

# Ecofeminist Narratives and the Question of Sustainability: A Study of Anita Desai's Select Novels

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## Abstract

This study investigates the ecofeminist aspects and the sustainability issues implicit in the novels of Anita Desai selected for study. It critically examines Desai's depiction of women and women's existential ties to the natural world, underscoring how women's emotional, spiritual, and social experiences shape women's experience in ecologically vulnerable environments. Ecofeminism as a philosophy parallels the oppression of nature and women in patriarchal societies, whilst also accounting for the bond that women frequently have with the natural world. The study involves a qualitative approach through close textual analysis of novels such as "Fire on the Mountain," "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" "Cry, the Peacock," and "Clear Light of Day," which examine ecofeminist aspects to illustrate the linkages among gender, nature, and power within Desai's texts. The proposed research will examine how Desai's work signifies this interconnectedness, specifically women's roles in nurturing and caring for natural resources, and their interpretations of sustainable development. By examining women's occupancy of land, forests, and animals, the study will explore their awareness of ecological harm, such as resource misuse, natural disasters, or deforestation. Finally, the study will seek to determine if Desai's treatment constitutes a model of sustainable coexistence or a critique of current systems of exploitation in the context of Indian English literature and environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminist, Sustainability, Anita Desai, Women and Nature, Environmental Ethics, and Patriarchy.

## Introduction

Ecofeminism is crucial in India and other developing nations because it exposes how rich nations have invaded and exploited our environment and its resources for their own urbanisation, development, and globalisation agendas. Similarly, our relationships with the natural world, other forms of life, and members of the opposite sex or sexual minority can shed light on gender issues. It is crucial to analyse this connection because the marginalised are the first to suffer from disasters and other forms of destruction. The intersection of certain combinations, such as women, children, the disabled, the impoverished, Black, and dalit, causes marginalisation to geometrically expand and generate several layers. *"Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India"* is Vandana Shiva's scathing indictment of the destructive effects of Western development ideology on women and the environment in developing nations. She criticises the patriarchal Western view of growth as "mal development" since it prioritises material wealth over the

welfare of social outcasts. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies offer both theoretical and practical ecofeminist viewpoints based on sustainability in their book *Ecofeminism*, which critiques current theories and practices. There is a literary foundation for ecofeminism as well. Theories and ideologies in literature have benefited from the linguistic and literary contributions of ecocriticism and feminist literary criticism. Though not a recent development, ecofeminist literary critique is still in its early stages, particularly as it pertains to postcolonial literature (Krishna and Jha 105).

The idea of ecofeminism confers the philosophy and research that brings women and the environment into consideration. It addresses how patriarchy dominates, oppresses, and exploits women and nature while also highlighting how inextricably linked and similar women and nature are. Regarding physical and behavioral methods, women are said to have many natural characteristics. The quality of preserving gender-environmental relations and nurturing and caring for the natural resources is brought about by this intimacy, which also helps to understand and analyze the role and sense of duty towards nature and the wellbeing of the general public. Women show a keen interest in interacting with nature in almost every country. In addition to being professionals and taking care of their domestic duties, they also show concern and compassion for the environment. Even in rural places, individuals can state that women are fully connected with the land, forest, and water. They are aware of the abuse of natural resources, natural disasters, deforestation, and animal care. The majority of their time is spent on agricultural activities, caring for animals, maintaining soil, plants, and trees, and they are conscious of not abusing them. Their closeness to nature is not new; it has existed since antiquity. Since they understood that they were the center of the world, it was their moral and ethical duty to preserve nature and natural resources so that ecology might coexist (Nazneen 27).

The confluence of ecofeminism and sustainability in literature demonstrates an increasing awareness of the relationship between ecological oppression and gender oppression. Ecofeminism is understood as both a conceptual framework and activist movement, and analyzes how patriarchal structures oppress both women and nature, while exploring the interconnectedness of damaging relationships that exploit the environment and marginalize and subjugate women (Shiva 88). Literature is critical in expressing these anxieties by providing complex narratives that portray women's lives in the context of environmental destruction and social-cultural restrictions. Literary works offer thematic and symbolic representations that represent and resist dominant ideologies that have normalized unsustainable and oppressive institutions. As Gaard suggests, ecofeminist literature “*serves as a space where alternative models of coexistence, resistance, and renewal can be imagined and narrated*” (Gaard 117). Particularly in postcolonial contexts like India, where environmental justice and gender inequality are closely related, ecofeminist literature serves as an important vehicle for engaging with sustainability, environmental ethics, and social justice. Readers who explore ecofeminist narratives become more aware of their relationship to the environmental crisis, reconsidering anthropocentric and androcentric worldviews and adding to an important discussion of sustainable living and ethical coexistence (Plumwood 5).

