



THE REFLECTION OF WILDERNESS IN ANITA DESAI'S SELECTED FICTIONAL WORKS

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Introduction:

As a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award and the Gaurdian Prize for literature, Anita Desai has earned a significant position in the Indian English literature. Since she has more than five decades of writing experience and has explored several dimensions of the Indian society. She has voraciously protested against the patriarchal society when she finds the unbearable presence of it in the Indian society and depicts the plights and predicaments of women in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971) *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). As a thought-provoking Indian writer, she portrays the sufferings of a poet in his declining days in *In Custody* (1984). Further, she depicts the ignominious impact of superstition in India because it adversely affected the Indian society.

Anita Desai and Her Concern for Nature:

As soon as the world had started realizing the results of the global warming, people began to search for its remedy. Since the issue of global warming became a hot debated topic, the litterateurs also started to address the same. As a lover of the nature, Anita Desai has voiced for the preservation and protection of nature and wilderness. She has dexterously presented the issue of the environmental crisis in her *The Village by the Sea*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *The Artist of Disappearance* and *Cry, The Peacock*.

After the Independence, the Indian government embarked upon various policies and some of these programmes related to the agriculture helped the Indian farmers to prosper. But some policies like setting up of big dams in ecologically sensitive places, setting up of fertilizing companies in populated places, selling off precious trees to multi-national companies for acquiring foreign currencies had disturbed the Indian society. Bereft of ameliorating the India society, such policies not only disturbed the simple villagers but also influenced nature adversely. Therefore, many environmentalists raised voices against such anti-environmental policies and developed mass movements against the detrimental government policies. Chipko Movement, Appiko Movement, Save Narmada Valley are some of the mass movements against the backdrop of such deleterious government policies.

The Post Independent Indian fiction writers started to track various environmental related issues. Kamala Markandya's name comes first among such writers because she portrayed various upshots of the anthropocentric development policies undertaken by the Indian government after the Independence. Her "Nectar in a Sieve"(1954) indicates the fast changing of the Indian society and reflects the unnecessary importance given on the Idea of Progress . She wrote:

"Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in - thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins—and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished" (Markandya, 1954, p.47)

As a socially-conscious writer, Anita Desai has drifted away from the popular mode of writing fiction in India. Since the Indian writers were conversant with the change brought by the Gandhian philosophy to the Indian society, the Indian writers carved for success by giving credence to his ideologies. Although Gandhi was killed in 1948, his craze for social reform continued to cater for the needs of the readers even after his death because Indians certified his honesty to the nation. As socially conscious writers, Khuswant Singh, Amitav Ghosh were diffident of the success of Indian Independence.

Since the Independence divided India into two nations, prominent writers considered the partition of India detrimental to both the nations. Devoid of any positive changes, it brought death and sorrow to both the nations. The Indian government forgot its environmental duties while trying to stabilize the whole situation. The development policies embarked upon by the post-Independent Indian government did not commensurate with the safety and security of the nature. As such policies were not compatible with the safety of nature, much destruction of nature in India occurred after the Independence. The impact of so-called development policies on post-Independence Indian society and environment is discussed in the second chapter of the present research work.

As a Post Independence India writer, Anita Desai did not only write about women's psyche but fabulously presented her characters as juxtapositions of success and agony because she has not only highlighted the success of the 'invisible characters' like Hari in *The Artist of Disappearance* and Arjuna in *Cry, the Peacock* but also frustrations of the subjugated women in *Fasting, Feasting*, and the agony of an old poet in *In Custody*.

The European practice of writing psychological novels found its finest expression in her novels. Furthermore, she addressed issues related to the environmental crisis that has ushered a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. As Anita Desai is well abreast of latest developments related to the environment; she skillfully presents the widening rift between sharing and caring of the natural resources. The most important contribution of Anita Desai to the Indian English literature is her attempt to sensitize humans towards the environmental crisis through her works like *The Village by the Sea*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *The Artist of Disappearance*, *The Museum of Final Journeys* and *Cry, The Peacock*.

