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Nature And Women: An Ecofeminist Study In Anita Desai'S Where Shall We Go This Summer? And Rosarita

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ecofeminist study of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Rosarita* providing the intricate connection between silence, sensibilities, and selfhood. Ecofeminism, which highlights the relationship between nature, gender, and resistance, provides a captious approach through Desai's narrative, presenting a compelling narrative where landscapes are not merely passive backdrops but transformative spaces for women characters. The study examines how both novels portray nature as an important role in the lives of women, highlighting the female characters of Sita, Sarita, and Bonita. Their journey illustrates how ecological consciousness and feminine identity are intertwined, enabling them to resist oppressive structures and providing the landscape which acts as both past history and as well as self-realisation. In both texts, Anita Desai presents nature as a silent interlocutor, allowing the protagonists to renegotiate their position between tradition and autonomy. This paper argues that Desai's works make a significant contribution to ecofeminist discourse, dealing with how environmental and feminine sensibilities reshape women's identity.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Sensibilities, Identity.

Introduction:

Ecofeminism is a term coined by the French writer Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book “Le Feminisme Ou La Mort”. Ecofeminism is a critical perspective that emerged in the late 20th century, exploring the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminism came from the earlier theoretical assumption of feminist theory and ecocriticism. Vandana Shiva (1989), in her book “Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India” talks about the concept of ‘Mother Earth’ and ‘Femininity of nature’ which are supported by cultural ecofeminism, emphasizing the natural interrelation between women and nature. Further, she discusses the traditional wisdom and asserts that environmental protection and preservation, as well as respect for women should be followed in modern urban society. Thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies highlight the silence, marginalization, and control of both women and the environment.

Anita Desai, one of the most outstanding novelists and a distinguished voice in Indian English literature, unlike other writers, focuses on the inner lives of women characters in her novels, and these characters navigate the pressure of the family, society, and tradition. Instead of external events or grand plots, she emphasizes the psychological, emotional, and spiritual struggles of individuals.

She is one of the most leading contemporary Indian authors in English who has been known as a literary genius in India as well as abroad. She was born on 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station near Dehradun in northern India. She grew up surrounded by Western literature and music. Her father, D.N Mazumdar was a Bengali and her mother Toni Nime was a German.

Desai has captivated the literary world with her novels “*Cry, the Peacock*” (1963), “*Voice in the City*” (1965), “*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*” (1971), “*The Peacock Garden*” (1974), “*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*” (1975), “*Fire on the Mountain*” (1977), “*Games at Twilight and Other Stories*” (1978), “*Clear Light of Day*” (1980), “*In Custody*” (1984), *Baumgartner's Bomb* (2004), “*Rosarita*” (2024).

Anita Desai's female characters often experience alienation within the rigid structures of family and society. In their quest for meaning, they turn toward nature as a space of refuge, resistance, and healing. Desai's novels “*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*” and “*Rosarita*” portray silences and selves that are intertwined with ecological landscapes dealing with nature as mirrors of inner conflict and offer possibilities for renewal. The relationship of women and nature has been central to ecofeminist discourse. The mentioned texts offer a fertile ground for ecofeminist readings because of their deep concern with women's psychological struggles and their symbolic association with nature.

The term ecofeminism frames the connection between women and nature. It argues the patriarchal systems that historically dominate both women and the environment, seeing them as resources to be controlled, exploited, or silenced.

Ecofeminist Reading in Anita Desai's "*Where Shall We Go This Summer*" and "*Rosarita*"

Anita Desai's novels "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*" and "*Rosarita*", offer rich material for ecofeminist study as they undergoes women's psychological struggle, silences, and sensibilities while portraying nature as a living and responsive space. Through these novels, Desai explores the interplay between women's inner worlds, ecological consciousness, and the formation of selfhood.

In *Rosarita*, the protagonist Bonita's silence reflects the psychological and emotional state. The novel uses landscape as a feminine silence in Bonita's reflection on her mother's past. Nature is depicted not merely as a backdrop for the action. Bonita's interaction with the environment, such as garden, ocean, shores, and enclosed natural spaces mirrors and validates her unspoken emotions, highlighting the ecofeminist interconnection between women and the environment. Bonita's journey in the novel is not about recovering familial history but about breaking away from it. Her path represents the reclamation of the feminine self through interaction with nature.

Desai presents nature as a metaphor for women. In the novel, the protagonist Bonita is portrayed through her mother's past. Bonita's reclamation of feminine agency emerges through her recognition of nature as a memory keeper, a witness to women's erased histories. By placing herself with the remembering entity, she resists patriarchal expunging and serves an alternative space of identity: "You hesitate, not wanting to return to your room; its emptiness will only oppress you, so you turn into the Jarden from where the day time strollers and loiterer are almost gone" (Desai 26). Bonita's rejection of oppressive emptiness and her attempt to reclaim through nature emerge as a space of freedom, memory, and self-discovery presenting landscape as a silent keeper of the past.

