

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

Ecocritical Exploration of Anita Desai's *The Artist of Disappearance*

Bipasha Majumder (De)
Assistant Professor & Head
Department of English
Debra T.S.K.S. Mahavidyalaya

Abstract:

The title novella of Anita Desai's new book, a trio of linked novellas about the art world, *The Artist of Disappearance* published in 2011 presents a very significant issue i.e. environmental crisis which we are all familiar with and forces us to look afresh at it. The present paper proposes to analyze the term 'ecocriticism' and then study this novella set in Mussorie, a resort in the Himalayan foothills, through the lens of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Capitalism, Development, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Nature, Wilderness.

Admittedly, there are only a few novels in the history of Indian English Literature, which can be read ecocritically. In fact a serious concern with ecological balance seems to be lacking in earlier works though nature has been employed as an important backdrop against which the stories of these novels develop. The title novella of Anita Desai's latest book, a trio of linked novellas entitled *The Artist of Disappearance* published in 2011, is one of a few literary works in which there is a concern for natural depletion taking place in today's India. My endeavour in this paper is to study this novella through the lens of ecocriticism. Let us now analyze the term ecocriticism and then re-read the novella from ecocritical perspective.

As a distinctive critical approach to literature, ecocriticism was not inaugurated until late in the 1980s in the USA. 'Green Studies' is an alternative term for ecocriticism in the UK where this new approach to literature began in the early 1990s. It is appropriate here to stress that though ecocriticism as a separate discipline emerged in the 1990s, it is a fact that the relation between man and his physical environment had always been intriguing to literary critics. This interest can be explained in two ways. 1. Man could realize in the last decade of the 20th century that the greatest problem of the 21st century would be the survival of the earth with all her living and non-living beings. 2. It is within some physical environment that man always exists and there can not be 'is' without 'where' as Lawrence Buell has put it. In fact man feels threatened in the ecologically degraded world. The last decade of 20th century clearly showed that man should do something to help the earth survive. Ecocriticism is one of the ways in which humanists strive to save the earth from destruction. However, one can trace the term 'ecocriticism' back to William Rueckert's essay. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" published in 1978. Cheryll Glotfelty revived the term in 1989. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm is one of the most important books in this new field of criticism. The term ecocriticism is a 'semineologic level'

for a 'unidoctrinalist imputation' (Buell: 'Letter' in "Forum on Literatures of the Environment" *The Modern Language Association of America* 1091). Eco is an abbreviated form of ecology which is concerned with the relationship between living organism (biotic component) and their natural environment (abiotic component). Similarly, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how the relationships between living organisms and their physical environment are reflected in literature. However, Simon C. Estok argues in an essay "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of 'Home' and 'Power' in *King Lear*":

ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and secondly by its commitment to make connections.... Ecocriticism, therefore, is not simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function - 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. (16-17)

Now we may do well to explore the title novella of Desai's new book about the art world *The Artist of Disappearance* from an ecocritical perspective. The novella is set in Mussorie, a resort in the Himalayan foothills, which happens to be the place where Mrs. Desai was born to a Bengali businessman and a German expatriate in 1937. The main character is Ravi, the adopted son of a prosperous and glamorous couple with social pretensions. The little boy Ravi grows up in the hills of Mussorie where the family has a stately mansion. His parents who adopt him "at the suggestion of a distant, philanthropic aunt" (106-107) seem to him cruel enough as they force him to abide by many rigid rules set by them. During the long summers when his parents are away, a Mr. Benjamin comes to their house to supervise his homework. Ravi wishes to learn ornithology or geology from him but Mr. Benjamin regards himself "as far above such frivolous matters" (105). He can't realize that it is only the outdoor world that can provide him all the nourishment he wants. School buildings seem to him a prison only.

Rows of boys filed off to the regime of lessons administered by furious teachers who threw chalk at one or twisted another's ear, picking on the most miserable targets to punish in inventive and fiendish ways. This was considered the only way in which the Latin motto that no one understood might be upheld (107).

After being released from school Ravi returns to his house where his parents do not "use a ruler to crack across his hand, or throw things at him in a rage" (108). But they have other ways to plunge him into profound misery. As Mrs. Desai says: "The home in their presence, had a set of rigid rules" (108). So "in a way, their absence was his vacation, which came to an end when the parents returned" (107). They can't realize that their son is interested only in observing and perceiving

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. (101)

After the premature death of his father, Ravi is, however, forced to stay in Bombay, a metropolitan city far away from the forest and the hills of Mussorie. Here he is admitted to a college where he studies management though he never understands what he is supposed to manage. Rather, “encased in a block of grey cement” he can “see nothing, hear nothing and say nothing either” (114). His family members consider him “freakishly backward, a wild creature from the mountains” (114). His cousins sometimes snigger as he passes them. Although Bombay is an island city surrounded by the Arabian Sea, Ravi has never been taken closer to it than in a passing automobile. Once they picnic by the sea where he gulps down “lungfuls of soggy sea air as if he were gulping lungfuls of life-saving oxygen” (115). In fact his life in Bombay is like that of a prisoner. The room he is given is a storeroom blocked by broken furniture and packed boxes. There is only one window that opens on to the garbage chute of the building. Neighbours throw bags of refuse into the chute out of their kitchen and bathroom windows and as a consequence an odour rises to his window in thick coils. Mrs. Desai has described Ravi’s prison-like condition: “He became convinced he would die here and then be placed in a garbage bag and dropped into the miasma himself. There was no one to whom he could explain that in order to survive he needed to be at altitude, a Himalayan altitude, so he might breathe” (115). Ravi has to struggle against these life-denying forces until his mother’s death. “Thus release - hers followed by his” (116). He returns to his childhood hilltop home after an unhappy sojourn in Bombay.

