

Women and Animals in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: A Study of Violence

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Abstract: *This paper examines the novel *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai within the context of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism. Despite the fact that both women and animals are excluded from society, I contend that the "other" in the shape of both women and animals is the focus of the book. Through the story, the author reframes topics like women and animals which are typically discussed through the male perspective. The woman serves as the interpreter between humans and animals. The animal figure is used to mediate self-politics and relationships between the two sexes. I demonstrate the significance of the ambivalent viewpoint when discussing the novel's protagonists. These ladies do not fall into either the cultural or natural domains in the culture-nature dichotomy. They demonstrate their ambivalence about both the culture/nature notions by straddling the binary in-between. No demeaning romantic or celebratory association exists between women and the natural world or with animals. The issue of violence against both women and animals has been looked at within this paradigm.*

Keywords: *women, animals, violence, rights, relationship*

Introduction

Through the viewpoint of material postcolonial ecofeminism, this paper examines the Violence against both Women and Animals. This subject has not received much attention under the umbrella of ecofeminism, especially when combined with postcolonial concerns. The 1977 book *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai offers a chance to reexamine some of the postcolonial themes found in the works of male authors from a gendered perspective, as well as to think about the particular mechanisms that place women and animals in inferior and stereotypical roles. In discovering the male-controlled subjugations of women and animals in Desai's work, the idea of violence is crucial. The "other" in the shape of women and animals, despite the fact that they are portrayed as being outside of civilization, is a fundamental argument that is advanced in this paper. The figure of the animal, in turn, mediates the politics and connections between men and women, while the woman herself turns out to be the mediator through which animals can be read. Since these ladies are completely either a part of the natural or cultural realms, the protagonist holds conflicting positions throughout the story. They confront any idealistic or jubilant classifications of women in the natural world, which comprises non-human creatures.

Research Method:

The interpretive philosophy serves as the foundation for the qualitative research approach used in this study. An informational qualitative approach is utilized to give information from a textual account of the phenomena under research. *Fire on the Mountain* is examined using the qualitative research methodology. The Violence against both Women and Animals, as depicted in literature, is

examined through the use of literary tropes like similes, metaphors, personification, the language of animation, symbols, and imagery.

Furthermore, the author will investigate Wordsworth's critique of modernity and industrialization through a lens of material postcolonial ecofeminism to *The Fire in the Mountain* and demonstrate how the novel establishes the link between women, animals, and violence.

Discussion and Analysis

The field of postcolonial ecofeminism is very new. Even now, the closely related disciplines of postcolonial ecofeminism and ecocriticism are dominated by a generally Euro-American outlook. Postcolonial ecofeminism is a topic that neither field effectively addresses. "The 'double-bind' of being female and being colonized" must be acknowledged in both disciplines, according to Campbell (2008, xi). The characters of Nanda and Raka, who have contrasting perspectives on and approaches to the natural environment of Kasauli, are used in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* to highlight the reality of a contemporary Indian family. Here, Nanda Kaul, the vice-chancellor's widow, is shown as an elderly woman who has become weary from carrying the load of the household throughout her life as a "recluse of vengeance" (Desai, 1999, p. 52). Raka, her great-granddaughter, who is sent to her for medical treatment, disrupts her peaceful life.

Postcolonial ecofeminism and ecocriticism must be combined under one analytical emphasis in order to comprehend how the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are strongly tied to concepts of class, caste, race, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. It is crucial to briefly put the discussions and disagreements around women and animals into historical and sociopolitical contexts. In the book's conclusion, it is revealed that Nanda Kaul's husband has been having an ongoing relationship with Miss David, a math teacher. Because of this, she shuns the social life where obligations and responsibilities never cease and where she has experienced the breakdown of her family. She has given up living in such a way in order to stay on the mountain and avoid it. "Be left to the pines and the cicadas alone," she has determined. She hoped that she will continue" (p. 3). She then discovers "the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life" (p. 3). Perhaps as a form of compensation and an alternative to the warped reality of the family life to which she has been shackled, she lives in the wild world of Kasauli. With the intention of engaging with the joy of nature, keeping the painful experiences in the back of their memories, and attempting to live in the present by finding solace from the unpleasant past, she envisions herself in close contact with nature in the mountain. According to Patrick D. Murphy, the opposition between nature and culture, which appears to be fundamental for a variety of claims made about human uniqueness, including those about spiritual essence, right to domination, and exploitative destiny, is why Jacques Derrida is right when he says that Western philosophy is founded on it. (Murphy, 1992, p.311) The aforementioned Murphy remark raises two crucial considerations.