Wilderness and Its Definition:

Since wilderness is one of the major tropes of ecocriticism, most environmentalists emphasize a need of establishing earlier forms of nature. The WILD Foundation (a non-profitable organization) defines wilderness as the unstirred area of nature undisturbed by human activities. It is discussed in the first chapter of the present study that anthropocentric culture is taking undue benefits from nature in the name of development; and destroying nature. But government and authorities concern should take adequate steps to stop destruction of nature and wilderness.

The word 'wilderness' has come from the notion of 'wildness' that refers to a place less dominated and controlled by the human beings and it entered into the cultural prominence in the 18th century. Originally, the word 'wilderness' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'wildeoren' means the existence of the 'deoren' or beasts above all boundaries. The noted ecocritic Greg Garrard defined wilderness as a place uncontaminated by the human civilization (Garrard, 2012, p.66). Moreover, the American Wilderness Act 1964 has given an elaborate definition of it:

"A wilderness, in contrast with these area where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

As wilderness is less modified by the human beings, the charm of it is still intact. According to Garrard, wilderness has an invigorating power (Garrard, 2012, p.66); it can facilitate a tired man's life. A depressed person can embark on a new task after spending some time in wilderness because it enlivens his senses. Therefore, the ecopsychologist Steven Harper mentions:

Upon entering wilderness, one of the first things almost everyone experiences is an enlivening of the five senses. Suddenly, we are bathed in (and sometimes overloaded with) new sounds, awesome sights, interesting textures, different smells and tastes. This awakening of our senses, or perhaps better stated, "coming to our sense", is a subtly powerful and underrated experience. People learn how greatly some of our basic modes of perception have been dulled in order to survive in the urban world; many have been deadened unnecessarily. As long as we remain unaware of the richness of our senses we have little choice about what we sense, and thus our perception is censored. (Harper, 1997, p.185)

Since the modern human beings endeavour to lead sustained way of life, the realization of the value of wilderness can lead humans to identify the inner wilderness. The recognition of the inner wilderness and its merging with the outer wilderness can enable a human being to reclaim his 'primordial self' and thus he can ensure a harmonious coexistence with nature:

As we experience our forgotten primordial self, we have the opportunity to catch experimental glimpses of the origin of the primordial images, the archetypes. The awareness of ourselves, our environment, and the relationship between them, or simply the awareness of our expanded self, is the experience of wholeness. We must even re-own our incompleteness if we are to become whole again. The experience of wholeness, however brief, is perhaps the most healing experience available to us. (Harper, 1997, p.196)

Therefore, it is better to understand the voice of the inner wilderness so that we can a peaceful existence with nature and wilderness.

As the need of wilderness in human lives is beyond doubt, many environmentalists like Gary Snyder, Edward Abbey opined for the preservation and protection of it because wilderness can make humans aware about the history of the human beings. As Abbey has strong faith on wilderness, he opined that wilderness is the only place where human beings can become crazy in peace:

We need wilderness because we are wild animals. Everyman needs a place where he can go crazy in peace. Every boy scout deserves a forest to get lost, miserable and starving in...For terror, freedom and delirium. Because we need brutality and raw adventure, because men and women first learned to love in, under and all around trees, because we need for every pair of feet and legs about ten leagues of naked nature, crags to leap from, mountains to measure by, deserts to finally die in when the heart fails. (Abbey, 1997, p.229)

Ravi, Wilderness and the Invisible Artist:

As Anita Desai loves nature and wilderness, she has brought forward the power of wilderness because she wants her readers to know the fascinating power of it so that humans can lead a sustained life co-existing

with the nature. In the novella *The Artist of Disappearance*, she portrayed the life of a boy who never enjoyed an emotionally and a materially stable childhood because he was an adopted child and his parents were callous to their duties of the son. He was never asked to join his parents in their foreign trips because they left the house in his custody.

Why did his parents never take him with them when they travelled abroad? The boy never asked and they never explained. It seemed they believed the child belonged at home while they belonged to the wider world where of course they would not have the time for him (or a servant to see to his needs). One day, they said, he would be old enough to accompany them and it occurred to no one that there was no reason he could not accompany them now. (What was not said never even mentioned, was that they were a childless couple, Ravi the child they had adopted-at the suggestion of a distant, philanthropic aunt-yet as far as anyone could see, they never made up a family.) And of course, in a way, their absence was his vacation, which came to an end when the parents returned. (Desai, 2011, p.106)

Although Ravi was neglected by his parents, their absence in the house worked for him as blessings in disguise because he wandered in the wilderness and discovered the fascinating power of it. He cultivated the habit of spending time in wilderness and found that it is place of freedom and peace.

