



NATURE AND ECOCRITICISM IN CRY, THE PEACOCK AND FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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Introduction:

The study of the relationship between literature and the environment has fostered human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in natural writing. In the essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," Rueckert defines ecocriticism as 'The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the bases for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and the future of the world' (102). Ecological criticism shares the obvious concern that human culture is inextricably linked to the physical world. The connection between nature and man is pivotal in *Cry, The Peacock and Fire on the Mountain*. An eco-critical approach brings out the importance of the environment to the major themes in her works. Nature imagery in her fiction allows the reader to perceive the unexplored realms of the female psyche. Heise believes that ecocriticism 'investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or authentic genres and tropes, and what assumptions about nature underlie genres that may not address this trope directly' (4). Desai's images- zoological, botanical, meteorological and colored represent actions, approaches, feelings and states of mind of particular characters or situations. Through the evocation of images, Desai transcribes the human condition and predicament. 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 images are poignant expressions of an extremely sensitive personality that borders between neurosis and insanity. The first zoological imagery of Toto, Maya's pet dog is used 'as a structural device that is not only integral to the novelist but also to the theme' (Prasad 363). This animal image introduces the theme of alienation and the death motif as the primary indicators of Maya's psychic disorder: 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. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. (*Cry* 7) Maya is so obsessed with the death of her pet dog that she fails to realize that death is a natural phenomenon one has to accept. Later, she claims 'childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets...' (*Cry* 15). Maya is a victim of alienation and loneliness. Gautama, her husband is cold to her desires. 'Gautama,' she says, 'Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that run under...' (14). As tension mounts, her erratic moods create creatures that appear to gnaw at her. She feels: It was that something else, that indefinable unease at the back of my mind, the grain of sand that it irked, itched, and remained meaningless...the giant shadows cast by trees...with horrifying swiftness... I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist limbs about me, of evil descending ...heralded by deafening drum beats. (17) The shapes formed in her mind are projections of an unknown terror, of rejection, of being in solitary confinement, bereft of a companion. She engages in comparing her rather insipid life to nature that provides a temporary relief from the tension mounting up in her. The minute details in nature reach out to her physical and emotional turmoil. Maya's infertility is another reason for her restlessness. The use of the botanical images relate to her barrenness. She notices: 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 ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch. (34) The 'silk – cotton trees' with 'huge blooms' that are now 'squashed into yellowish miasma' suggest the painful reality of her aridity. The deployment of different images, intermittently is crucial in

understanding the fact that Maya is self-conscious of the reality around her. When the pigeon's nest in the verandah of her home is filled with babies, and the doves coo to mate, Maya is reminded of her loveless life and her childless condition. Her unfortunate plight is aggravated when she sees rats. She says, 'Rats will suckle their young most tenderly. I know this as now I lived quite near one, with seven young ones nestling between their legs' (107). The acceptance of barrenness and virginity is a sign of disaster. Her deranged mind is filled with thoughts of snakes that crawl to the lure of 'chaste sweet white flowers' (107). Lizards seem to crawl, beckoning her. She adds: Of the lizards, the lizards that come upon you, stalking you silently, upon clod, 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.... (108) Later, when Gautama enquires about the giant lizards called Iguanas, Maya exclaims, "Iguanas!" my blood ran cold, and I heard the slither of its dragging tail even now, in white daylight. 'Get off-I tell you, get off! Go!'"(108) These images capture the predatory sensibility in Maya spontaneously and unconsciously. As Iyengar puts it, 'Her forte is the exploration of sensibility-the particular kind of modern sensibility that is ill at ease' (102). Maya is so shocked at the unpleasantness of the slimy creatures that she detests any animal, even her pet cat for a moment. Yet, her mind continuously churns up revolting images that provide testimony to her sordid state. Maya realizes that her quest for a fruitful life would not materialize. Both of them are poles apart in sensibilities. She is like 'the beds of petunias...sentimental irresolute flowers,' while Gautama resembles 'the blossoms of the lemon tree ...stronger, crisper character' (21-22). Maya identifies herself with the peacocks that keep 'pacing the rocks at night- peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with- agony at the death on love'(146). Gautama is unresponsive to her desperate calls for intimacy. She recalls how lonely she had felt even in her own home. She recalls, 'I was caged in this room that I had hated -severe, without even the grace of symmetry' (85-86). Marriage too does not provide a solution to her loveless life. The resulting chaos in her mind is suffocating and the external images succinctly associate with

the mounting pressure that is beyond endurance.

