

Prismatic Refraction of Eco-criticism in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

KUMARI RASHMI PRIYDARSHNI

Abstract. The human world cannot be separated from that of nature. Now-a-days, Eco-criticism has been playing an extremely vital role in shaping the essence of human society. This term refers to the study of literature and environment from an inter-disciplinary point of view and aims at improving the predicament of mankind on domestic, cultural, social, ethical and psychological levels. So far as Desai's eco-critical outlook is concerned, she, also, has a great attachment with nature and environment. All her fiction, starting from *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) to her latest mind-blowing novel *The Zigzag Way* (2004), have quite lively descriptions of natural environment, in which she embroiders drama of despair, defeats and illusions of individual characters. However, the present paper attempts at finding out prismatic refraction of eco-criticism in her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* which is a touching story of Maya, a neurotic young woman suffering basically on account of incompatibility of her thoughts and emotive impulses with her insensitive, pragmatic and rational advocate husband Gautama. In this novel Desai has sketched the disturbed mental status of the female protagonist co-relating with the natural surroundings. In it she doesn't focus on the pollution of river, ponds or other resources; doesn't tell about the adverse impact of scientific advancement on the nature and environment, rather reveals out the lulling and soothing effects of nature on the deteriorated psyche of Maya through her cinematographic technique, by using appropriate symbols, metaphors or images from nature.

Keywords : Prismatic refraction; peasantry; eco-criticism; alienation; pragmatic; eco-feminist; surrealistic; bio-diversity; existentialist; cinematographic technique.

Nature promotes that sensibility which is the foundation for human love, and can invoke passions that can perpetuate human relationships. Man's intense longing to be independent gradually lessens his attachments with nature; though, nature has always been congenial to his existence. The romantic poets glorified the Rousseauistic simplicity in their works by the idealisation of peasantry, childhood, and the residents of moors and heaths. They started taking refuge in the lap of nature, and like true eco-critics, delineating the nature and its various aspects in their writings. William Wordsworth always favoured countryside and natural scenario and was a great denunciator of urbanization. Nature plays a larger part in Thomas Hardy's books also, which is far from being all beauty and goodness. It has horrible aspects as well. If nature is orderly and benign, it is, amoral, rapacious and disastrous as well. Nature can be a protector, and sometimes, a

destroyer, as Shelley has depicted in his famous poem "Ode to the West Wind". In it he prophetically sings:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth.
(Shelley 2007 : 61-62)

Nature acts both as a consoling agent and also as a disturbing presence. The human world cannot be alienated from that of nature. In the modern patriarchal society there is enormous discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, creed, language, gender, colour and age etc., which brings imbalance and disharmony in the social and environmental set up. Now-a-days, Eco-criticism has been playing, an extremely vital role in bringing harmony amidst human society. This term refers to the study of literature and environment from an inter-disciplinary point of view and it aims at improving the predicament of mankind on domestic, cultural, social, ethical and psychological levels. It has moral and philosophical aims too, and it strives to maintain ecological balance and harmony in the society. Eco-criticism was previously known as 'the study of nature writing'. In the mid-1980s, scholars began to work collectively to establish eco-criticism as a genre. Cheryll Glotfelty revived the term "Eco-criticism" and emphasised its adoption to refer to the dispersed critical field. From the late 1990s, new branches of ASLE i.e. 'Association for the Study of Literature and Environment' and affiliated organizations were started in the UK, Japan, Korea, Australia and New-Zealand (ASLEC-ANZ), India (OSLE-India), Taiwan, Canada and Europe, which broadened its relevance and scope. Simon Estok argues that eco-criticism is more than:

simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the functions - thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical or otherwise of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds. (Evans 1997 : 16-17)

So far as 'Desai's eco-critical outlook' is concerned, she, also, has a great attachment with nature and environment. In her novels, however, nature plays a mind-soothing, pain-relieving and delightful role. All her fiction, starting from '*Cry, the Peacock*' (1963) to her latest mind-blowing novel *The Zigzag Way* (2004), have lively descriptions of natural environment in which she embroiders drama of despair, defeats and illusions of individual characters. It is astonishing that this aspect of her calibre as a fictionist has not been emphasised, or talked of much. In fact, the nature and the natural environment are the material on which Anita Desai weaves her tragic tales. Natural landscape intertwines with the character's inner

milieu and provides a new dimension to her view of nature. Her love for, and obsession with nature, guides her novels in the stark barren and lifeless lives of the protagonists. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is her first novel that deals with the story of Maya, a neurotic young woman suffering basically on account of incompatibility of her thoughts and emotive impulses with her insensitive, pragmatic and rational advocate husband Gautama. Maya is a victim of marital alienation and is always torn by doubts, dreads and hopelessness. This novel begins with the description of seasons. Maya gives vent to her matrimonial frustration in the presence of the flowers in the garden. Her sad mood mingles with the mood of the flowers as she inhales their scent:

