

## **Women, Animals and Violence: Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Lee Yew Leong's "Honey, I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now"**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* and Lee Yew Leong's short story "Honey, I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now" in a comparative manner using the framework of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism. I argue that the "other" in the form of women and animals are centred in both the novel and short story, although both women and animals are removed and distanced from society. These writers, through their stories, rework issues of violence, women and animals that are otherwise usually presented from a male point of view. The woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read. In turn, the identity politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. I show that the position of ambivalence is important when discussing the protagonists in both the stories. Within the culture/nature binary, these women neither belong to the cultural sphere nor the natural sphere. They straddle the binary in-between, thus showing their ambivalence to both the culture/nature constructs. There is no romantic or celebratory linking of the woman to nature or animals that puts them in inferiorised positions. Within this framework, the question of violence—towards both women and animals—is key.*

### **Introduction**

This paper looks at the link between women, animals and violence through a lens of material postcolonial ecofeminism. Not much attention has been paid to this topic under the rubric of ecofeminism, especially in tandem with postcolonial issues<sup>1</sup>. Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) provides an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial issues espoused in the fiction of male writers through a

gendered perspective, while simultaneously considering the specific processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions. The research and analysis done in this paper foregrounds a comparative approach, where Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is the lens through which Lee Yew Leong's short story "Honey, I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now" (2010) is read. The notion of violence is key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of women and animals in both Desai's novel and Lee's short story.

A key argument that is furthered in this paper is that the "other" in the form of women and animals is central to both the novel and short story even though in both works women and animals are portrayed as apart from society. Furthermore, the woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read, while, in turn, the politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. The protagonists occupy ambivalent positions in both stories since these women belong wholly to either to the cultural or the natural worlds. They defy any romantic or celebratory categorizations of women within the natural sphere that includes non-human animals.

## **Postcolonial Ecofeminism**

Postcolonial ecofeminism is a relatively new critical domain. The related fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view even today. Neither field addresses the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately. Both fields need to recognize "the 'double-bind' of being female and being colonized" (Campbell, xi). A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism under one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It is important to contextualize, very briefly, the debates and arguments surrounding women and animals historically and socio-politically. Patrick D. Murphy remarks that

the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida is correct when he claims that Western philosophy is based on the opposition of nature and culture, since this opposition seems fundamental for a vast array of claims made about human uniqueness, in terms of spiritual essence, right to domination, and exploitative destiny. (Murphy, 311, my emphasis)

Two important points arise from Murphy's quotation above. Firstly, we are brought face-to-face with the reference to Cartesian dualisms, where the nature/culture binary goes back to the self/other dichotomy. Secondly, this references the basic ecofeminist premise that the binaristic framework authorizes various forms of oppressions because it puts in place a set of hierarchical oppositions. Rene Descartes claims that "the reason why animals do not speak as we do is...that they have no thoughts" (60). From this, he concludes that animals are "natural automata" (Descartes, 61), that is, they are mechanical and only have instinctual drives. Such Cartesian thinking has had far-reaching impacts on the attribution of reason to men (culture, human) and instincts and emotions to women (nature, animal). Such philosophical generalizations have been naturalized and thus allow certain oppressions and exploitation of animals, women and other marginalized groups of people to take place. This is most clearly observed when "women's bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality" (Adams and Donovan, 1). Thus women's "animality" is used to deny them the rights of public citizenship. In other words, the differences among different groups are assumed to be essential in nature and culminate in the process of "othering." These differences are then used as the basis for the domination and oppression of certain categories of people.

The connection between sexism and speciesism has been well-documented by many ecofeminists. This stems from the belief and increasing research that supports the claim that all oppressions are interconnected. Therefore, the connections and oppressions of women and animals cannot be viewed in a vacuum, independent of other forms of “abuse, degradation, exploitation and commercialization” (Adams and Donovan, 3). According to Susanne Kappeler, sexism and speciesism have to be viewed together with racism, classism, nationalism and aspects of scientific discourse, all of which legitimize the exploitation of women and animals to a large extent<sup>2</sup>. Such interconnections work at times by animalizing women (speciesism) and by feminizing animals (sexism), and sometimes some non-human animal terms can function as epithets. This also goes to show that the relationship between speciesism and sexism is not unidirectional.