The albino astrologer's prediction of the imminent death of either Gautama or herself draws Maya into the quagmire of the need to live or die. While she contemplates death, she ironically decides to murder Gautama, the root cause of her unfulfilled life. The astrologer's warning works on her imbalanced mind and she constantly engages in deciding how to execute the crime, justifying the need to act at the first opportunity. The fissure generated by the emotional and intellectual alienation between partners need culmination and the sapless existence of the couple is finally resolved: He had no contact with the world, on with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? 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. (149) Desai exploits the ravages of nature and the botanical images to heighten the malicious influence of Maya on Gautama. In the meantime, Maya's father, to take complete rest, decides on a European tour and asks the couple to accompany him. Gautama decides to move to his own house for a few days instead. At the railway station Maya sees cages of 'laboratory' monkeys bound for Bombay. Their pitiable sight is unbearable and is symbolic of her despicable situation: And one that I saw was perfectly still and quiet.... Its bow was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity, and its hands, folded across its thin belly, waited to accept it. Then it spied something on the platform beside it ...It was only a monkey-nut shell, empty. A small whimper broke from the animal...then was silent again, waiting. (130) Maya is agitated because the monkeys are thirsty and hungry and there is 'not even a bowl of water for them' (130). In Gautama's home Maya finds relief in the company of her mother-in-law and Nila, her sister-in-law. Yet, she cannot restrain the thoughts of murder that keep her engaged 'relentless as a well-aimed arrow' (131). She finally decides to kill Gautama without further delay. She says: Storms I had known before. Rain storms, thunder-storms, dust-storms....But this waiting with not a rumble of thunder, not a whirl of wind to mark the beginning of the end. And it was the end that I waited for. The beginning had begun long ago, was even forgotten.... I had waited too long - another day would be one too many. (154) When the dust-storm finally approaches, Maya

believes 'the time came for annihilation' (156). She knows that the time for 'release and liberty' (158) has arrived: Ah, storm, storm, wonderful, infidel storm, blow, blow! I cried and ran and ran on and on from room to room, laughing as maniac laugh once the world gives them up and surrenders them to their freedom.... Frightened? No! I ran from the thought, laughing. Oh no, what need for fright.... It is only relief I promise you, you shall see – I swear – survive.... (158) As the evening approaches, Maya asks Gautama to accompany her to the roof instead of walking down the garden. As they keep talking, Maya realizes that it is 'Poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama who was so intense and yet had never lived, and never would' (173). She makes him pause at the parapet edge and when Gautama makes a casual gesture in front of her as they talk, she pushes him 'to the very bottom' screaming 'Gautama!' in fury (173). The death of Gautama is a rude shock to the families. When asked about the reason for the act, Maya justifies by saying that 'it was an accident' (180). She feels no remorse and moves about with merriment. She has avenged the wrong done to her. Maya's unpredictable behavior is watched suspiciously by Nila. A month after Gautama's death, the three move into Maya's home. One day, Nila and her mother hear 'the patter of a child's laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight – a brilliant peacock's feather perhaps? Then it stopped, suddenly they heard a different voice calling...calling out in great dread' (184). Maya's mother-in-law rushes to the balcony, and in an effort to stop Maya from any untoward action disappears with her 'into the dark quiet' (184). Nila is dumb-struck! Maya has escaped pain as peacocks do. "Pia, pia' they cry. 'Lover, lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die" (82). Just as peacocks fight before they mate, Maya has killed her husband and dies in love with life. *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai's sixth novel, centers on Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. According to Choudary, 'Fire on the Mountain displays skilful dramatization of the experiences of certain women embroiled by the crossway of life' (77). The characters respond to certain situations in their lives and the imagery employed in the novel abounds in the externalization of the inner consciousness of the three women. Nature images have been employed to examine human relationships and their significations. Swain acknowledges that "There is in her a persistent search for the most appropriate symbols and images in the expression of the subterranean and the subconscious" (131). The aged Nanda Kaul