First, a connection to Cartesian dualisms is made, where the self/other dichotomy is reconnected with the nature/culture binary. Second, this makes reference to the fundamental ecofeminist thesis that because the binarist framework establishes a hierarchy of oppositions, it permits multiple forms of oppression. According to Rene Descartes (2007), "animals do not speak as we do because they have no thoughts" (p. 60). He draws the conclusion that since animals are mechanical and merely have innate drives, they are "natural automata" (p. 61). The attribution of instincts and emotions to women (nature, animal) and reason to men (culture, human) has been profoundly influenced by such Cartesian thought. Such conceptual generalizations have become commonplace, permitting the exploitation of women, animals, and other marginalized groups. When "women's bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality" (Adams and Donovan, 1995, p. 1), this is most obviously evident.

The text seems to infer that it is impossible to hold Raka at this moment because she has actively broken free from all the ties and restrictions that once bound Nanda. At this point, Raka rejects the socio-cultural realm. Raka is depicted as being upset by the suffering of the animals nearby or by the cruelty being perpetrated on them. Desai relates the topic of the linked oppression of animals and women through these instances of animal abuse, suggesting that it is informative to take into account examples of male-induced violence regardless of where it is directed. The pinnacle of this masculine violence is shown in two passages from the book, which take place at the Pasteur Institute and the Kasauli Club. Ram Lal responds to Raka's question about the Pasteur Institute by saying, here, medical professionals create injectable serum. A dog once lost control and bit everybody in the community. It had to be put to death. Its head was severed, then delivered to the institute. They are sliced open by the doctors, who examine them. There are several animals there, including rabbits and guinea pigs. They employ them as test subjects. Oh, the serum is always boiling there. (p. 44) Desai appears to be making a clear allusion to the Pasteur Institute in Paris, France, where two ladies active in the anti-vivisection movement saw hundreds of animals suffer in pain from 1903 to 1907. In the line mentioned above, Desai avoids aestheticizing animal agony and suffering, a charge leveled against many writers. She specifically highlights the agony of the dogs through Ram Lal's account of what happened to Raka.

The "animality" of women is thus utilized to deny them the privileges of citizenship. In other words, it is thought that the disparities between various groups are inherent in nature and lead to the process of "othering." The dominance and oppression of some groups of people are thus based on these distinctions. Many ecofeminists have shown a strong link between sexism and speciesism. This results from the conviction that all oppressions are interrelated, which is supported by growing evidence. Because of this, it is impossible to separate the linkages and oppressions of women and animals from other instances of "abuse, degradation, exploitation, and commercialization" (Adams and Donovan, 1995, p.3).

Susanne Kappeler claims that in order to fully understand how sexism and speciesism legitimate the exploitation of both women and animals, it is necessary to examine them in the context of racism,

classism, nationalism, and elements of scientific discourse. Such links may work through feminizing animals (sexism) and animalizing women (speciesism), and occasionally certain non-human animal words can serve as epithets. This further demonstrates the bidirectional nature of the interaction between sexism and speciesism. At this point, I want to emphasize that this paper does not prioritize one group over another and that women and animals are not seen as being either/or in this context (Adams and Donovan, 1995, p. 3). In order to build an ambivalent viewpoint, this study will explore the relationships between these two groups as well as disrupt some binary distinctions. It is crucial to do this because failing to question such binarist distinctions compromises our ability to comprehend oppression's mechanisms in its entirety. One crucial thing to remember in this regard is that the comparison of women to animals should not be interpreted as a "natural" one that implies that they are fundamentally similar, but rather as a contrived one that the patriarchy has made in order to subjugate women. (Gruen, 1993, p.61). This connection's artificiality thus makes two things obvious.