Anita Desai enjoys a significant position in Indian English literature as a writer who examines with unusual psychological detail the complexities of human psychology, identity, and the cultural places of women. Desai's works are often articulated as exploring both the personal and the political, providing nuanced and subtle critiques of modernity, urban alienation, and issues regarding the place of women in postcolonial India. Desai's style of writing, which combines lyrical prose with psychological insight, has provided a compelling and innovative character to Indian fiction in English (Lal 54). Particular significance is her deep understanding of female consciousness and her focus on the interior, which connects her to feminist

and ecofeminist literary traditions. As Mukherjee observes, central to several of Desai's female protagonists is a powerful sense of disconnection from their environment, indicating more widespread ecological and existential concerns regarding displacement (Mukherjee 112). Moreover, themes around solitude, nature, and spiritual longing that Desai addresses in books like *"Fire on the Mountain"* and *"Clear Light of Day"* lend themselves particularly well to ecofeminist readings. Desai's subtle critique of patriarchal and urban pressures that produce ecological harm and lead to women's alienation makes her an important literary voice on sustainability and gendered resistance (Rao 89). Thus, through considering the work of Anita Desai, the research can further clarify relations between gender, ecology, and postcolonial identity in Indian literature.

Anita Desai's selected novels offer an intimate examination of the interiority of women, illustrating roles with characters experiencing isolation, emotional detachment, and existential unrest. In *"Fire on the Mountain,"* elderly widow Nanda Kaul moves from the constraints of domesticity in search of peace at her house in the hills of Kasauli. She has created a refuge of solitude. She welcomes a visiting great-granddaughter, Raka, whose innocent wildness and silence recall a suppressed emotional past. The arrival of Raka culminates in a symbolic forest fire that reflects the chaos of the external landscape and internal uncertainty and disquiet. *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* features protagonist Sita, who remains attuned to her woman's instinct, spiritual, physical, and psychological aspects. Sita feels overwhelmed by the noise of urban life, patriarchal control suffocating her desire for life. Pregnant and mentally fragile, Sita flees to the island of Manori to find solace and magical protection. She, too, must contend with the conflicts within herself. In *"Cry, the Peacock,"* Maya, trapped in a marriage to the rational and indifferent Gautama, becomes mad as she is haunted by a childhood prophecy and her suppressed desires. Her madness is reflected in the heightened feeling she has towards the natural world, but also her disconnect and tenuous psychological state. *"Clear Light of Day"* centers on Bim, a middle-aged woman living in her rotting ancestral house in post-partition Delhi, as she takes care of her autistic brother and reflects on estrangement, dreaminess, change, and family. By way of these narratives, Desai describes haunting portraits of women wrestling with loss, identity, and disconnection, against a backdrop of rich nature, evoking psychology and emotion, while placing her characters in contexts that evoke political, psychological, and natural environments.

Anita Desai's stories make a valuable, unique contribution to ecofeminism and environmental ethics in Indian English literature as they represent the link between the exploitation of women and the degradation of nature. Female characters in her novels usually have a deep affinity for their natural surroundings and demonstrate empathy for nature, as both are marginalized and violated by patriarchy (Sivakala 3). This connection is not just symbolic; Desai shows how the destruction of the environment shapes women's lives and demeanour, whether physically or psychologically, and often makes them more vulnerable. In *"Cry, the Peacock,"* Desai juxtaposes the deeply rooted connection Maya has with the environment with the extent to which she is alienated by her patriarchal marriage to Gopal, and individuals are left with the suggestion that there is an intrinsic connection between the female psyche and the environment (Priyanka 307). Likewise, *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* conveys Sita's retreat to the island as her longing for a place where she could avert the social constraints of her environment and go back to a more natural, visceral state of being (Nawaz et al. 4). These descriptions fit the Ecofeminist perspective that understands the systematic linking of women's domination and nature's exploitation and that both are a result of the same framework and patriarchal ideologies (Mies and Shiva 18).

Desai's *"Fire on the Mountain"* is another case in point, as remote Carignano is eventually placed within the harsh but forceful Himalayan environment. Both Nanda Kaul's select isolation, ambivalent relationship to the environment, and Raka's more primitive identification with the forces of nature's destruction can be read from an ecofeminist perspective. The text is critical of the anthropocentric perspective and humanizes nature by attributing presence to the setting and demonstrating the literal effect of that presence on the characters' emotional and psychological stance (Samkaria 25). The ultimate blaze on the periphery of the mountain can be read as an aggressive expression of a repressed and hurting nature, in alignment with the psychological upheavals of the women characters. Through her delicate articulation of the inner lives of women combined with the destiny of their ecosystem, Anita Desai's works deepen Indian English fiction with an ecologically rooted feminist awareness. Her writings, by implication, promote an environmental ethic recognizing the inherent worth of nature and resisting the patriarchal structures perpetuating the dominance of both women and nature. By speaking about the interlocking suffering and endurance of women and nature, Desai calls forth a more unified and moral interface with the earth, a cardinal principle of ecofeminism (Bala 55).