decides to spend the rest of her life at Carignano, in Kasauli all alone. She believes she has completed her duties in life and has decided to 'be left to the pines and cicadas alone. She hoped she would not stop' (Fire 3). At this stage in her life, Nanda 'wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction' (3). She is grey, tall and thin and she fancies 'she could merge with the pine trees and could be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake' (4). Critic Indira says, 'Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life' (97). Nanda is attracted to Carignano for 'its barrenness.' (Fire 4). Nanda is like Carignano, stark, alone and barren. The lonely house is symbolic of the solitary life of Nanda. The barrenness and starkness associated with it symbolizes an essential human condition-alienation. The sight of an eagle or a bright hoopoe served to delight her otherwise solitary existence. The postman early morning is an unwelcome sight. She understands that her great-grand daughter, Raka would be staying with her for some days. Ram Lal the cook and caretaker is the only person who she maintains contact with. Raka, as Nanda understands, has suffered from typhoid and the fever has made her weak. She is being sent to Carignano to convalesce. Raka has been asked to stay in Carignano as part of her medication. Desai describes Nanda's anger and reluctance in welcoming her great-grand daughter thus: One long finger moved like a searching insect over the letter on her lap, moved involuntarily as she struggled to suppress her anger, her disappointment and her total loathing of her daughter's meddling, busybody ways, her grand daughter's abject helplessness, and her great grand daughter's impending arrival here at Carignano. (Fire18) Nanda has no option but to receive her great-grand daughter. As she sits alone, she sees an eagle, 'its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle – gliding, with eyes closed' (21). Nanda is desperate for a life without worries. She is forced to accept Raka into her house. Her mind is filled with thoughts about freedom. Added to this, a few days later she hears 'A burst of crackling and hissing, as of suddenly awakened geese, a brief silence, then a voice issued from it that made her gasp and shrivel...'(22). It was the voice of her friend Ila

Das who wanted to spend some time with her friend Nanda. As Nanda talks to Ila over the phone, she watches 'The white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation' (23). Nanda feels she is being persecuted like the worm in her desperate attempt to escape Ila. 'Still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach...' (24). This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is a cruel reminder of her past suffering at the hands of the adulterous husband and her present awareness about the harsh realities of life. Her husband had an extra-marital affair with Miss David, the Mathematics teacher. Now, Nanda is helpless as she has to welcome Ila, which means disturbing her tranquility. Though Nanda is determined to remain unaffected by the happenings outside, she cannot help but listen to the quarrel of the monkeys and the shrill voices of the parrots. As Nanda decides to take a walk on the lawn, she spots a lapwing that gets agitated on her unexpected arrival. Nanda thinks 'that hunted, fearful bird, distracting and disturbing' (28). Nanda is compared to a bird that has been aroused from its serenity at the arrival of Raka and Ila. D. Maya observes that "In the evocation of images that transcribed the human conditions and in the poignant fictionalization of the human predicament, Anita Desai's skill is incomparable" (135-136). The arrival of Raka, though unwelcome is looked up by Nanda as a responsibility. To Nanda 'Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round faced, calm or radiant' (Fire 43). Nanda thinks the girl 'looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs' (43). As Raka slowly approaches her great-grand mother, she makes the 'old lady feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect' (43). Raka's illness has proved detrimental and her great-grand mother is her only solace. To Raka, the old lady is 'another pine tree, the grey sari a rock – all components of the bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden' (44). In contrast, Raka is 'an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry' to Nanda (44). Without any warmth or show of affection, Nanda welcomes Raka into her abode of isolation and introspection. Ecological criticism envelops not only ecological concerns, but also those landscapes that employ images that contribute to a meaningful link between the various

aspects of animate and inanimate relationships. Howarth mentions: A future sense of cultural history may be landscape ecology which avoids distinction between natural and disturbed regions and uses a new spatial language to describe land by shape, junction, and change. They also provides metaphors for land – such as mosaic, patch, corridor.... (76)