At this point, I would like to stress that this paper is not about privileging one group over the other, that women and animals here are not viewed as being either/or. This paper is about exploring the interconnections between these two groups as well as rupturing the space between certain binaries to establish an ambivalent position. It is important to do so because a failure to challenge such binaristic distinctions undermines a more complete understanding of the workings of oppression.

Thus, one important point to note here is that the connection between women and animals is “not to be understood as a ‘natural’ connection—one that suggests that women and animals are essentially similar—but rather a constructed connection that has been created by the patriarchy as a means of oppression” (Gruen, 61, my emphasis). The constructedness of this connection then exposes two things. Firstly, such constructions are “culturally and historically contingent; that is, depending on time and place this border not only moves but the reasons for assigning animals and humans to each side of the border change as well” (DeMello, 33). This implicitly raises questions of power and hegemony: who is in power and who gets to represent whom and in what way. Secondly, such a construction also has to take note of the role of language, particularly the issue of anthropomorphism, which has proven to be extremely contentious with regards to representing animals. DeMello states,

Animals are like us, but also unlike us. Because of this ambiguity, they are a perfect vehicle for expressing information about ourselves, to ourselves. ...we bestialize people...and humanize animals (that we anthropomorphize). And although we can use animals to highlight a person’s good qualities (brave like a lion), we more commonly use animals negatively (cunning like a fox), especially to denigrate racial minorities. (287-288, original emphasis)

However, critics such as Marion Copeland<sup>3</sup> and John Berger have spoken in defense of anthropomorphism. Berger is of the opinion that “the much-maligned process of anthropomorphism is actually beneficial because it expresses the proximity between human and animal” (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 251; Berger, 255). It is important to realise, however, that some of the claims that ecofeminists make against this position—that anthropomorphism is both anthropocentric and androcentric—also remain valid and true in certain instances<sup>4</sup>. I suggest that the two authors to be discussed in this paper be posited

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within the framework of recuperating anthropomorphism when reading their works. Part of their strategy is to allow human readers to identify with the characters, their feelings as well as the interactions between women and animals, where a certain necessary anthropomorphism—to use Copeland’s term—is deployed by the writers.

## **Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain***

Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* centres on Nanda Kaul, who retreats to a former British hill-station, Kasauli, supposedly to spend her old age in peace and isolation in her house called Carignano. Her quiet life is interrupted by her great-granddaughter Raka, who is sent to her to recover from an illness. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Nanda Kaul’s husband has had a life-long affair with a mathematics teacher, Miss David. Thus, Nanda’s exile to Kasauli, though presented as an act of choice, is actually forced on her. She comes to terms with the reality of her self-enforced exile when she hears that her old friend Ila Das has been raped and murdered. At the same time, Raka sets the forest surrounding the house on fire. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the character of Raka and her connections with animals and violence.

It is important to note that in *Fire on the Mountain*, however, Desai does not stop and foreground the conclusion that marginalized and “othered” women are necessarily only victims of gender-related violence. Through Nanda’s great-granddaughter, Raka, the text introduces a different form of female existence and even agency that differs profoundly from Nanda’s.

Nanda Kaul describes Raka’s name, which means the moon, to be an “utter misnomer” because of “her resemblance to an insect” (Desai, 39). The zoological images ascribed to Raka are not static; they change as Nanda’s feelings for Raka change and as Raka’s own character goes through a subtle change from being a quiet child to eagerly exploring her surroundings. Nonetheless, Raka is still likened to a wild thing and her gestures are depicted as being animalistic. She forages for food in the forest, “drop[s] on all fours [to come] scrambling up the hill” (Desai, 73), and doubles over to lick the scratches and wounds on her arms and legs like an animal (Desai, 50). It is this very nature of being wild and animalistic that makes Raka evasive and she opts for the unruly, wild and untamed landscape surrounding Kasauli instead of the “safe, cozy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment” (Desai, 91). At this point, Raka rejects the socio-cultural domain and the text seems to suggest that it is impossible to contain her as she actively frees herself from all close ties and boundaries that shackled Nanda at some point.

