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Ecofeminism in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*

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Ecofeminism began as an offshoot of the earlier theoretical approaches: Feminism and Ecocriticism. The term Ecofeminism was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 (Schmonskey). The Ecofeminist philosophy unfolds an underlying connection between the ecological imbalance and the age-old gender issues. The emergence of the Industrial Revolution, the scientific growth and rational outlook has engendered a utilitarian approach towards life. Everything which is less promising in terms of material advancement has been sidelined and marginalized. Man has rejected Nature considering it remote, primitive, uncivilized and uncultivated. Man has not only changed his track but has enforced his superiority over Nature that has led to even violation and exploitation of the natural life. The Ecocritics' revolt against the rational modes of the world attracted the feminist mind greatly whose rebellion is against the same system which is rationally and logically organized so as to form a patriarchal monopoly. In this way, an anti-rational outlook became a common ground for Ecocriticism and Feminism, hence an emergence of Ecofeminism. The ecofeminist approach refers to

“a value system, social movement, and a practice.... (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentricism and environmental destruction. It is an “awareness” that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is ultimately linked to Western man's attitude toward women and tribal cultures” (Birkland 18).

Ecofeminism further unfolds the Essentialist perspective which has generated “normative dualism such as male/female, culture/nature, and reason/emotion” (Hanafi 110). Such perspective has created an intricate hierarchical system ranking “man above female and culture above nature” (110). Such dualism is also known as binary-oppositions which emanate from the more general dichotomy- rational/irrational. The hierarchical system is formed in such a motivated way that it conspires to give man a central place and to woman as well as nature a marginalized status. The culture/nature opposition and its connection with male/female dichotomy is aptly justified by the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner in his essay “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?:”

Woman is being identified with – or ... seems to be a symbol of something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is “natural” in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generally, “culture,” is engaged in the Process of generating and sustaining system of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e; systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature (72).

Anita Desai who is known for her keen feminist consciousness has portrayed a similar story of oppression and suppression of woman as well as of nature in her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. What is unique about the female characters of Anita Desai's novels is that they are nonconformists; they do not passively submit to the patriarchal norms and values. Sita, the central female character in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, resentfully rejects the rational and the utilitarian ways of the urbanized world. She appears crazy to the people around her because she refuses to identify with their system. She used to spend her time standing in the balcony and keeping the crows away from attacking the injured eagle. The eagle is symbolic of her own wounded self and the distorted world of Nature. Both are being attacked by the crows which metaphorically "formed the shadow civilization in that city of flats and alleys" – a corrupt order of the urbanized world (Desai 34). In this crow theatre, the human system is full of "murder, infanticide, incest, theft, and robbery..." (340). The people around her are "nothing but ... food, sex and money matter." She calls them animal not the wild animals of the forest but "pariahs" which roam in the street and hang around dirt and filth (43). This shows her intense resentment against the absurdities of the modern world. She is able to discern meaninglessness, disorder, and moral vacuum in the system which is apparently so ordered and organized by a rational mind. She is surprised to see destructiveness at the heart of peace and order. Meneca, her daughter, could easily break the buds and tear paintings. Karan, her son, enjoyed building a tower of blocks only for the joy of throwing it apart. Sita is disturbed to realize that the "creative impulse had no chance against the overpowering desire to destroy" (41). She declares the very world around her as nothing but madness and insanity which is very arrogantly countered by her husband: "What madness is there here? He asked, loudly, righteously, pointing to the familiar patterns, the quite regularity carefully arranged outside their bedroom door – so carefully arranged by him" (32). This man-made life around her, the home and the colony – all have pushed her aside, ignored her and rejected her. She is imprisoned "in the grey, ... empty shell" which is shrouded by the pretentious demands of the society. She feels herself trapped in the egg-shell and is very eagerly waiting for "this grey egg-world to fall apart" giving her a new life of redemption and liberation (49).

