markandaya writing in early 20th century. Their novels celebrated local culture which included the spirit of a place and its landscapes – the rivers, hills, forests and fields. Vivid descriptions of the flora and fauna with references to vegetation, birds, insects, and other animals can be experienced in these novels alongside the portrayal of indigenous worship of rivers and trees. The stories were built around age-old superstitions and oral folklore and were seeped in local flavour and culture. Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in literature on the changing landscape of nature and identity which demonstrates a resistance to the oppressive patriarchal system in India.

From the novels of Kamala Markandaya to Arundhati Roy, women have explored the flora and fauna of India and raised a voice of protest against injustices towards women, wildlife or water conservation. Anita Desai is especially noted for her fine rendering of female characters and the projection of emotions through flora, fauna and landscape imagery. Her novels *Cry, the Peacock* (1980) and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1982), highlight natural, cultural and psychic landscapes in her writings. Desai's novels are known for their recurring motifs of feminine psychological characterisation, of tropical Indian settings opposing urban and rural realms, and plots which often combine a sense of gothic mystery and philosophical contemplation. The gothic orientation, evoked through powerful language and nature images, draws readers into the inner psyche of the characters – nudging them to seek their authentic selves amidst stifling married lives. The main women characters of the two novels identify with a sense of belongingness towards their natural surroundings. Desai's concern for the fate and future of modern woman living in a male chauvinistic society is reflected in the issues she brings up in these novels. Women in India have been widely dependent on men to satisfy their needs through the institution of marriage, from material sustenance, to social relations, to romantic love – so any kind of disruption of attachment within the marriage leads to the failure of the relationship at several points which have multiple ramifications, economically, socially, psychologically. Desai explores the inner psyches of her characters placed within the framework of

complicated relationships. The married heroines of both these novels are fragile characters stuck in unions of incompatibility. While the men are rational in their approach to love and life; the women are more sensitive and emotional with different sets of expectations and responses.

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. As a child, with her mother dead and her brother settled abroad, Maya grew up with a lot of affection from her advocate father. 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, or attend Mrs Lal's party; however, 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, 1980, p. 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.

The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is perched between mythic landscapes and social reality and revolves around Sita, wife of an industrialist, who is pregnant with their fifth child. Utterly dissatisfied with life and her husband Raman, she seeks peace in the nostalgia of a beautiful past and flees from her Bombay apartment to the idyllic landscapes of a childhood spent on the nearby island of Manori.⁷ To her dismay, she realizes that her childhood was not as charming as she had deceived herself into believing – and the spell of the 'magical island' is soon lost. Yet, although there are not enough amenities on Manori, Sita is determined to spend the rest of her days of pregnancy on the island away from the noisy and polluted atmosphere of Bombay. A sensitive and emotional middle-aged woman, Sita feels alienated from her husband and her grown children. Her existential sensibilities cause her to suffer emotional isolation and loneliness. As Sita is driven by the unending madness of the clamorous city, she loses her grip on reality, developing a vague attitude towards everything. Though she rebels against the birth of her fifth child; she also wants to protect it from

⁷ Manori is a popular weekend escape just to the north of Mumbai city. It is separated from the mainland by a creek and thus has the atmosphere of an island. Manori is a fishing village of palm-fringed beaches and rows of white-washed Spanish-style seafront hotels. It is somewhat reminiscent of Goa and considered a refuge from the heat, pollution, noise, and clamorous activity of Mumbai.

the cruelties of the modern world. She seeks some kind of miracle on the island. Nostalgically, she thinks of how her father had once made it an island of magic.

Desai writes:

...she saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror it was so bright, so brilliant to her eyes.... It took her some time to notice that this magic, too, cast shadows. (Desai 1982, p. 63)

The illusion of magic is lost and she realizes her attempt to find a further purpose to her life is futile. There only remains a life of compromise.