Outdoors was freedom. Outdoors was the life to which he close to belong-the life of the crickets springing out of the grass, the birds wheeling hundreds of feet below in the valley or soaring upwards above the mountains, and the animals invisible in the undergrowth, giving themselves away by an occasional rustle or eruption of cries or flurried calls; plants following their own green compulsions and purposes, almost imperceptibly, and the rocks and stones, seemingly inert but mysteriously part of the constant change and movement of the earth. One had only to be silent, aware, observe and perceive-and this was Ravi's one talent as far as anyone could see. (Desai, 2011, p.101)

Ravi experienced the death of his parents and Miss Wilkinson's unfortunate involvement in the burning of his home. After losing his home and the burden of all relationships, Ravi received fulsome opportunity to continue his love for nature and wilderness. As he secretly loved wilderness, he started to ameliorate it and created an awesome garden in the wilderness in absence of the knowledge of the world.

All signs of the outer world vanished: the distant halloos criss-crossing the terraced fields in the valley below, the barking of a dog in the village on the other side of the stream, the grinding of the stones of the watermill. Only a bird sang, with piercing sweetness, till it noted Ravi's appearance, and took off. (Desai, 2011, p.126)

Ravi started to expand the design of the garden in the wilderness and he aimed to finish all his works before every sunset. His stay in the wilderness invigorated him and made his life happy because wilderness enlivened his senses. As he feared that the anthropocentric world would commercialise his garden in the wilderness, he never wanted to disclose the garden to anyone. His fear turned into reality when the city youths accidentally discovered his garden in the wilderness.

Good, bad-hardly the words that applied. He was not even sure this garden-this design, whatever it was-was man-made. How could anything man-made surpass the Himalayas themselves, the flow of hills from the plains to the snows, mounting from light into cloud into sky? Or the eagles slowly circling on currents of air in the golden valleys below, or the sound of water gushing from invisible sources above ?(Desai,2011,p.144)

The city youths wanted to take the advantage of their discovery and they shoot the garden in their cameras and endeavored to take the interview of Ravi so that they could show the world their achievements. All their endeavors were put cold water by Ravi when he declined to give his interview to them. Anita Desai's love for Ravi's intension is clear when she diluted the wish of the city youths. The city youths captured the garden in their cameras but they could not find out the amazement of the garden when they played what they recorded. Neither Ravi was recognised by the city youths nor was his garden in the wilderness was commercialised. Thus Anita Desai works for the lover of wilderness and the protectors of nature. The authorial voice is reverberated by Shalini at the end of the novella:

“Someone who is different, someone who is not destroying the land but making something of it, something beautiful. You can see whoever it is really understands this landscape, appreciates it.” (Desai, 2011, p.146)

Thus, Ravi's endeavours are praised by the city youths and it seems that they were not angry at the artist for declining their request for the interview. As a literary text, the novella *The Artist of Disappearance* has successfully highlighted the power of wilderness and compelled the city youths to realise the need of safeguarding nature and wilderness.

Natural wilderness is considered synonymous with the innate unconscious world of human beings because mystery, doubt, danger, peril etc. are also a part of human unconscious self. Here, an attempt has been made to show wilderness as a symbol of human unconscious self, it also studies the impact of nature on humans

as well as anthropocentric influence on nature and vice versa. Such an attempt is well supported by the analysis of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain, Cry, the Peacock*. The general impact of wilderness on human beings can be discerned in the mentioned works of Anita Desai, various convolutions of man-wilderness, nature-culture conflicts and an anthropocentric resistance to deprecate the value of wilderness is also apparent in Desai's works. Sometimes, an encounter with the wilderness assists a character to dissect various convolutions of a problem and unknown realms of the unconscious self.