Through marriage, she enters a web of human relationships which she finds extremely absurd and hollow. The institution of marriage is symbolically conceived as a contract which determines the subjectivity of a wife along the set criteria of the patriarchal laws. According to Jacques Lacan, as quoted by Dorothy Leland, "Woman is introduced into the symbolic pact of marriage as an object of exchange along basically andocentric and patriarchal lines" (123). Being a husband, a man confirms his dominant position in the domestic sphere. He enjoys the central place in the family and the wife is subservient to him. Sita and Raman did not share a mutual compatible relationship. Raman was completely indifferent towards his wife and wore patriarchal rigidity and arrogance on his face. Looking at her wedding photographs Sita "could scarcely recognize her bride self" which is nothing but an imposture of passivity, servility and subjugation (48). She realizes that marriage is no more than a farce which denies woman her autonomy and has given her a slave-like disposition. The absurdity of the relationship made her resentful and rebellious. Her long term subjugation results in the loss of psychological equilibrium. She is pregnant but not willing to give birth to her child and wants to keep it safe inside the womb. Since this is not possible in this world of logic and order, she decides to escape into the magical world of dark and wild island which existed with all its primitive purity and originality. For twenty years she lived a life of boredom and oblivion in the mainland of Bombay. Now she struggles to liberate herself from the shackles of segregation. It is a conscious striving to regain her freedom, her autonomy and identity which have been denied to her in the materially advanced but dull and mechanical life of Bombay. She boldly breaks away from the mainland which "implied solidity, security: the solidity of streets, the security of

houses" (52). Instead she preferred more natural and pure life of the island which is in opposition to the dull and tediously mechanical life of the urbanized world. Hence, another binary opposition is unfolded here – mainland vs island.

It is the same island where Sita earlier lived with her father. Her relationship with her father was no different from the one she shared with her indifferent husband. The daughter-father relationship is again an affirmation of the hierarchical dichotomy – the male-female, the superior-inferior. Sita always wondered about her mother who had left them long back and was no longer remembered and missed by the family. Sita preferred to accept it as a fact. "Life seemed complete, full without her, there was no reason for her to exist. Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless" (76). Her relationship with the father was enigmatic. She felt herself trapped by his magic world until she got married with Raman. She switched over from the father-ruled world to the husband ruled-world. In both the worlds she was dislocated; she was not given a place of her own. Through the marriage, the power was transferred from the father to the husband- from man to man. Initially she was happy to find herself free from the magical trap of her father but to her disappointment she soon came to know that the world she entered has its own scars and bruises. She was forced to lead a life of utter futility and boredom. At this point of her life, she longed to escape into the dark magical world of the island. This mysterious natural world could give her refuge, a protection from the absurdities of the phallogocentric world. But she never knew that though her father died long back, his patriarchal traces are still there to choke and enslave her.

As soon as Sita enters the island along with her daughter and the youngest son, she faces the phallic threat. The attitude of Moses, the caretaker of the house on the island, is very dominating and arrogant towards her because he found her as someone who had not "inherited the dignity, the mystery, and the ascetic splendor of the fabled father" (13). The very description of Sita's dim and dull appearance in the presence of the dignified glare and charm of the driver reinforces the suppressed and undermined position of a woman in the patriarchal world. Moses looked for "Sahib" who "might prove more promising, more satisfying." This is the general attitude of the people that they long for power and prestige which they are accustomed to associate with the male-figure only. The master of the house for whom he waited for so long turned out to be a mere clumsy mistress who carried no dignity and hence no charm for Moses and the people gathered there. Their "speculating" and "criticizing" eyes made Moses conscious of his own awkward position in attending a mistress who is not only less promising and less satisfying but almost obscure. From their conversation, Moses becomes aware of the differences amongst the family members which he regards as natural outcome of the absence of the father-figure in the family. He outrightly declares that "there were rifts and dissensions in the family as he had known there would be, must be, since there was no father to hold them together and lead them in obedience, nor even a husband" (18). It is a preconceived notion that only a male or father-figure can hold the family together, hence confirms male monopoly in the family.

There is striking similarity between Sita and the island. Sita during the twenty years of her life of boredom has become aged and worn out. In the similar vein, the island lacks its usual gorgeousness and brilliance. Both Sita and the world of nature exist as a "dark blot of foreign matter" (99). Both have been neglected and marginalized in the age of growing globalization and rationalism. What is special about Sita and the forces of Nature is that both are not submissive. Nature is never portrayed silent in the novel but always outrageous, thundering and roaring as if raising its voice against the ways of the world. The Sea in the mainland of Bombay is seen revengefully revealing all the stuff which the human beings threw at her spoiling her purity: "a ring of green plastic, a rubber shoe, bones, and frayed tins" (45). Highly engrossed in

the artificial and materialistic conducts of life, human beings have forgotten their unbroken bond with Nature. This is best expressed by Wordsworth's poem 'The World is Too Much with Us:'

The world is too much with us: late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;--
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our heart away, a sordid boon.