Landscapes of Tropical Environments

Like the lives of the two female protagonists in Desai's novels, the world of the tropics is "embedded in a host of oppositions":

between the usual and strange, normal and pathological, moderate and excessive, refined and gaudy, hallowed and plagued, immune and susceptible, hospitable and inhospitable, resplendent and insipid, and vigorous and languid. (Clayton quoted in Lundberg et al, 2021, p.5)

Hills and rivers, fields and forests, sea and sky, rainstorms and dust storms, all manifest aspects of carefree joyousness and painful agony in Desai's narratives. The abundant use of nature imagery is deliberate – it allows readers to dive deep into the landscape of the female psyche to understand her responses to incidents, people, or relationships. As Ursula Heise contends, "ecocritical approaches allow writers to investigate how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary genres and tropes" (Heise cited in Shyamala, 2011, p. 1).

The description of seasons in both novels exemplify the tropicality of the setting. If the monsoon feels like "an unceasing burial" to Sita; summer heat for Maya is excruciating – "dust-clouded and sun-sodden, beneath which trees, plants, grass that was once green, now drop as though withered by lightning" (Desai, 1980, p. 153). Contrasting landscapes between pastoral village life and urban congestion are explored in *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. The novels not only highlight the impacts of environmental deterioration but also examine the emotional breakdown of both female characters. Maya and Sita are each alienated; attuned to their own consciousness, but feeling rootless and alone in social interactions. Both 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. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* also finds solace in nature and hence flees to Manori island to experience the purity of child-like joy and freedom. The past for Sita becomes a psychic residue that she obsesses over to the extent that it gives her the strength to leave her Bombay home, and husband, and the urbanized social lifestyle they had built for themselves over the years.

She saw that island illusion as a refugee, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea – it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children, too, into smoother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them. (Desai, 1982, p. 101)

Life on the island is slow and beautiful and offers a sharp contrast to the fast-paced city life that Sita started to find “stiff, static and petrified” as the “streets and walls ceased to offer security or safety but implied threats of murder instead” (Desai, 1982, p. 101). The constrictive atmosphere of city life, the loveless marriage, and the burden of bringing another child into the world became unbearable for Sita and she needed a space for herself in order to revive. Manori moves beyond the symbolic dimension of nature and becomes a living and breathing landscape that sets the mood for nostalgia, longing, and reconciliation with the present. Sita finds it reassuring when her son, Karan looks amazed at the buffaloes bathing luxuriously in ponds or the “drumstick trees with their long beans and twisted garlands of small orchid-like flowers, tattered palms and palmyras, bushes of hibiscus and lantana in bloom” (Desai, 1982, p. 123).

These rural landscapes are domesticated, yet they nevertheless offer a glimpse of wilderness and its sanctuary:

Wild places provide solace for exiles, release for repressed and outlawed feelings, and space for adventurous forays beyond the restrictions of law and domesticity, but the discoveries made there are...eventually re-assimilated by civilization... (Waugh, 2006, p. 532)

Sita's escape to the island is a reminder of Gerrard's concept of wilderness explained as:

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available...it is a construction mobilized to protect particular habitat and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the

moral and material pollution of the city. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth.... (Gerrard, 2012, p. 66)

The love for wilderness is also expressed by Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, when she recalls how as a young child she would go for “walks in wild tracts of land” that were kind of “eruptions of rock and wilderness”.

There were great boulders there with stark gaps in which snakes and lizards lived.... There were tangles of thorn-bushes that, in certain seasons, bore small, poignant flowers.... Sometimes I saw a flurry of small, tortured peahens.... they lived lives so inverted, so given to passions of which I knew nothing. (Desai, 1980, p. 86)

The landscapes in both these novels present images that contribute meaningful links between various aspects of animate and inanimate relationships. *Cry, The Peacock* is filled with ample references of tropical fruits like papaya, and relishing “cold-drinks of lemon and mango, tamarind and passion-fruit” (p. 116). Maya is fascinated by the vibrant flowers growing on golmohar⁸ trees: “scarlet blossom nestling on feathery branches” (p. 141). A tropical spring is beautifully described in a passage where Maya is lured by the ecstasy of the season. She says:

I close my eyes and listen to the shrilling of ecstatic insects – ecstatic because it is the season of hot quivering sun, and they thrive on it. The tremulous flower-tinted air is vibrant as a violin string set into motion by the fine, tender leg of a brilliant grasshopper (1980, p. 34).

