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Eco-Feminism in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, a subtle writer, belongs to the generation of novelists on the Indian English scene. Her fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977 in London placed her reputation as one of the best Indian English novelists. It is the Hindi translation of Academy award winning novel and she received National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain* in the year 1978. It is the most explicit novel on feminism and the title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is suggestive of the revolt of the new generation of women against a world dominated by harsh and cruel men. The title has its symbolic meaning which points out the Nature symbolism. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* is set in Kasauli, a hill station which is focused on three women and their experiences in life.

Keywords

Anita Desai; *Fire on the Mountain*; Eco-Feminism.

Introduction

Indo-Anglian literature is usually described as Indian writing in English. Indo-Anglian literature refers to the body of work by writers who write in the English language or whose co-native language could be one of the various languages of India. The Indian English literature began in 1793 A.D. Then Sake Dean Mahomet published a book entitled *Travels of Dean Mahomet* in London and this was essentially his travel narrative that can be put somewhere between a non-fiction and a travelogue.

In the early stages, the Indian writings in English were heavily influenced by the Western art form of the novel. Indian English fiction is a later development. Social and national problems which permeate the works of Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ram Gopal Ghose, Surendranath Banerjee, G.K. Gokale and other pioneers of Indian Renaissance paved the way for the growth and development of Indian English fiction.

India was the fountain head of storytelling in ancient days. Novel as an art form came to India with the British. It was a new genre in Indian literature. In various Indian languages, novel became a popular literary form which attracted great writers. Bhudeva Chandra Mukherjee's *Anguria Binimoy*, Bankim Chandra's *Raj Singha*, *Kapalkundla* and *Durgeshnandini*, R.C.Dutt's *Sansar and Madhvi Kankan*, Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and *Char Adhyaya* are some noticeable novels in Bengali which had a great role in the development of Indian English literature.

Indian novelists successfully employed European technique of novel for expressing typical Indian ethos and sensibility. Early fiction writers copied their languages from the works of English Romantics and Victorians. Novelist from the all parts of India contributed their might to the development of Indian English novel.

The Indian writing in English began to get noticed and seriously discussed only with the arrival of number of novelists in 1930s. They were R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. There are several other notable writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, G.V. Desani, Balachandra Rajan, Khushwant Singh, who have contributed to the Indo-Anglian literature. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian Diaspora, such as V.S.Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, who are of Indian descent.

After the Second World War, women novelists of worth and quality began enriching Indian fiction in English. Indeed, there has been a galaxy of accomplished women novelists whose works are now an integral part of literature. The Indian women novelists are noticeable for their own style. Each one of them has her own world of experiences, her own way looking at things, and her own way of portraying characters in the novels. They evinced a keen sense of awareness of social change. Women have made remarkable contribution to poetry and fiction in Indian English literature. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and many others have evinced remarkable artistic skill for satire, humour, criticism, pathos, serious tragic emotions, fantasy and even poetic touches.

Lalithambika Antharjanam who was an author and social reformer reflected the women's roles in society with the help of her novels. Amrita Pritam is the first woman writer to win Sahitya Akadami Award for literature. Gita Sahgal is also a writer and journalist on issues of feminism, fundamentalism, and racism who is the director of prize winning documentary films, and a women rights as well as human rights activist. Tarabai Shinde is an activist whose work entitled as *Stri Purush Tulana* is considered as the first modern Indian feminist text. Among such writers of India, Anita Desai is talented in describing the condition of women in the Indian society.

Anita Desai is widely recognized as one of India's leading English fiction writers who is one of the world famous and of India's best modern novelist in

English. She was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station in the foot hills of the Himalaya ranges, near Dehradun, in the North Indian state of Uttaranchal, India. Anita Desai is a distinguished Indo-Anglian novelist, who got married in 1958 and had four children. She is a good and efficient mother. She has been living in various cities: Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Poona- some of which are well described in her novels.