Bonita's journey into the landscape once inhabited by her mother transforms into an act of reclamation; she begins to perceive nature not only as an active force in shaping her own identity. The novel undergoes how Desai's use of garden and enclosed natural spaces symbolised women's containment within the patriarchal system. When Bonita recalls the garden of her childhood, it becomes a site of return, not just geographically but psychologically reflecting her mother Sarita's unspoken frustrations.

Throughout the novel, nature is served not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant shaping feminine agency. Nature becomes a living archive to the character's forgotten year: "Mother, an artist? In the home you remembers without a paintbrush, a chalk or a sketchbook to be seen? (Desai 10). This reveals Bonita's realisation of her mother, Sarita, constrained by patriarchal space, symbolising the silencing of women's creative potential under patriarchy.

In "*Rosarita*" Desai's treats landscape that is once vast, secretive and alive, symbolising hidden histories, memory, and the potential for reclaiming identity. Nature functions as witness, archive, and active participant in Bonita's journey of self-discovery: "The highway and the land is traverses seem infinite but on the distant horizon hills appear like the incoming waves of prehistoric

sea, changing in colour from grey to blue and back to grey, their folds closed about their secrets, histories they do not display” (Desai 44)

Here, Bonita’s travels mirror the process of delving into the depths of one’s identity. The dynamic landscape reflects the fluidity of identity and the continuous process of uncovering and integrating the lost histories of the character. Bonita’s journey along this infinite highway symbolises the quest to reclaim those hidden narratives, portraying the landscape’s active participation in shaping identity and consciousness.

The novel is not about unveiling a historical fact or confirming a hidden biography. It is about what emerges within Bonita’s clarity, acceptance, and creative freedom in the face of mystery. It is the certainty about the past, but with a renewed sense of what it means to embrace one’s own identity in the present. Suggestion in healing and identity comes not from mastering history but from accepting one’s place within nature’s cycle of change, decay, and renewal. The sea, light, and shifting shore embody the truth she arrives at: neither gift nor memory can remain fixed and that impermanence is a kind of freedom.

“Where Shall We Go This Summer?” is a novel exploring alienation, identity and emotional turmoil through its protagonist, the sensitive woman Sita. It is set against the backdrop of political instability, post-independent India. While studying, the novel delves into Sita’s internal crisis, where she struggles to find meaning and peace. On the contrary, she finds violent, chaotic, and emotional stifling. Sita is a middle-aged woman living in Bombay with her husband Raman and their children. Feeling emotionally suffocated and deeply disturbed by the political unrest and domestic life around her, she decides to escape to Manori Island, her childhood home.

Sita believes that the Island once had a magical healing powers and can offer a safe environment where she can preserve her unborn child from the corrupt outside world. However, as she returns to the Island, she is not only confronted with the reality that the magic of her childhood is gone but also with the realization that escape is not a solution. The Island is no longer the magical place; it is dry, decaying, and ordinary just like her own emotional state. The state of nature forces her to reflect on her inner self, and nature becomes a mirror, not an escape for its protagonist, Sita, a sensitive woman. The novel is of three parts -Monsoon 67; life in the city, Winter 47; retreat to Manori Island, and Monsoon 67; Realisation and acceptance of the protagonist.

In the novel, Desai portrayed nature as a space for the protagonist’s site for healing as well as self-realization. Sita, the protagonist, is the mother of four children and in her fifth pregnancy; she is in confusion and ambivalence about motherhood. She feels that the unborn child is safe, whole and perfect inside her womb, protected from the chaos of the outside world. She said “would she be performing an act of creation or, by releasing it in violent, pain wracked blood bath” (Desai 44)

In search of escape from all the suffocating realities of Sita’s Life in Bombay and her sense of entrapment as a wife and mother, she finds solace through nature. She believes that her childhood

hometown, Manori Island had a magical and later this Island becomes a metaphor for yearning silence, healing and resistance. Through Sita journey Desai foregrounds the interconnection between women's inner lives and the environment. Nature particularly, the Island, offers a space for Sita to reflect, imagine, and reconnect. As she navigates through the Island, she finds a refuge that provides protection. She had a firm assurance that it would hold her unborn baby safely by magic. "There would be the sea- it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it". (Desai 91)

Not only does nature play an important role towards Sita, but it also plays one towards her children, reflecting their innate innocence, curiosity and vitality. In Manori Island, Sita's children reflect the disconnection and unease, living within the structural, mechanical, and emotionally detached unlike their mother's childhood on Manori Island, surrounded by sea, trees, and open landscapes. Their days become monotonous, masked by silence and a sense of being trapped in their mother's emotional world, suffocated by the lack of space to grow as individuals.