The cultivated landscape is vividly described through “well-watered lushness” of leafy *cheekoo*⁹ trees, or “a bough of brazen bougainvilleas” (p. 139). Tropical jasmine, chameli, champa and bela flowers mentioned in the novel are woven by women into small garlands and tucked into a braid of hair as a cultural practice. Animals take demonical as well as divine form. Tropical birds such as “phosphorescent parrots” (p. 23), “stiff-legged, tough-feathered cranes” (p. 130) along with “the odour of bats and mildew” (p. 28) inhabit the landscapes of the novel. The thick jungles are abundant with wild birds like a peacock that may be found “screeching with insane joy and fear at the sight of a raincloud over the horizon” at the coming of the monsoon. Maya spots a monkey at the station and it makes her sad to realize that they were caged laboratory

⁸ Golmohar trees (*Delonix regia*) are also called flame trees or Poinciana. They are one of the earliest cultivated trees of tropical and subtropical India.

⁹ Also called Sapodilla.

monkeys – thirsty but without any provision for water. She feels a rush of emotion for these monkeys and is reminded of her own situation:

And one that I saw was perfectly still and quiet.... Its brow was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity, and its hands, folded across its thin belly, waited to accept it.... A small whimper broke from the animal...then it was silent again, waiting. (Desai, 1980, p.130)

Landscapes of Feminine Sensibility

Nature imagery has been abundantly used in these novels to project the fear, anxiety, and mental instability of the protagonists. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya describes her psychological helplessness by comparing her “thoughts of anguish” (Desai, 1980, p.19) with the birds “that awake from dreams and rise out of the trees amidst great commotion, circle a while, then settle again, on other branches (Desai, 1980, p.19). Her mental instability is first exposed when she obsessively grieves over Toto’s dead body. Rather than accepting the death of her pet dog, she is unable to cope with the separation. The oddity of her behaviour is emphasized by the description with which the novel opens:

All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to 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 bag on which it lay under the lime trees where there was a cool aqueous shade, saw its eyes open and staring still.... Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. Flies began the hum amidst the limes, driving away the gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies. (Desai, 1980, p. 7)

Projections of terror, anxiety and loneliness as Maya battles her thoughts, are understood through analogies drawn from nature. To understand her physical and mental turmoil, Desai describes the “indefinable unease” in Maya through “the giant shadows cast by trees” or the “sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist lengths” around her (Desai, 1980, p. 17). Nature provides relief for Maya as her mind wanders into dark empty corners of being. Her emptiness is also her empty womb, for unlike Sita whose psychological turmoil grows with the child growing inside her, Maya’s psychological demise is one of gnawing barrenness and is highlighted through the juxtaposition of botanical images of ‘nests’ and ‘blooms’ in her surroundings:

Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds.... Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid-podded.... (Desai, 1980, p. 34; Shyamala, 2011, p.2)

There is a lingering need in Maya to escape from reality. She relates to natural surroundings to express the struggle within:

The rolling cotton-balls, the flying yellow leaves, the surging clouds of dust, all seemed to flee, flee, flee, and yet could not, for they were bound to the season, and returned to continue their struggle for escape. Something similar heaved inside me – a longing, a dread, a search for solution, a despair, and my head throbbed and spun. (Desai, 1980, p. 33)

This need to run away from everything is also witnessed in Sita of *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. After spending a childhood on the Manori island amidst natural surroundings, the “small, enclosed area” in urban Bombay made her feel like a “monument of waiting” who is stuck in a “grey, dull-lit, empty shell” (Desai, 1982, p. 55). So, when her husband Raman casually asks *where shall we go this summer?* Sita blurts out Manori. Desai writes: “The plan to escape boiled up in her with such suddenness, she was herself taken by surprise, not realizing that it had been simmering inside her so long” (1982, p. 57).