As a promising Indo-English writer, she has enriched Indian fictional world with her significant literary outputs. She is originally an Indian citizen who migrated to America, but considered to be an expatriate writer of the Indian origin. Anita Desai's works portrayed the experience of the people of India. She differs in many ways from the postcolonial women writers of India. She has used time and memory as an important aspect of the novel.

On the literary map of Indian women's writing, Anita Desai appears to be a leading luminary. In the critical perspective, Anita Desai is considered as Indian Jane Austen and Woolf. Anita Desai, a prominent Indian English writer, has written a number of novels such as: *Cry, the peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *Fasting Feasting* (1999), etc. Her contribution to Indian English fiction has earned both name and fame for her. Broadly speaking, Desai's themes and images deal with confinement and lack of freedom. Her novels depict a world of alienation, loneliness, and suffering. She is a gifted writer and winner of Sahitya Academy Award, who can also be considered as the writer of the psychological novels. In short, her expert knowledge of contemporary European theatre, her exposure to the feminine sensibility of Indian society, all these made her famous as a novelist in the history of Indian English literature.

Anita Desai has been awarded numerous prizes and honors, including the Winfred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature, The Padmasri Award from the Government of India, The Moravia Prize for Literature, and Neil Gunn

Prize for International Literature from the Scottish Arts Council. Anita Desai is a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi.

Anita Desai, a wonderfully subtle writer, belongs to the generation of novelists on the Indian English scene. Her fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977 in London placed her reputation as one of the best Indian English novelists. It is the Hindi translation of Academy award winning novel and she received National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain* in the year 1978. It is the most explicit novel on feminism and the title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is suggestive of the revolt of the new generation of women against a world dominated by harsh and cruel men. The title has its symbolic meaning which points out the Nature symbolism. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* is set in Kasauli, a hill station which is focused on three women and their experiences in life.

Anita Desai's intention is not to describe the landscape but the psychology of the protagonist and the landscape used only to reflect symbolically the mindscape of Nanda Kaul. It is the novel that closely associates the nature with the women. By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Anita Desai hints at how her female protagonists despise the absurdity of their existence. They either withdraw into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, long for something new or is made miserable by the environment as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the location of her novel, Anita Desai has endowed it with a wider appeal where the boundaries of region, religion and time cease to exist. This novel is obviously about Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das.

Anita Desai's novels, made it clear that the feminism depicted by her is the one which she could experience, sometimes directly but very often indirectly. In concerning with the interior landscape and the psychic odyssey of the figures, Anita Desai has extended and enlarged thematic horizon of Indo-

Anglian novel. Thus it is through the quality of mind and soul above that Anita Desai's novels would be a major contribution to Indian English literature.

Eco-Feminism in *Fire on the Mountain*

Eco-Feminism describes movements and philosophies which links feminism with ecology. It is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of nature and the subordination or oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside Second Wave Feminism and the Green Movement.

The term Eco-Feminism was coined by the French writer Francoise de Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. From the arguments that there is a relationship between the women and nature, Eco-feminists believe that these connections are illustrated through traditionally feminine values such as reciprocity, nurturing and co-operation, which are present both among women and in nature. Women and nature are also having the unity of sharing their history of oppression by the patriarchal western society.

In Western society women are considered to be inferior to men and the nature is treated as inferior to the culture. Throughout our history nature is often closer to women than men.

After the beginning of the Environmental Movement in the early 1970s, intersections among feminists and other social justice movements emerged. The feminists that took interests in these movements explored how oppressions were linked through gender, race, class, and ecology, as well as species and ideas of nationhood. These feminists developed texts, such as *Women and Nature*, *The Death of Nature*, and *Ecology*. These texts helped to propel the association between domination by man on women and the domination of culture on nature. From these texts feminist activism of the 1980s linked with the ideas of Ecology and the Environment. At the end of the decade Eco-feminism expressed an intersectional analysis of women and the environment. In the 1990s, the advancing theories in Eco-Feminism were begun and the

analysis done by post-structural and Third Wave Feminists who argued that eco-feminism equated women with nature.