The novels of Anita Desai pose far-reaching ecofeminist concerns as they depict the intertwined oppression of women and nature under the impact of patriarchal society and the capitalist system. For example, in *"Cry, the Peacock,"* Maya's deep sensitivity towards the natural environment is set off against her husband's, Gautama, more remote, intellectual stance. Maya's connection to the vivid environment surrounding her, particularly in the context of the peacock imagery, serves as a symbol for her own passionate but buried existence. As Maya finds herself affected by increasing isolation within her marriage, so her identification with the natural environment and her imagination, reinforced as she realizes the oppression she feels as a woman, has parallels to the exploitation of nature itself. The text does not explicitly formulate an ecofeminist position, however, Maya's strong identification with nature, and in particular the description of her sense of being trapped in a patriarchal configuration, brings to mind some of the ecofeminist issues regarding systems of domination being interlocking. For example, regarding her garden, Maya states, *"The cannas flaunted barbaric reds, the bougainvillea blazed in violent purples, the frangipani sent out its heady, sensuous perfume on the still air"* (Desai *"Cry, the Peacock"* 15). This vivid portrayal underscores her deep sensory engagement with nature, a stark contrast to Gautama's intellectual pursuits.

*"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* elaborates on these concepts through Sita's retreat to Manori Island. The island, once a refuge from the demands of domesticity and afterwards a precious retreat for Sita, creates a space for Sita to confront herself and to navigate her relationship with her geography and place within the world. The tides and the sea, agitated and churning, reflect Sita's struggles and battles against the expected limitations of her gender. The island, as an ungoverned wilderness, presents a diversion to the constrained and repressive home life that envelops her, evoking possibilities of freedom emerging from both the wildness of the island and the retreat from patriarchal imposition once she's embraced the endless nature of the island. Sita's intense desire for a simpler, more genuine life of interconnection in nature is consistent with ecofeminist ethics, which espouse the importance of interrelation and oppose anthropocentrism. When she considers her desire to remain on the island, she considers, *"Here, there was no past, no future. Only the ever-present, the ever-insistent sea"* (Desai *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* 78). This quote emphasizes the island as a space outside the linear, patriarchal conception of time and history, offering a connection to a more primal, natural rhythm.

In *"Fire on the Mountain,"* Nanda Kaul's secluded life in Kasauli initially seems to be a withdrawal from social expectations. Yet the stark and barren terrain that encircles her also reflects the emotional wasteland of her own life, a result of a life within patriarchal constraints that have withheld her real connection and expression. The destructive fire at the close of the novel can be seen as a violent expression of the repressed emotions and the capacity for nature to reflect and even magnify the violence that is present in human relationships and imbalances in society. Although not overtly concerned with environmental exploitation, the novel quietly connects the emotional emptiness of its women with a sense of alienation from a supportive and life-sustaining natural world. Raka's interest in the charred forest and her distance from normal social interactions also reinforce a possible criticism of a society that isolates women as well as nature. Nanda's need for solitude is seen when she considers, *"Here on the mountain, she encountered no one. No one and nothing. Only the pines and the silence"* (Desai *"Fire on the Mountain"* 3). This quote highlights her attempt to find solace in nature, yet the "silence" also hints at an emotional void.

Anita Desai's fiction delves into women's deep emotional and spiritual relationship with nature in her novels, presenting nature as a haven as well as the site of resistance from patriarchal oppression. In *"Fire on the Mountain,"* Nanda Kaul's safety and identity emerge in, and with, her isolation, among Kasauli's natural landscape. The hills provide Nanda with not only safety, but are also intimate. In her un-manicured and wild life with nature, Nanda experiences spiritual: *"It was not a house she had wanted, but space. Not a place, but a freedom, an air in which she could breathe"* (Desai *"Fire on the Mountain"* 21). This yearning for space represents her emotional liberation from domestic responsibilities and societal expectations, with nature as a silent partner in her independence. Similarly, in *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* Sita escapes the chaotic city life of Bombay to the mythical island of Manori to seek healing during pregnancy. Her journey is a spiritual reawakening based on nature: *"The sea would cure her... it had power, she was certain, to bring peace, to quiet the storm inside her"* (Desai *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* 55). Sita's inner conflict is externalized by nature, and her interaction with the island indicates a deeper desire for purity, control, and rebirth. Desai thereby subscribes to ecofeminist thinking by highlighting how women, oppressed and emotionally restricted by societal roles, tend to find healing and self-realization in natural environments (Shiva 45; Gaard and Murphy 12).