While pregnant Maya escapes to an island of delusion, barren Sita remains confined in a passionless marriage as her deranged thoughts become filled with sexual imageries of snakes that creep in closer to the lure of “chaste sweet white flowers” (p. 107) and lizards that stalk her:

Of the lizards, the lizards that come upon you, stalking you silently, upon cold toes slipping their clublike tongues in and out, in and out with an audible hiss and a death’s rattle, slowly moving up, closing in on you... rubbing their cold bellies upon yours...rubbing and grinding. (Desai, 1980, p. 108; see also Shyamala, 2011, p. 2; Rajeshwar, 2000. p. 16)

Maya yearns for love, intimacy, and the fruition of pregnancy. She identifies her plight with that of the peacocks that search for mates in the night:

...peacocks tearing themselves to shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with agony at the death of love. The night sky turned to a flurry of peacocks' tails, each star a staring eye. (Desai, 1980, p. 175; see also Shyamala, 2011, p.2; Rajeshwar, 2000. p. 17)

All the while her husband, Gautama, remains aloof – unaware and unresponsive to her desires. The prophecy of the albino astrologer that either Gautama or Maya will die in their fourth year of marriage, haunts her until she is driven to rid herself, and the world, of her husband.

He had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died.... It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (Desai, 1980, p. 149)

Again, Desai uses nature – screaming peacocks and rain clouds – to evoke a psychological landscape ravaged by dark emotions pushed to the extremes of Thanatos.

In a psychoanalytical reading of the novel, Rajeshwar notes:

The exact point of her plunging depths of psychosis, however, is her act of violence itself. Maya's pushing Gautama off the parapet of their house is not forfeited. There are simply no accidents in psychic life. Behind Maya's final indulgence in violence, there has been a prolonged psychic struggle which she has not known herself (2000, p. 20).

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, 1980, p. 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.

Similar to how Maya identifies herself with peacocks and finds resolution to her restlessness through them, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* faces conflict that is somehow resolved when she recalls a verse from D. H. Lawrence:

*The wild young heifer glancing distraught,
with a strange, new knocking of life at her side
runs seeking loneliness.
The little grain draws down – the earth, to hide,
Nay, even the slumberous egg as it Labors
under the shell,
Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
Asks to be hidden and wishes nothing to tell (Desai, 1982, p. 150)*

Sita identifies with the heifer, the grain, the slumberous egg, in wanting to conceal, indeed to deny, all that was pulsating inside her. However, she hoped in an epiphanic moment of revelation that now “the great gap between them would be newly and securely bridged” (Desai, 1982, p. 150). This euphoria, nevertheless, is short-lived and Sita soon realizes that she cannot connect psychologically with her husband and whatever lies ahead is a sort of compromise or acceptance of bland reality. Although, the novel can be said to have ended on a positive note as Sita finally returns to family and the realities of urban life, it is by no means a joyous ending. It is a renunciation of her own psychological needs, her authentic self.

Sita’s struggle for psychological freedom is referenced through nature imagery in the novel. The scene where an eagle is attacked by crows testifies to Sita’s conflict with her husband and her deeper psychological needs. Sita is the eagle and Raman is symbolized by the crows that attack the helpless eagle “on the ledge that jutted out below their balcony” (Desai, 1982, p. 38). Sita’s desperate effort to save the eagle from the attack of the crows whose “scimitar beaks” pierce the eagle is her fight against the masculine value represented by her husband against her feminine instinct (Desai, 1982, p. 35). When Sita comes across a jellyfish stranded on the tip of a sandbar, she is not only amazed at the “unearthly whiteness” of that “mostly passive and unadventurous undersea creature” – but is also reminded of her own fetus that “floated inside her, mindless and helpless” similar “to this poor washed thing thrown onto the beach, opaque and wet and sad” (Desai, 1982, p. 127).

Nature-Culture Entanglements

“Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is by religion” (White, 1996, p. 9). Lynn White Jr. is here speaking of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the idea is more philosophical. It contends that cultural landscapes are informed by the old religions, which inform our philosophical views of the environment – and our relationship with, and treatment of, nature. In Anita Desai’s

novels nature imagery is entangled with the female psyche, and further with Hindu philosophy and mythology.