Nanda's banishment to Kasauli is therefore imposed upon her even though it is implied that she chose to do so. When she finds out that her former friend Ila Das was murdered and raped, she finally accepts the truth of her self-imposed seclusion. Desai dives deeply into Nanda Kaul's mind, revealing that he evidently favors seclusion to social interaction, aridity to innovation, and stillness to movement. Over the years, this internal conflict had developed into an almost obsessive need for solitude. Looking down over the years she had endured and endured, Nanda Kaul recalled that "she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restless surging, clamoring about her" (p. 17). Such conceptions are culturally and historically contingent, which means that as the border shifts through time and space, so do the justifications for putting different creatures and people on each side of it (DeMello, 2012, p.33). This subtly raises issues of power and hegemony, specifically who has the authority to speak for whom and how. Second, such a construction must consider the role of language, notably the problematic topic of anthropomorphism when it comes to the representation of animals. Animals are like us but also different from us, according to DeMello. They are the ideal medium for communicating information about ourselves to ourselves because of their ambiguity. ...We anthropomorphize (humanize) animals and bestialize humans. Additionally, even though we can use animals to emphasize a person's positive traits (brave like a lion), we frequently use them negatively (sly like a fox), especially to belittle racial minorities. (DeMello, 2012, pp.287–288, emphasis in original)

However, anthropomorphism has been defended by detractors like John Berger and Marion Copeland. According to Berger, "anthropomorphism, despite being derided, is useful because it conveys the closeness between humans and animals. " (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 251). Ram Lal highlights the indignities of animal death by violating the animals' bodily integrity in a later discussion with Raka about witches, telling her that after cutting up the insane dogs and boiling their brains, the institute physicians throw down the bodies for you to feast on. "(p, 77). All of this is created in the vocabulary

of marketable methodical investigation and vivisection, which inevitably denies the subjecthood of the animal. However, there is no denying the connection between Raka and the Pasteur Institute. Regarding the child's control by the Pasteur Institute, Nanda Kaul questions, "[w]hat did Raka see in it? Why did the kid find it fascinating? (p. 73). Nearly as in response, Raka acknowledges that almost as if in response, "[t]he spectacle of ruin and failure in some way captivated her, motivated her. She was drawn to Kasauli because of its damaged, demolished, and desolate areas (pp. 90–91). This includes both the Pasteur Institute and the burned-out home on the hill, whose owner perished after attempting to save her cat from the blaze. Here, Raka's feelings and ambivalent attitude are expressed. On the one side, she chooses to completely reject the socio-political realm, making the desolate environment her home. On the other side, she enjoys the destructive qualities of this nature and its surroundings, and by the book's end, she will also vehemently oppose the natural world. Raka's transformation is irreversible after she sees the celebration at the Kasauli Club.

Raka is horrified by the display of brutality performed at the costume-party dances in the club, which is eerily similar to the abuse meted out to the animals in the Pasteur Institute: Raka noticed the white skull and crossbones on his chest. When he raised his scythe to cut off the woman's bucket head, it glinted and fired out lightning bolts from below his arm. Her pink neck expanded wide and she laughed in blood bubbles under her messy hair. A figure in a brown robe then appeared to be sneaking up to Raka from behind the curtain as the row of bottoms parted to let it through. However, it was unable to see because it lacked a head and just had a blood-stained shawl draping around its neck. It held its head buried behind its arm while giggling too much and had a pot grin (p. 71). Raka observes a ritualized celebration of male violence in this situation. Raka is forced to confront and actually envision the painful reminiscence she has of the brutality. Tara, the mother, and Raka endured the domination of her husband through the actions of the club dancers. Raka's memory of her father abusing her mother with hammers and fists made her shrink under the sheets and wet the mattress out of fear as she saw the woman's head being chopped off with a scythe and blood dripping from her neck.. while her mother sobbed while lying on the ground with her eyes closed. (p. 71-72) Knowing the reasons for Raka's desire for ugly and destructive sights, her preference for wild animals, and her rejection of the "civilized" world are all based on this violence. Raka, who ends the book by setting the woodland on fire, represents the climax of all the tragedies that the novel's female characters endure. Raka clearly wants to exact revenge on the grownup, but she also destroys the local space, which was the part of previous girls' deaths, failures, and acts of violence, in a symbolic way. She says, "[L]ook, Nani, I have set the forest on fire" (p. 145), articulating the collective silence of women in the destructive agency. Raka is currently located outside of both the natural and socio-cultural spheres.