Subsequently, the Island lures Sita's children into an intimate connection with nature, awakening their curiosity and imagination "Let's go out on that, Menaka said pointing at a long thin arm of land that went on furlong into the sea" (Desai 113). To them, nature is not intimidating; it is fascinating. They respond to it with playfulness, such as collecting shells, exploring the shore, feeling the sea breeze.

In the novel, Desai also presents an ecofeminist vision nurturing maternal force giving protection, sustenance, and comfort. Sita walking barefoot on the wet sand and her children bathing in the sea suggest a close connection with the natural world. The sea, though previously "churned and tormented by the monsoon storms till it was muddy and full of long, floating seaweed" is now "calm as if exhausted by the storm" which personifies the sea giving Sita, suffering and endurance. Sita's barefoot walk on the sand indicates her attempt to merge with the earth and seek comfort in its maternal embrace. The stormy and calm phases of the sea mirror Sita's own mental state, which is her inner turmoil and her longing for peace. Just as the sea returns to calmness after violence, nature holds the promise of healing and renewal for Sita.

Desai's depiction of landscapes critiques patriarchal efforts to control women's agency mirroring Shiva, argues that capitalist and colonial structures erase women's ecological knowledge. In Ecofeminism, "Violence against women is as old as patriarchy. Traditional patriarchy has structured our world- views and mindsets, our social and cultural worlds on the basis of domination over women, and the denial of their full humanity and right to equality." Patriarchy denies women's humanity and equality through emotional silencing, reproduction control, and rigid family roles.

Sita's rebellion, seen in her refusal to conform, silences and suppression, becomes an act of ecofeminist resistance. Ecofeminism, as Shiva articulates, insists that the devaluation of women and the destruction of nature are not separate phenomena but structurally linked with the logic of domination. Sita's alienation from her husband, her children, and urban society reflects the same

logic that alienates humanity from the earth, reducing it to a resource for consumption rather than a source of life.

Manori Island is crucial under the ecofeminist dimension of the novel. For Sita, the Island is not simply a geographical retreat but a maternal landscape, which nurtures her inner psychological landscape connected with her father's miracle myth life. Her belief that Island can heal from all sufferings highlights the ecofeminist longing for a return to harmony between human and nature, but it also exposes the difficulty of realising such harmony, which is fractured by the modern patriarchy. "This island, once fertile with memories and myth, now lies barren, degraded, and unable to fulfil her expectation" (Desai 18) This mirrors both nature and women's traditional roles as nurtured in contemporary society. Desai presents an ecofeminist picture of both yearning and loss.

At the same time, Sita realises is that Manori Island does not deliver salvation. Since the Island is not what she imagined, the myth of miracles is no longer feasible. Her return to Bombay, in the end, to Raman and her children, is not a surrender but a recognition of the need to negotiate survival within the contradictions of modern existence. Sita's journey illustrates the complexity that resistance is necessary, but it must coexist with the acceptance of reality's limitations. Desai avoids both idealization and despair, instead offering an expression of ecofeminist vision grounded in ambivalence, negotiation, and resilience.

A character like Sita in the novel "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" poses that patriarchy operates not only as physical violence but also as psychological domination. Sita's life with Raman in Bombay is marked by suffocation in family structure. Though Raman is not brutally violent, his rational, ordered and dismissive approach to Sita's emotions becomes a form of psychological violence.

While in "*Rosarita*", Bonita's mother Sarita's experiences are shaped by rigid social norms and family expectations : "Once, you remember, Mother , after eying the mandatory meat and potatoes, rose and went to the kitchen, asked the cook if he would let her have some of the vegetables he had cooked for himself, and made a meal of it by herself under threatening frown on father's face words withheld"(Desai 18). This shows Sarita's resistance against the structure exploited by the patriarchal system, while the protagonist reminisces about the past.

Bonita's realisation and recognition were mainly from the revisit of the internal past. Sarita is forced to abandon both her artistic skills and creativity under patriarchal rule. "She had talent Francisco saw that, wanted to help it to flower. And you say she give up on returning to India?" (Desai 11). Here, Bonita's mother, Sarita, experiences artistic suppression that parallels her disconnection from nature, reinforcing the ecofeminist idea that creative and environmental suppression are interconnected.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai does not idealize nature or women in a simplistic manner instead she uses ecofeminist ideas to explore the psychological map of women, the loss of harmony between women and their environment in modern society. An ecofeminist study in her novels reveals that the novel is not merely the story of women's psychological crisis but a complex negotiation between humans and nature as well as resistance to domination.

Both novels give support to the ecofeminist insight that nature and humans are inseparable. Desai provides an intricate way in which the destinies of women and nature are intertwined, both shaped and subjected to patriarchal structures of domination. She also draws a striking parallel between nature and women, indicating how the silencing of feminine voices and natural spaces relate to each other. Yet she also portrays resilience and creative potential of both women and nature, offering a nuance of ecofeminist vision in the characters of Sita, Bonita and Sarita.

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