Eco-Feminists focus on these connections and analysis how the society devalue and oppress both women and nature. Eco-Feminists analyzed that it is not only women who are closer to nature, but also the oppressed races and social classes have also been closely associated with nature.

A postcolonial eco-feminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial Eco-Criticism and Eco-Feminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, race, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. This paper brings that the relationship between women and environment shown through the women protagonists in novel written by Anita Desai. Many Indian women novelists not only explore the female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by male society, but their work also retains currency for making social issues a key part in their novels. Especially Anita Desai, although writing in an industrial, cosmopolitan setting, engages herself with the basic concerns of the environmentalists and ecologists. She is generally thought to have addressed women's inner cravings for self- identity.

Fire on the Mountain promotes eco-consciousness by foregrounding the landscape, by interpreting human actions in animal terms, by conveying the diverse nature of mountain biosphere, by depicting the ecological food chain of that locale and by describing some spontaneous natural process. Thus the novel aims to bring the integral relationship between women and nature. The novel reveals the domination and exploitation of man on nature as well as the oppression of women by patriarchal society, which shown through the protagonists or central characters of the novel.

Fire on the Mountain revolves around three women characters namely Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das. The response of these characters to different

situations in life has been externalized with natural images to proliferate their inner consciousness. The novel depicts the darker shades of nature and simultaneous alliance of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Therefore, this novel makes it clear that eco-criticism envelops not only ecological issues, but also those natural icons that have a relevant connection between human and non-human relationships.

In this novel, Anita Desai's description of the landscape is used to reflect symbolically the mindscape of Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of the novel. The place Carignano in Kasauli, is the place of bareness and isolation. Nanda Kaul herself was a lover of nature. She wanted to preserve the serenity of nature. It was this love of nature which had brought her to Kasauli, and inspired her to renounce her family. She wanted nothing and no one else and she want to become a recluse. "Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left without nothing (Desai 17)?"

The place Carignano, she had chosen was on the ridge of the mountain isolated and unfrequented which reflects her isolated life. She wished to be harmonized with nature and become a part of nature. She was at time curtained by pine tree as if she was nothing but a part of trees. Forsaking the company of man, she had come to be identified with the nature, with pine trees and the mountain and the wind. Both the landscape Carignano and her life reveal the exploitation of human society and thus they become isolated.

The cruelty that the women suffer in Desai's novel finds their culmination in the character Raka, who sets the forest on fire at the end. Raka, a weak looking secretive great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul who also felt more at home among wild untamed nature. She wanted also to be alone and pursue her own secret life among rocks and pines of Kasauli, with all the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer and a discoverer. Though Nanda and Raka reject each other, they were similar in their character of loving nature. "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and

obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct (Desai 39)".

Both Raka, and her great grandmother Nanda Kaul isolated themselves from the external world and desired for an undisturbed life of recluse. Similarly, the landscape Carignano is the place of isolation and renunciation.

The novel portrays the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous conjunction of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Ila Das's rape in Desai's novel is mercilessly carried out in the fields that are supposed to sustain life. The nature helps the human society but it is destroyed by men. Similarly Ila das was raped and killed as a reward for the service to the society. It shows the domination of patriarchal society on both women and nature.

Anita Desai has taken special pains through her extensive use of similes and bird images to highlight the pathos and tragedy of this self-respecting lady. Ila got a job of a social welfare officer. But she was raped and killed for being against child marriage. Though Ila and the nature served the people, they got destroyed at the end. It shows the oppression of women and nature.

Conclusion

To conclude, Anita Desai reflects the relationship of women and nature through the oppression of her female protagonists. Eco-Feminism reveals the domination of man on ecology (nature) and the subordination of these three female characters. It is Nanda, Raka and Ila Das who were suppressed by the patriarchal society as well as the nature dominated by human society.

Anita Desai has a special talent in bringing the connection between humans and nature. Thus, it is proved that she is a feminist as well as an ecologist, through her famous novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Anita Desai is the best of all Indian writers in revealing the natural images, and presenting the protagonists in connection with nature.

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