Raka is shown to be upset at the distress of the animals around her or at the violence meted out to them. Through these incidences of animal abuse, Desai connects the issue of intertwined oppressions of animals and women, demonstrating that it is instructive to consider incidents of male-induced violence no matter where it is directed. Two scenes from the novel, at the Pasteur Institute and the Kasauli Club, depict the culmination of such male violence. When Raka inquires about the Pasteur institute from Ram Lal, he tells her,

It is where doctors make serum for injections. ...Once a dog had gone mad and bitten everyone in the village. The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too, many animals. They use them for tests. ...Oh, they are always boiling serum there. (Desai, 44)

Desai seems to be suggesting a direct reference to the Pasteur Institute in Paris, France, where two women who were instrumental in the anti-vivisection protests in the years 1903-1907, witnessed hundreds of animals dying in agony<sup>5</sup>. Desai refrains from aestheticizing animal suffering and pain in the passage quoted above: an issue that many writers have been accused of. She pointedly brings the dogs' suffering to the fore through Ram Lal's description of events to Raka. Later on, in a conversation with Raka on witches, Ram Lal tells her that witches "feast on the corpses the institute doctors throw down after they have cut up the mad dogs and boiled their brains" (Desai, 77), highlighting the indignities of animal death through the violation of the animals' bodily integrity. This necessarily denies the subjecthood of the animal, and all of this is constituted in the discourse of commercial scientific experimentation and vivisection.

At the same time, the Pasteur Institute is undeniably linked to Raka. Nanda Kaul, with regards to the hold the Pasteur Institute has on the child, thinks "[w]hat did Raka see in it? Why did it fascinate the child?" (Desai, 73). Almost as if in answer, Raka admits that "[t]he scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. ...It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her" (Desai, 90-91). This extends not only to the Pasteur Institute but also to the burnt house on the hill, whose owner was burnt alive when she tried to rescue her cat from the fire. Raka's feelings and position of ambivalence manifest themselves here, where on the one hand she makes the uninviting landscape her home by rejecting the socio-political sphere altogether. On the other hand, she revels in the destructive aspects of this nature and landscape, and by the end of the novel, she will reject the natural sphere with equal vehemence as well.

This change in Raka seals itself completely after she witnesses the party at the Kasauli Club. In a direct parallel to the violence inflicted on the animals in the Pasteur Institute, the spectacle of violence enacted in the costume-party dances in the club horrifies Raka:

Raka saw the skull and crossbones in white upon his chest. He had a scythe tucked under his arm and it glinted and shot off bolts of lights when he raised it and chopped off the woman's bucket head. Under her disheveled hair her pink throat opened wide and she laughed in bubbles of blood. ...

Then the row of bottoms parted to let through a figure in a brown robe that came stalking up to Raka as though it saw her there behind the curtain. Yet it could not see for it had no head, only a shawl dipped in blood dripping about its neck. It held its head tucked underneath its arm, grinning like a pot, with too many teeth. (Desai, 71)

What Raka sees here is a ritualized celebration of male violence. This violence of the dancers in the club brings Raka face-to-face with, and literally visualizes for her, the traumatic memory she has of the violence that she and her mother, Tara, suffered at the hands of her father. The figure with the scythe, chopping off the woman's head, the blood dripping from the neck, crystallize for Raka the father beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright...and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. (Desai, 71-72)

This violence is key to understanding why Raka seeks out scenes of ugliness and devastation, and why she feels safer with animals in the wild landscape and rejects the 'civilised' world. Collectively, the atrocities that the women suffer in the novel, find their culmination in Raka who sets the forest on fire in the end. While the fire is evidently her revenge against the adult world, Raka also symbolically destroys the local space<sup>6</sup> which was the scene of the violence, failure and death of females before her. In the destructive agency, the collective silence of women is finally articulated through her when she whispers, "[L]ook, Nani, I have set the forest on fire" (Desai, 145). At this point, Raka is situated neither in the socio-cultural sphere nor in the natural sphere. She ruptures and totally rejects the binaries of culture/nature, human/animal. Her act of setting the forest on fire is nonetheless a violent one, and Raka pledges no allegiance to either the human or the animal world.

### **Lee Yew Leong's "Honey I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now"**

"Honey I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now" is a short story by Lee Yew Leong, a Singaporean writer. It was first published in 2010 in the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* (QLRS). The story is about two friends, Annie and Wei Hsiung, Taiwanese-Singaporeans who have gone to the United States to study. While crossing a road from the Georgia Aquarium, both Annie and Wei Hsiung are lost in their own thoughts, and they liken their identities and situations to certain sea creatures—jellyfish, sea bream, the Portuguese Man of War and sharks—they have just seen at the aquarium.