Like mystery and doubt coupled with wilderness in the world of nature, the wilderness in humans are affixed with various conundrums and obscurity. Sometimes, wilderness in human beings can lead towards creative exploration that can easily stimulate a character like Arjuna in *Cry, the Peacock* to abandon his familial dogmatism and adopt a life of openness towards the world and the society. The anthropocentric world is not content with facility of just exploring the world but ready to play with wilderness and even contribute for the destruction of wilderness that is apparent in the mentioned works of Anita Desai.

The Love for Wilderness and Subsequent Rejection of the Anthropocentric World:

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's brother abandons his father's world of artificiality to lead an independent life devoid of his father's culture because he considered his father's culture detrimental to his free will and he never wanted to put any division in the society. He loved to walk in the lap of nature than enjoying a cup of tea in the terrace of their building. His love for outer world of wilderness has accelerated the discovery of his innate of wilderness. Cronon observes "It becomes a place of freedom in which (people) can recover the true selves (they) have lost to the corrupting influences of (there) artificial lives. (Cronon, 1996)

Arjuna's attachment with the outer world of wilderness and his journey to discover truth through the inner wilderness has fructified him to be a liberal youth that can establish reforms in post-Independent India. But his father was ready to put division in the society because his anthropocentric culture has taught him see the society divided. He often enjoyed presence of nature; perhaps he heard the plea of nature to consider all human beings as his children.

...Go into the wilderness; stand on the rock of granitic truth. Hear the Ur syllables, the seed syllables, of mother earth; the wind! The moving water! The sighing boughs! We are her children, she is our mother, we are it, the flowing land... (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p.274)

Arjuna's father mischievously tried to dissuade his son from being liberal to all religion:

'What is his name? Spitefully then. 'Farid Mohammed'. A still, ferocious pause. The Mohammeds-one did not know people like the Mohammeds, but one knew that they lived in a disreputable quarter of the city where tailor-shops jostled the butcher', and people slept out on the street on string-beds at night. Badly off, disreputable Muslims who thought nothing of spitting pan-juice on their walls, of allowing their daughters to wander about the streets and shops unescorted. Father's lips grew narrower, tighter, his fastidious fingers folded away the newspaper, setting it aside, as he prepared for a lengthy talk..." (Desai, 1980, p.113)

The more his father persuaded him to relinquish his liberal attitude, the more he becomes stronger at his will and silently endures because he knows futility of arguing with his 'cultured' father. Therefore Maya said: "If I was a partridge, plump, content, he was a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for his liberty." (Desai, 1980, p.115). As he followed the inner voice of wilderness, he successfully fought against his father's anthropocentric culture and achieved the meaning of his life whereas his sister could not heal her fractured relationship with her husband because his father never taught her to cope with difficult situation. Since her father showed excessive allegiance to the anthropocentric culture and luxury, she could never alter her father's presence in her life.

The symbolic clash between anthropocentrism and wilderness has brought forward by Anita Desai with the help of differences between Raka and her great grandmother. Nanda's personal degradation is a result of her husband's bogus culture and she never enjoyed any love from her husband. The relationship between Nanda and her Vice-Chancellor husband shows that they were maintaining the relationship for the namesake. She came to Kasauli to forget her past. On the other hand, her great grandchild came to Kasauli to recuperate her health. She came to Kasauli to feel nature and wilderness. Raka wanted to live in wilderness; she tried to make wilderness her home. Thus, the conflict between wilderness and culture constitutes the fascinating part of the novel.

"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. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it, simply." (Desai, 2008, p.53)

The impact of human civilization on Nanda was so degenerating that she forgot to love and admire the natural beauty of Kasauli. Instead of having fascination for flower and gardens, Nanda Kaul started loving barrenness of the garden that was in front her house. Her life turned out to be insipid, she became dyspeptic while she saw Raka's admiration to those things that Nanda Kaul considered filthy and useless.

Raka started to live in Kasauli as if she was born to live in the wilderness. There is no denying the fact that her love for wild animals and her fascination with snakes is a testimony of her innate love for wild life and wilderness. (Desai, 2008, p.55)

“Once she came upon a great thick yellow snake poured in rings upon itself, backing on the sunned top of a flat rock. She watched it for a long, while, digging her toes into the stepping red soil, keeping still the long, wand of broom she held in her hand.” (Desai, 2008, p.53)

Nanda Kaul’s determination to remain alien from the natural world has negative impact on her life. She not only became dyspeptic but also became detached from the world of wilderness. She found Raka as the only person who valued Carignano properly and efficiently and she enjoyed the electromagnetic energy from nature and wilderness.