I bent upon them, inhaling that mist of sad maidenly
scent feeling mood merge into mood, sensation into
sensation, till there was nothing left but that mist.
(Desai 2004 : 24)

The arrival of the spring season has been interconnected with the qualities of the autumn, as the trees shed their leaves and new leaves are about to appear in them:

Down the street the silk cotton trees were the first
to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms—blobs in the
blue, 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)

Maya remembers another spring here – the spring of her childhood which was "far more idyllic one". Several images taken from nature such as, the wind, the dust storms, the snakes, and the desert, allude at Maya's solitude and insanity. As storm approaches Maya turns restless. "Storms" appear as symbols of the beginning of the end, that end, which Maya waited for:

Rain storms, thunder-storms, dust-storms. Matters
of lightning, of sweeping winds, of fury followed
by serenity. But this waiting – this long, long
waiting with not a rumble of thunder, not a whirl
of wind to mark the beginning of the end. (153)

Desai correlates the moods of the men and women with that of the mood of nature. Maya's brooding over the weather tells about her dejected and alienated existence:

I see no rain, no clouded sky, no promise, no
sweetness, but only the summer heat, the summer
sky, dust-clouded and sun-sodden, beneath which

trees, plants, and grass that was once green, now droops as though withered by lightning. (144)

In Anita Desai's novels the trees, birds, seasons, hills, gardens and, in fact, the whole nature in all its diversity symbolise hope, regeneration and freshness, as well as, the harsh realities of existence. The inner world of Maya's imagination is not inhabited by human beings, but by snakes, birds, rats and lizards. The spring season arrives with the incessant chirrupings of the brain-fever bird:

Spring came with the brain-fever bird whose long, insistent call rang imploringly from the tree tops all morning and again at twilight. (33)

Anita Desai is a great delineator of nature, yet, her eco-consciousness differs from that of eco-reformers like Arundhati Roy or Vandana Shiva. Roy, like a true environmentalist and eco-feminist, shows her great concern for the deplorable state of nature and environment due to the evil impacts of urbanization in all her writings, even in her magnum opus novel *The God of Small Things*. When Rahel returns twenty-three years later she gets extremely grieved to see the river Meenachal which was once very neat and clean but now:

The river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. (Roy 2002 : 124)

Anita Desai, like a dedicated psychologist and word-painter of nature, sketches the vivid magical sights and sounds of nature. Maya getting detached from the external world tells about her loneliness:

The Milky Way swooped across from north-east to south-west Akash-Ganga, the Ganges of the sky. I lay there, thinking of the stars ... the aeons that it took for their light to travel down the great vacuum into my waiting eyes. A shooting-star sped across the sky, then, disintegrated into sparks that were immediately extinguished. (Desai 27)

Desai's description of natural beauty has Keatsian sensuousness in itself. She portrays nature's glory in co-relation with the psyche and consciousness of her characters. She describes the enchanting charm of the evening Sun in a very realistic and vivid manner:

 Prismatic Refraction of Eco-criticism in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendent from the topmost branches of the trees, swelling visibly like, she thought, a purulent boil, until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home. He was very late. (8)

Desai's chief concern as an eco-critic is to present delicate and fragile human relationships flourishing in between the natural set-up. The surrealistic touch of the scenic beauty as depicted in the novels of Desai may be equated with that of Lawrence and Golding. In the title *Cry, the Peacock*, the cry of peacock signifies 'death of love and love of life' to Maya. Comparing the 'love-relations of Maya and Gautama' with that of peacock's, Desai has created an eco-logical parallel. Like a true eco-psychologist, she closely observes the behaviour of birds while love-making, and, vividly captures them in words:

Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other's breasts to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. (83)

Nature acts both, as a metaphor of hope and life and as a true companion of characters' disturbed psyche. Maya takes dance of peacocks at par with the dance of death which sharpens Maya's sense of separation, alienation and death:

Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds?
Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain?
'Pia, pia' they cry, 'Lover, Lover, Mio, Mio.—I die,
I die (82)

Maya had a fit of fever and heard the voice of the peacocks shrieking with insane joy and fear at the sight of a raincloud. The cries and activities of peacocks while mating have been given voice through beautiful word portrayal. Such pictorial and symbolic descriptions remind one of the emotional frustrations of Paul Morel and Miriam during 'Hen-Pecking Episode' as depicted by D. H. Lawrence in his celebrated novel *Sons and Lovers* :

He (Paul) had a small hand, warm, and rather capable-looking. Miriam watched. He held the corn to the hen. The bird eyed it with her hard, bright eye, and suddenly made a peck into his hand. He started, and laughed. "Rap, rap, rap!" went the bird's beak in his palm. He laughed again... "She

knocks you, and nips you, but she never hurts," said
Paul, when the last corn had gone.