When we come to this short story by Lee, we are again faced with a major episode of violence. This is especially pertinent to the sexual violence meted out to the main female character, Annie. Annie confronts the reality of her rape by her colleague, Sean, and the termination of the resulting pregnancy, through dissociating her identity and self. She changes her name to Annie from Hsin Yee, and the shift in nomenclature is accompanied by her likening her form to a jellyfish. We see that Wei Hsiung's crush on Annie died like a random jellyfish in the ocean: "[p]erhaps his crush had been like the death of this imaginary jellyfish, soundlessly existing in the first place, then soundlessly ceasing to exist afterwards...arbitrary after all" (2-3). In a parallel, Annie taken on the formlessness of the jellyfish when she tries to fit in in a foreign place in America as well as a foreign space in her office. Her comment to Wei Hsiung earlier takes on a new prominence here then: "The fish in the aquarium. Maybe they really are humans who have changed form" (1). The deconstruction of human identity by means of the animal—here, the jellyfish—becomes the only way that Annie can negotiate the reality of her bodily abuse and abortion. In likening herself to the jellyfish, Annie attempts to establish a material and embodied relation with it to cope with her trauma.

Lee, through Annie and Wei Hsiung's ruminations, invokes the concept of the animal-human (jellyfish as humans) and human-animal (humans as jellyfish) through the substitutability of identities, of names and of beings. What this does, in effect, is that it destabilizes the established hierarchies of human-animal, and by extension, the culture-nature binary. The place of both men and women in these hierarchies is broken down. The otherness of Annie, and even Wei Hsiung to a certain extent, is seen through an animal and literally becoming that animal. Both woman (Annie) and animal are then centered in the narrative,

along with Wei Hsiong. To use Carol Adams' term, the jellyfish does not become an absent-referent because it is centred along with Annie.

When Annie and Wei Hsiong are at the Georgia Aquarium, they are fascinated by the jellyfish in the tanks they see there. The discussion that follows on the difference between a jellyfish and a Portuguese Man of War, which is a siphonophore, further elucidates the identity crises and conflict that both the characters face. Here, Lee focuses on Wei Hsiong and how he experiences his place in America, and his relationship to Hsin Yee, who has now become Annie. Wei Hsiong realises again, through the various animals on display in their tanks, that "identity is negotiated on just that quotidian level. The Man of War is not a jellyfish" (3), just as his name Wei Hsiong cannot be substituted for an easier-to-pronounce name that his American friends bestow upon him, even though he does not like it. Therefore, the manner in which the jellyfish is deployed and represented tells a lot about each character's internal conflict.

Attention too is paid to the creatures behind the glass wall in the tank. In differentiating the jellyfish from the Man of War, a separate identity is given to each creature in its own right, just as both Annie and Wei Hsiong yearn for themselves in the human world. Lee goes as far to classify the Man of War as a siphonophore, meaning that it is made up of several specialized minute individual organisms called zooids, which cannot survive independently nor function as individual organisms. Perhaps this is Lee's way of saying that Annie and Wei Hsiong's conflicted identities can only be resolved if, like the zooids in the siphonophore, they integrate into themselves both Asian-ness and American-ness. Also, important to note here is the idea of animals in zoos (here, it is the sea creatures in an aquarium). Derek Ryan states that "encounters between humans and animals in zoos—regardless of the information provided and the closeness in proximity—are often marked by a sense of distance and distraction" (1). Annie describes the jellyfish she is looking at as "pressingly beautiful for all it ghaastliness" (2), and expresses that distance that is there when looking at the animal and the violence done to the animal in captivity. She too becomes complicit in the one-way gaze at animals, highlighting the notion of spectatorship-ownership that Berger talks about in his essay "Why Look at Animals?". Annie adopts the male-gaze to peer at the jellyfish and, just like Raka, does not identify with the natural sphere. She becomes complicit in the very forces that subjugate the animals in captivity by objectifying them through their captivity. Annie's ambivalence comes out here, where she first identifies with the jellyfish on the level of selfhood and subjectivity, yet distances herself from the jellyfish in captivity because she is simultaneously disgusted and repulsed by it. We see Annie being located between the culture-nature binary, where her ambivalence regarding both spheres (cultural and natural) comes out. As argued earlier, Annie thus occupies an ambivalent position that defies any romantic or celebratory categorizations of women within the natural sphere.