Raka also starts a fire in the area of the house's surrounding forest. I shall focus on the personality of Raka and her relationships with animals and violence for the sake of this essay. It's important to note that Desai does not explicitly state in *Fire on the Mountain* that marginalized and "othered" women are

always the targets of gender-based violence. The novel provides a distinct type of existence and even agency of women that is radically different from Nanda's through her great-granddaughter, Raka. Raka's name, which translates to "moon," according to Nanda Kaul, is an "utter misnomer" because of "her resemblance to an insect" (p. 39). The zoological stereotypes of Raka shift throughout time as Nanda's feelings for her do and as Raka's personality gradually transforms from a timid youngster to one who is eager to explore her environment. Raka's acts are still depicted as being animalistic and she is still compared to a wild animal. In the forest, she looks for food and "drop[s] on all fours [to come] scrambling up the hill" (p. 73). She also bends over backward to lick her limbs and legs as an animal would (p. 50). Raka avoids eye contact and prefers the untamed, wild, and untamed environment surrounding Kasauli to the "safe, cozy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment" (p. 91). This is due to the fact that she is wild and animalistic by nature.

Numerous vivid imageries of animals, birds, and insects that represent Nanda's emotional states and moods are also abundant in the story and greatly contribute to the book's overall tone. Nanda seemed to be stuck between the eagle's distance and aloofness. She had thought about trying to mimic the eagle's closed-eye glide when it occurred to her (p. 19). The image of the "white and yellow butterfly" (p. 13) flapping over her daughter's letter contradicts Nanda's wish for stability, which is hinted at by the charred tree trunks, by simultaneously implying the fragility of this self-created insulated universe, the inevitability of change, as well as her wish for freedom. Nanda believes 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" (p. 39) despite Raka denoting the full moon. She does not appreciate her presence as an obligation, either. Raka makes her great-grandmother "feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect" when she approaches her gently (p. 39). Raka's disease has been harmful, and her only comfort is her great-grandmother. Nanda welcomes Raka into her home of solitude and reflection without any warmth or signs of compassion. She shatters the distinctions between civilization and nature and between humans and animals. Raka doesn't swear allegiance to either the human or animal world, although harsh, her act of lighting the woodland on fire is not violent.

However, it's crucial to understand that some of the arguments ecofeminists use to refute this viewpoint—namely, that anthropomorphism is at once anthropocentric and androcentric—retain some of their validity and truth. I advise reading the works of the author who will be the subject of this essay within the context of recovering anthropomorphism. They use a sufficient amount of anthropomorphism, to use Copeland's phrase, in order for readers to be able to relate to the characters, their emotions, and the interactions between women and animals.

Conclusion

As a result of her separation from society, Raka is labeled as "other" and is nevertheless the focus of Desai's work. This paper has looked at the relationships between women and animals without trying to

favor anyone. It's vital to notice that no one provides any significant answers to the problems. Instead, the work provides important new understandings of the mechanisms that place women and animals in inferior and stereotypical roles. Additionally, it shows how these are resisted or appropriated by the women. The contradictory status of the women in the novel is revealed by rereading and reinterpreting it in order to disrupt the dichotomies of culture and nature and human and animal through fictional representations. It is impossible to say that Raka has a romantic relationship with nature and the natural world. Since violence exposes the patriarchal instrumentalist worldview toward both women and animals, it has been crucial to examine how the patriarchal oppression of both women and animals works. The misery caused by this brutality to women and animals is thus intricately linked, and the author compels readers to notice deeply to harm committed against both women and animals. This further demonstrates the connection between the lack of separation between the oppression of women and that of animals.

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