(Lawrence 2004 : 157)

Anita Desai seems to be extremely interested in cats, birds, dogs and other such lovely creatures of nature. For Maya the lizards and rats were the agents of death and gloom:

The desert is waiting, the rats and the lizards.
They'll claim the flesh; the winds will carry the
bones away. (Desai 108)

Maya before pushing her husband down from the parapet watches at the moon aesthetically and thoughtfully:

....I saw, behind the line of trees that marked the
horizon, the pale hushed glow of the rising moon.
I held him (Gautama) there, while I gazed at it
watching the rim of it climb swiftly above the
trees...And then Gautama made a
mistake...coming between me and the worshipped
moon... 'Gautama!' I screamed in fury, and thrust
out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and
past him, saw him fall then...down to the very
bottom. (172-173)

Anita Desai, like a true eco-critic, presents nature shaping the spirits of her female protagonists. She demonstrates violence, murder and even madness occurring in the world of Nature, as one finds in the famous Shakespearean tragedies *Macbeth*, *King Lear* etc. . Amidst the flowers and trees in the garden, under the starry night, Maya is conscious of some evil, an indefinable unease. There is a constant interaction between the inner world of the protagonist and the outer world of nature and in the process of this interaction an intense vision of the life is projected.

In Indian society an extreme form of patriarchy has been practised since the beginning of known history. It is chiefly based on male pre-dominance and female sub-ordination. Women have been often equated with mother Earth, and no doubt, both have been witnessing the atrocities loaded upon them from the time immemorial. They have been tolerating all sorts of injustice and brutalities done to them. Obviously enough, women can do a lot to save mother earth and its diversity from being ruined. This truth forms the core of the recent wide-spread movement eco-feminism, which tries at involving more and more women in saving the nature and earth's bio-diversity. Women, in general, are more sensitive to the death or destruction of the object of their love. In *Cry, the Peacock* Maya is highly disturbed

and shocked due to the death of her pet dog Toto, but Gautama was not affected at all; and, he kept on sipping tea. Maya criticises this inconsiderate attitude of her husband:

...seeing me bereaved, seeing tears on my face and
my pet gone, 'You need a cup of tea', he said. Yes,
I cried, yes, it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness,
but the distance he coldly keeps from me... (14)

At another place, Maya feels sad for the plight of the caged monkeys suffering from hunger and thirst. She draws the attention of Gautama about the helplessness of the caged monkeys and begins crying for the helpless state of those laboratory monkeys, and man's deliberate cruelty to them :

Look! I cried, for he had seen nothing really. They
are thirsty, and hungry. There's not even a bowl of
water for them. And those cages! (130)

But Gautama keeps on smoking stoically and telling Maya to stop shedding tears over such a petty matter for the people were looking at her childishness:

Come on now, Maya, he'll get them water. Stop
crying like that – people are looking. (*Ibid.*)

Clearly enough, if women develop love and care towards nature and environment, they may react more sharply to the injustice done to it than men and take desired and fast steps for its protection. However, Desai is more an existentialist novelist than being an eco-feminist, as her preoccupation is much with the personal tragedies of individuals and their inner sensibility. In *Cry, the Peacock* also, she doesn't focus on the pollution of river, ponds or other resources; she doesn't tell us about the adverse impact of scientific advancement on the nature and environment but, she reveals the lulling and soothing effects of nature on the disturbed psyche of Maya through her cinematographic technique, by using appropriate symbols, metaphors or images from nature. Desai appears as a close critic and observer of nature, and has shown an inexorable impact of nature on the human psyche and world. In her novels there are characters who champion eco-oriented cause; though she, herself, in her personal life, has remained completely detached from eco-conscious movements. In this sense her depictions of nature, or better say, eco-critical writings are not as turning loose of emotions, but, an escape from personality which substantiates the greatness of an artist.

Kumari Rashmi Priyadarshni

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
Gautam Buddha Mahila College, Gaya

Works Cited

- Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 2004.
- Evans, G. Blackmore. (ed.) "Shakespeare and Eco-criticism". *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston and New York : Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Lawrence, D.H. *Sons and Lovers*. New Delhi : Rupa Classics, 2004.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2002.
- Shelley, P.B. "Ode to the West Wind". *Collected Poems*. Agra : LNA Educational Publishers, 2007.