Thus, Anita Desai, a true environmentalist, has presented Bombay as an extremely polluted city where one can find numerous “huge, lumbering trucks loaded with rocks, logs, sacks and bundles and men perched on top, their mouths and nose wrapped in scarves against the dust and fumes of exhaust”(116). One may recall here Mrs. Desai’s description of another metropolitan city, Calcutta, in her 1965 novel *Voices in the City*. Here the air is acrid and the open-drain is clogged with the torn platform tickets. Nirode, one of the important characters of the novel, envies his brother being on the train “speeding out of this dark pandemonium into the openness and promise of the bare country” (*Voices in the City* 7). Mrs. Desai’s dislike for modern city atmosphere is once again reflected in her *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Let us recall such words as: “The Calcutta of the black back streets, the steaming rubbish tips, the scarred tenements, its hunger, its squalor, its desolation” (*Baumgartner’s Bombay* 166). Her description of Bombay either in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* or *The Artist of Disappearance* is not much different from that of Calcutta or Madras. Thus, city becomes an embodiment of all that is foul and filthy in most of Desai’s novels.

Like Nanda Kaul in Mrs. Desai's 1977 novel *Fire in the Mountain*, also set in a hill station (Carignano in the Kasauli Hills), Ravi chooses to live at his childhood home in Mussorie after enduring a long, suffocating life in Bombay because here he can find the dust and odour of the city replaced by "the sharp sweetness of pine woods, the smoke of wood fires, the glass-like clarity of mountain air" (117). He is rather uncomfortable in human company and at ease only in nature where he can draw fresh air into his lungs. Even after the family mansion burns down, he continues to live in its ruins.

Unfortunately, however, hitherto unspoiled lands of the foothills of the Himalayas are now under the looming threat of capitalist development. "Timber companies are cutting down the trees. Limestone quarries and phosphate mines are making the hills unstable. Soil erosion is taking place. Lots of landslides are occurring" (131). Thus, Anita Desai is much concerned about the environmental degradation taking place in a modernizing, industrializing India. True, some sensible men like Ravi are still there to work on the preservation of nature. Unaffected by unbridled capitalism, Ravi, the representative of those sensible men, continues to live in the lap of nature. His creation of a private garden in a hidden glade is, however, a futile attempt on his part to preserve nature as the modernity bursts in soon in the shape of a film crew arriving from Delhi to make a documentary about the environmental degradation. His solipsistic existence is interrupted when he is informed that a TV crew wishes to film his creation and talk to him. In fact he "had no interest at all in anything that was happening in town" (147). He looks upon them as the "barbarians from the city" (152). He is of the view that "their gaze alone was a desecration" (152). So he decides not to talk to them and flees even further into rural poverty. "He is someone who is different, someone who is not destroying the land but making something of it, something beautiful" (146). The TV crew thinks that the artistic creation by Ravi "will make the perfect ending. First, all the bad things happening here. Then finish with something beautiful. Hopeful" (146).

But, there is perhaps nothing hopeful lying ahead. As they drive away, there is a sudden shattering series of mining explosions and they reveal their venality by a jubilant shout "That is what we need for a finish" (156). Mrs. Desai ends her novella with something that is utterly hopeless: "A line of trucks went rumbling down a newly made track into a gully, and the ghost men below began to load them for the journey down to the plains" (156). The expression 'ghost men' is probably suggestive of the ultimate destiny of the human beings who are going to be extinct in no time as a consequence of ruthless destruction of nature. Thus, *The Artist of Disappearance* presents a very significant issue which we are all familiar with and forces us to look afresh at it. There is no denying the fact that Desai's new novella is oriented toward not only heightening her readers' awareness of the present environmental crisis or imminent catastrophe but also inciting them to social and political action. In conclusion, we may recall such immortal lines as:

What would the world be, once bereft

Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,

O let them be left, wildness and wet;

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet. (“Inversnaid” 13-16)

Works Cited:

1. Buell, Lawrence ‘Letter’, “Forum on Literatures of the Environment” PMLA 114:5, October 1999.
2. Desai, Anita *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989.
3. Desai, Anita *Fire on the Mountain*, Vintage, Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, 1999.
4. Desai, Anita *The Artist of Disappearance*, Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, 2011.
5. Desai, Anita *Voices in the City*, Orient Paperbacks, Madarsa Road, Kashmere Gate, Delhi-110 006, 2001.
6. Egan, Gabriel *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* Accent on Shakespeare, London, Routledge ,2006.
7. Egan, Gabriel “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: The Unexpected Return of the Elizabethan World, Picture” Literature Compass Vol. 1 Internet [http:// www.literature-compass.com](http://www.literature-compass.com) 2004.
8. Estok, Simon C. “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of ‘Home’ and ‘Power’ in *King Lear*” AUMLA 103, May 2005.
9. Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* , University of Georgia Press, 1996.
10. Hopkins, G. M. “Inversnaid”, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* Ed. by Robert Bridges, London: Humphrey Milford, 1918.
11. Rueckert, William “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” IOWA Review 9.1, 1978.