The names of the couples in the novels are entwined within Hindu philosophical-mythological landscapes. In *Cry, The Peacock*, the name Maya reflects *māyā* a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy that originally denoted the magic power which leads to illusion of the world. Gautama, based on Gautama Buddha¹⁰ symbolizes asceticism and the search for truth. In the novel too, Maya is swayed by instincts and relishes a world of sensations. She is full of desires, expectations and longings and as a creature of instinct, she loses the distinction between proper and improper social guidelines in the making of choices. The contrariness of their characters is obvious in the way Gautama touches without feeling, and Maya who feels even without touching. Gautama is realistic, rational, and dispassionate, towards everything and shows a philosophical detachment towards life as preached in the Bhagavad Gita. Within this cultural landscape of ancient Hinduism, the reader can sense the contemporary grounding of the irreconcilable temperaments of the couple and how these are alive within the marital disharmony.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, the names of the couple are likewise borrowed from Hindu mythology. However, the characters in the novel do not carry the virtues of Lord Rama and Goddess Sita the Hindu deities mentioned in the Ramayana. Desai's Raman and Sita are far from being the ideal couple who represent the virtues of valour, commitment, love and sacrifice. Unlike goddess Sita who single-handedly nurtured her children Love and Kush; Sita in the novel is reluctant to give birth to the child she is carrying in her womb. The mythical figure Sita was a princess and yet shows courage and commitment to live in a humble cottage in the forest with her boys. Desai's Sita runs away from the challenges life throws at her and wants to live in a world of magic, illusion and nostalgia. Raman and Sita also present binary opposites. If Raman is a creature of society, extrovert and accommodative; Sita is hypersensitive, introvert and pessimistic. She not only hates Raman for his lack of feeling but also derides his "sub human placidity, calmness, and sluggishness" (Desai, 1982, p. 43) and the routine manner of her husband's family. Sita escapes to Manori island as a form of self-exile from home and civilization. Although she seeks a sense of self, through silence and reverie, she experiences an empty void that takes away her sense of identity and ability to commit love and security to her children.

Hindu mythology also comes to play a significant role in the ending of the novel *Cry, The Peacock*. When Maya catches sight of the bronze statue of dancing Shiva on her way to the terrace, the image enraptures her completely and she prays inadvertently "Let that Lord of the Dance protect us ..."

¹⁰ The Buddha, religious leader and teacher, lived in ancient India from the 6th to the 5th century BCE

The powerful, slightly bent leg and the firm rooting of the graceful foot upon the squirming body of evil, and the raised leg with its arched foot, raised into a symbol of liberation, seemed more than ever to pulse with the flow of blood in them. (1980, pp.234-235)

Concluding Landscapes

Cry, The Peacock and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* revolve around the environmental, psychological and cultural landscapes of their two main female characters. There is pointed focus in both the novels that lend themselves to ecocritical analysis. Analysing the texts from the lens of ecofeminism, we encounter the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that control the way the female protagonists think, act and live – leaving them with little or no choices and a lack of voice. Both novels expose problems and vulnerabilities of middle-class Indian women who find themselves unable to express their thoughts and thus live suppressed, depressed and oppressed lives till they lose their psychological balance. If Maya had spent a pampered childhood with her father where she lived in an unreal make-believe world as “a toy princess in a toy world”; Sita’s relationship with her father is an affirmation of the hierarchical dichotomy – the male-female, the superior-inferior. Both women, however, experience a close kinship with nature. While Maya identifies her agony with the screams of peacocks; Sita relates to the island that has degraded with time and lost its lustre due neglect and marginalization. In the growing age of rationalism and modernization, women and nature suffer like a “dark blot of foreign matter” (Desai, 1982, p. 99). Both Gautama and Raman are rational, insensitive men who enjoy patriarchal rigidity while their wives feel unloved, unnoticed and uncared for in marriages that deny them autonomy and visibility. However, despite the challenges of patriarchal order, neither Maya or Sita, nor the forces of nature are submissive. Sita boldly breaks away from the mainland which “implied solidity, security: the solidity of streets, the security of houses” (Desai, 1982, p. 52). Similarly, the sea in mainland Bombay is seen revengefully throwing back the rubbish – “a ring of green plastic, a rubber shoe, bones” (Desai, 1980, p.45) that humans dump in her waters.

Anita Desai’s novels thus raise questions regarding both the patriarchal socio-cultural dynamics and environmental concerns within tropical India landscapes. Her books engage readers in an ecofeminist imaginary.

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