The boundary between nature and culture is imaginary and conceptual. In reality, a meaningful kinship between humanity and the world of nature is discernible. The primitive people, as affirmed by Sherry B. Ortner, "do not see or intuit any distinction between the human cultural state and the state of nature at all" (72). The primitive people lived in harmony with the aspects of Nature. They were nature worshipper. Not only nature but woman was also at the centre of the primitive cults. The pagans advocated and celebrated the female principle in nature. Helen A. Berger affirms:

...pre-Christian communities lived in balance with nature because they revered it, seeing it as a manifestation of the goddess. Similarly, the worship in old Pagan communities of goddesses as well as gods is believed to have resulted in women being considered equal, if not superior to men (22).

The protagonist in Anita Desai's novel too shares a peaceful bond with Nature. She rejects to identify with the cultural norms of Bombay and makes efforts to illuminate her kinship with Nature by returning to the elemental natural life of the island. Sita's children, on the other hand, look down upon the place as wild, barren and fearful also. They are used to see Nature only in the forms of parks, gardens and the green outhouses which are moulded, shaped and cultivated by the human hand. They are scared to see nature in its primitive purity and originality. The children are afraid of the "dark on the island." The natural life of the island and the artificial life of the urban world are juxtaposed in the comment given by Sita: "Of course there will be lamps- real ones. Not electric bulbs but real lamps- lanterns" (17). Meneca's contemptuous attitude towards the aspects of Nature is paralleled to her equally negative view of her mother. This correlation has been clearly perceptible throughout the novel.

Having come to the island, Sita tries to regain her lost bond with her children in the absence of the father-figure. She also tries to abridge the gap between the world of Nature and the children. She wanted them to realize the absurdities of the life which they have adopted keeping away from the world of Nature. Sita disapproved Meneca's inclination towards science for future study arguing that "science can't be all satisfactory. It's all – all figures, statistics, logic" (107). Sita wanted her daughter to study art which is "spontaneous", "alive" and "creative." But Meneca ostentatiously rejects mother's advices and is determined to be a part of the world of 'logic and 'order.' Her mind is so moulded that she has internalized the patriarchal norms. She relates herself with the male-order in order to get acceptance in the patriarchal society. Identifying with the phallic system means comfort, security, growth, and materialistic advancement in sharp contrast to the mother-figure which means, as shown in the novel, vitality, energy, creativity, art and music. Sita helplessly watched her children going away into the world of emptiness and hollowness leaving behind the disorderly, wild but vital values. They are excited to see their father who has come to save them from the dark and wild island. Sita is surprised to see how "the man so passive, so grey" could be hailed with such warmth and excitement. The children preferred to associate themselves with the father-figure because of his cool and calculated behavior and because they saw him as superior in "courage" and in "leadership" (127). Not only children who showed a connection with the father and rejection

of the mother. But contrastive attitude of Moses and Miriam towards the sahib and the memsahib is also worth noticing. They were proud of the lunch they had prepared for the sahib though they did not bother to do much for the memsahib and the children. The world is so streamlined and channelized that it has become a support system for the male and marginalizes the female. Moses represented male arrogance and contemptuous attitude towards Sita who was to him just an “unworthy offspring of the illustrious and well-remembered father” (25). Previously her father was given respect and eminence in the society. Now her husband enjoyed the position and power. Where is she? What about her identity and place in the society? At this point of her life, Sita realized why her mother had to run away from the father-ruled world. When the dull routine of the Bombay life and the absence of the conjugal love led her to the verge of insanity, Sita took a bold decision to escape into the pure natural life of the island.

Living on the island was like attaining the selfhood for Sita. In this secluded island, in this lonely and isolated house, she never suffered from loneliness and alienation. “She felt surrounded by presences – the presence of the island itself, of the sea around it, and of the palm trees that spoke to each other, sometimes, even to her.” She witnessed chaos and disturbance at the heart of rationally ordered and organized urban world while she saw vitality and tranquility in apparently so wild and chaotic natural surroundings of the island. People have drawn away from Nature and have become prey to the illusory world of logical measures. Trapped by the numbers and logics, they have grown blind to see anything vital in the natural forces. The island which was barren and desolate for others was so alive and responsive for Sita. Nature seems to have embraced her and redeemed her. It is on the island that she attained psychic equilibrium and mental poise which she had nearly lost in the mainland.

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