At the end of the story, Wei Hsiong, in a moment of epiphany, comments that "[t]o us...they may be sea bream and jellyfish, but to them, we are the exotic sharks shipped from Taiwan by UPS, captive now behind glass, distorted, in their tank" (5). Lee's narrative strategy here works in two ways: first, for the literal sharks in the tanks, and second, for Annie and Wei Hsiong as the 'exotic Asian Others' in America. According to Berger, "[h]owever you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars, less than a foot from you, looking outward in the public direction, you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal" (original emphasis, 260). What is being exposed here are the marginalised positions that both the animal and human Others hold in society. The sharks from Taiwan in the aquarium function as a parallel to Annie and Wei Hsiong as Taiwanese-Singaporeans, feeling out of place in an America that cannot pronounce their names and therefore cannot "acknowledge the owner of that name" (Lee, 3). Furthermore, directly relevant to Annie's sexual abuse is the way Sean views her. He does so in much the same way as the sharks are viewed in the tanks, employing a spectator's gaze that objectifies and doubly marginalizes Annie as both woman and animal.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Raka and Annie (even Wei Hsiong, to a certain extent) are removed and distanced from society, and as such are characterized as “others” and yet are centred in the works by Desai and Lee. This paper has explored the connections between these women and animals without the aim of privileging one over the other. It is important to note that neither author offers any utopian solutions to any of the characters’ predicaments. The works instead offer critical insights into the processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions. It also demonstrates the ways in which these are resisted or co-opted by the women. By re-reading and re-interpreting these writings to unsettle the binaries of culture/nature and human/animal through the fictional representations, the women’s ambivalent position emerges in the authors’ works. Both Raka and Annie cannot be said to be romantically aligned with nature and the natural sphere. The notion of violence has been key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of both women and animals, where violence exposes the patriarchal instrumentalist mindset regarding both women and animals. Women’s and animals’ suffering due to this violence is then inextricably linked and both the authors force us to pay attention to wrongs against women as well as animals. This also goes to show that the oppression of women and the oppression of animals are linked and do not operate in a vacuum.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The research on animals and women specifically went on till the late 90’s. After this period, there was a large gap in the scholarly work on animals in ecocriticism and ecofeminism as a whole. The research that did come out in the subsequent years focused mainly on animals in the wilderness, animal rights, zoos and captivity, companion species and how they played a role alongside humans, and theories focused on animals included deep ecology and affect theory. Although a lot of scholarly work has been done since then on animals in themselves and their roles in human lives, research on interconnections with women and a gendered analysis has since taken a back seat. It is my hope that this paper will try to build on the existing research regarding women and animals, and expand on the postcolonial aspects with a critical gendered analysis.

<sup>2</sup> I am mindful that there are other forms of oppression that fit within this framework, for example, homophobia, heterosexism, disability, etc. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover these aspects fully to do them justice.

<sup>3</sup> Copeland is aware that anthropomorphism is a “double-edged sword as capable of being used to denigrate as to reveal the true character of the nonhuman protagonist” (92). However, she maintains that these anxieties are a clear attestation of the human desire to know the animal directly.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on the anti-vivisection riots, see Carol Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog*.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth account of and comments on the debate about anthropomorphism with regards to women and animals, see Greta Gaard (ed), *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, 1993; Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (eds), *Animals and Women*, 1995; Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 1990; Marion W. Copeland, “Nonhuman Animals”, 1998; Simon C. Estok, “Theory from the Fringes”, 2007; Lawrence Buell, “The Misery of Beasts and Humans” in *Writing for an Endangered World*, 2001 and Val Plumwood, “Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> It is also important at this point to bring in the history of Carignano, rendered by the postman, which is ridden with murders and violent deaths. In rendering the history of the house Carignano, Desai also refers to colonial relations and their racist ideology. She frames the issues of exile and dislocation through postcolonial issues that comprise of this colonialist supremacy and ideology, first of the British inhabitants and then through the Indian inhabitants.



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