Raka is left to herself at Carignano. She spends her time talking to Ram Lal and moving around the hill side with its only vegetation of a blighted gorge. The factory at this hill station resembles 'a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked' (Fire 46). She clings to the rail and slides across the length of the outdoor kitchen 'lizard-like' (46) and finds the room empty. She sees Ram Lal and enquires about the mad dogs and jackals that roam on the hill sides. In a desperate attempt, to enjoy the holidays, Raka decides to explore Carignano. But Nanda is indignant when she sees Raka roaming around 'as if she were a thousand black mosquitoes, a stilly humming conglomerate of them, and did not know whether to contain or release this dire seething' (49). The sudden arrival of a dust-storm, yellow and fierce, engulfs Kasauli, blotting out the view, the sky and the air in a gritty mask. 'The sun ... lighting them up in a great conflagration - splendid bonfire that burned in the heart of the yellow clouds. The whole world was livid, inflamed' (58). Raka is astonished at the sight and enquires whether it would set the hills on fire. Ram Lal says that 'this is how forest fires do start. I can't tell you how many forest fire we see each year in Kasuali.... You can see how many trees are burnt, and house too' (58). The symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* and is highly significant from the thematic point of view. The mountain symbolizes Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka's wild nature. "Nanda is the 'rocky belt', dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like the forest fire. The novel may be considered as a story of inabilities of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another's position" (Choudary 79). Forest fire is one of the major concerns in the mountainous regions. It could be accidental or intentional and results in loss of lives, property and the depletion of forest resources. Hill stations have been pleasure spots for tourists and passer-by who often 'scratched their names into their succulent blades and there they remained – names and dates, incongruous and obtrusive as the barbed wire' (Fire 63). 'Garden House' that was once the

most beautiful garden in Kasauli is now used as an army billet. This reminds one of the insensitivity of man to nature. He has reduced nature to an object for his own use and pleasure. A few days in Carignano, Raka proves that 'she was no long the insect, the grasshopper child. She grew as still as a twig' (79). Both Nanda and Raka usually avoid each other; though Nanda has developed a liking for her great-granddaughter. Nanda and Raka, on this particular day sense 'a copper glow that outlined the shoulder of the hill in the east... a livid radiance in that cinereous twilight' (81). It is a forest fire – a big one. It could either be the work of poachers or thieves, let alone dust-storms. Images of insects like lizards, birds like eagles and parrots, and 'the thematic image of the 'fire' with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of the impending tragedy' (Indira 96). The arrival of Ila reminds Nanda of the younger days. Raka does not interfere with the old women and she is taken in by 'the scene of devastation and failure' of Kasauli that somehow 'drew her, inspired her' (Fire 99). To Raka, Carignano is 'as dry and clean as a nut but she burst from its shell like an impatient kernel, small and explosive' (99). Raka is so involved with Carignano that she raises herself on 'to the tips of her toes – tall as a pine – stretched out her arms till she felt the yellow light... till she was alight, ablaze' (100). Nanda understands that Raka is agile and she is 'the elusive fish, the golden catch' (108).

Ila is aware that all forms of exploitation take place at Kasauli. She is a person who fights for justice. Ila recalls the incident where Maya-devi's son dies of tetanus. Superstitious beliefs in Kasauli are so rooted that the priest-man is revered and the doctor is shunned. Ila is involved with the lives of the people in Kasauli as she has recently joined in the capacity of the welfare officer by the government. She is against child marriage that prevails in Kasauli and prevents the marriage of Preet Singh's seven yearold daughter to an old man in a neighboring village. Hence she has incurred the wrath of the priest and Preet Singh, who has decided to take revenge on Ila for interfering in his affairs. Though she is aware of the dire consequences of her deeds, she is committed to the welfare of Kasauli. One day, when Ila is out visiting Kasauli, she finds that the work would take too much time. Though alone, she is determined to walk the long distance down the desolate hill side to reach home and is interrupted by 'a

black shape' (155). She recognizes Preet Singh who has attacked her. Defenseless against the powerful assailant, she is raped and brutally killed. The news is a rude shock to Nanda. She is invited by the police to identify the dead body. At that moment, Raka runs to Nanda telling her 'I have set the forest on fire' (159). To Nanda, Ila's death is like the fire that has been set. The young girl sees Nanda 'on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling' (159). She does not realize that her great-grandmother is dead. In this novel, 'the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end' (Indira 96). Vassanji opines: Anita Desai's novels do not deal with the large movements of history but with the struggles of human soul; not with the exuberance, the contradictions, the fascinations of India, its thrillingness and rawness that so easily fascinate the non-Indian reader; rather she looks at the invisible and private, and shall we say darker world of the self. (Introduction xiii) Anita Desai has the power to express sensibilities in her canvas using images from nature. Since most of her novels are explorations into fundamental conditions and hapless situations, the use of imagery from nature has contributed to the themes in her novels in a substantial manner. She is an artist who has the ability to carve such deep emotions within her dexterous use of imagery that they announce the introduction of the explorations of the selves within the ecological framework.

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