“Would she own it herself one day, Carignano? Nanda Kaul wondered, lashing her fingers together over her chest. Ought she have it to Raka? Certainly it belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka alone understand carignano, knew what Carignano stood for – she alone valued that, Nanda Kaul know.” (Desai, 2005, p. 88)

While Nanda Kaul realised that her great grandchild was doing exactly the opposite to her interest, she started to treat Raka like a wild creature. Nanda took recourse to flurry of lies to suppress and domesticate Raka. Nanda Kaul discovered that Raka had the power of vanishing silently. Nanda Kaul never appreciated such a move by her great grandchild. Thus the rift between Nanda Kaul and Raka went from bad to worse. And Anita Desai symbolically carries forward the clash between civilisation and wilderness. Raka is symbolised as mysterious and uncontaminated wilderness and Nanda Kaul as human culture who was exhausted by living a life with façade of honesty.

The more Nanda Kaul tried to tame Raka, the more Raka drifted apart from Nanda Kaul’s grasp. She tried to contaminate Raka’s world of wilderness but she failed to do so. And the novelist punished her for such intensions. The noted ecocritic McKibben’s words are relevant to present the nature of Nanda Kaul. McKibben found anthropocentric culture problematic and disturbing because it tends to impose authority on everything that comes in contact with them.

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us. (McKibben, 1990, p.54)

Nanda and Raka represented opposite poles of a river. One is a lover of wilderness and the other despises it and tries to tame it. Nanda never stopped trying to pamper Raka and ultimately she lost her control over her great grandchild and Raka won the world of human culture. Nanda Kaul admits her defeat at the end of the novel. All her attempts to captivate Raka, indeed, ended in a smoke because Anita Desai seems to maintain the sacramental value to wilderness. Raka’s act of putting fire on the mountain symbolises her attempt to destroy Nanda Kaul’s world of hypocrisy and Nanda Kaul confessed that she fabricated her past and embroidered her family life to captivate Raka.

“All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills. She had lied to Raka.” (Desai, 2008, p.158)

Nanda Kaul’s perpetual defeat in the hands of a small child and her preponderous nature to find out goodness in human relationships can be compared with a many human’s perverse response to environmental issues like global warming and large scale deforestation. Many scientists and environmentalists predict severe repercussions of such environmental issues and perverse human responses to those growing environmental problems. The American scientist and environmentalist Paul R. Ehrlich anticipated the possible ending of the world in “*The Population Bomb*”. “*The Population Bomb*” predicts that that many people of this universe would die out of hunger and starvation if human beings do not respond to the growing environmental issues like global warming, waste disposal, acid rain, ozone layer depletion, air pollution and water pollution etc.

“The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of my crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate” (Ehrlich, 1972, p.xii)

Nanda Kaul’s volatile attempts to win over the wilderness domain of Raka and her subsequent embarrassments are suggestive of mankind’s unsuccessful bid to win over the wilderness. Just like Nanda Kaul’s inability to know mysterious power of Raka, humans are also oblivious to the root cause of environmental disaster like earthquake and tsunami. If humans know the actual cause of such environmental disasters, they could have already invented some means to prevent such environmental disasters. But such a discovery is yet to be a reality in the 21st Century because some mysteries of nature and wilderness are never to be unfolded by the humans.

Summation:

Thus, the research work reflects the power of wilderness. A boy named Ravi in *The Artist of Disappearance* received necessary impetus to live in the world after losing his parents and his home and he is invigorated while he came in touch with the wilderness. As wilderness has invigorating power, Anita Desai has reflected the fascinating power of it through Ravi, Raka and Arjuna. The three characters are successful to become self reliant by recognising the voice of innate wilderness. However, the symbolic clash between anthropocentrism and wilderness indicates the futility of any attempt to win over nature and wilderness because humans are only a part of nature and thus it cannot completely domineer over nature and wilderness.

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