By these representations, Desai quietly incorporates ecofeminist observations by illustrating how the oppression of women tends to go hand in hand with the exploitation of nature. Her female protagonists often find comfort, introspection, or even a sense of defiance in their connection to the natural world, underscoring the interrelatedness of their experiences of oppression and the possibility of finding strength and alternative ways of thinking beyond dominant patriarchal frameworks. Although not openly espousing an ecofeminist philosophy, Desai's thoughtful investigation into the interwoven relationships among gender, nature, and systems of power provides rich soil for ecofeminist interpretation. These women protagonists not only turn to nature as a source of refuge but also interact with it in spiritually redemptive ways, supporting the ecofeminist premise that the destruction of women and nature arises from common systems of domination.

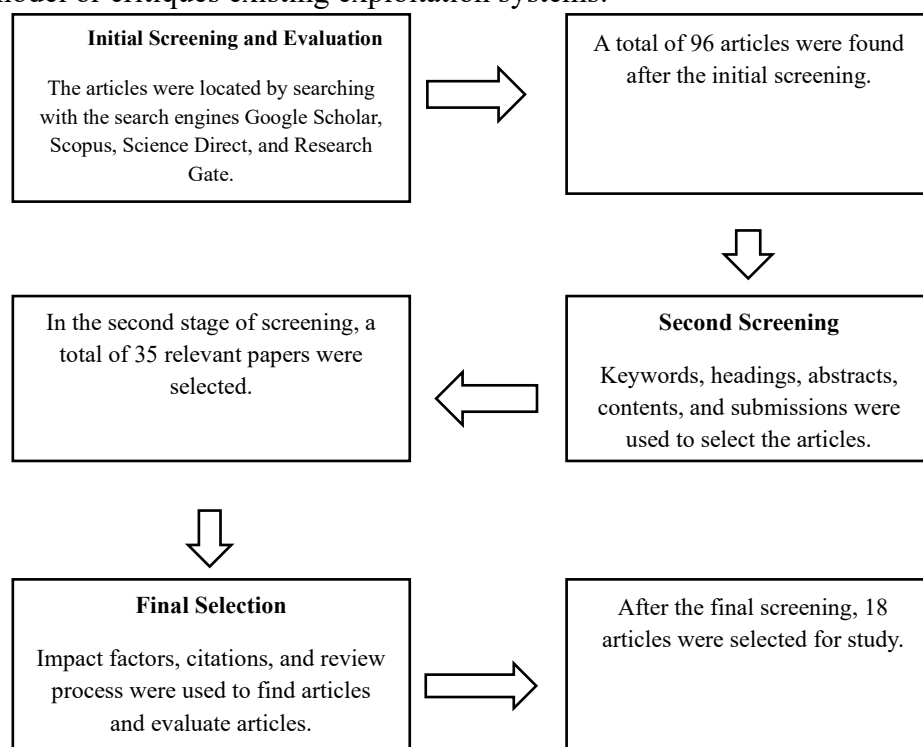
While Anita Desai's primary focus is on her characters' internal lives and social lives, her narratives illustrate environmental degradation and ecological crises. In *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* the comparison between the vividly industrialized Bombay and the relatively unspoiled island of Manori implicitly critiques the ecological costs of urban expansion. Sita's desire for the island indicates a wish for a more peaceful existence with nature, without the pollution and artifice of the city. The flux of the tides and the raw force of the sea, as comforting as they are at first, also quietly emphasize nature's fragility and



susceptibility to disturbance. Likewise, in *"Fire on the Mountain,"* the imagery of the charred forest and barren landscape of Kasauli may be interpreted as a result of human intervention or neglect, indicative of a disturbed ecosystem. The imagery is set against the emotional dryness of the characters, and the reader is invited to make a parallel between the despoliation of the environment and the emotional barrenness of people within a possibly unsustainable social framework. While Desai does not overtly describe ecological crises, the fact that there is environmental degradation and the characters' desire for a more natural life implicitly speaks to the effect of human behavior on the environment and the need for a more sustainable lifestyle. Sita considers Bombay as she writes: *"crowds and the noise and the smells"* (Desai *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"* 25), hinting at the environmental toll of urbanization. The burnt forest in *"Fire on the Mountain"* is described as *"blackened and twisted"* (Desai *"Fire on the Mountain"* 67), a stark image of environmental damage. These subtle depictions serve as cautionary notes about the consequences of ecological neglect for both the natural world and human well-being.

## Objectives

1. To investigate the ecofeminist themes found in the select novels of Anita Desai by looking at the intersections between gender, nature, and power relationships.
2. To analyze how Anita Desai constructs the connection between women and nature, especially through her female protagonists' emotional, spiritual, and social experiences.
3. To analyze the portrayal of environmental degradation and ecological crises in Desai's narratives and their implications for sustainable living.
4. To investigate how Anita Desai's narratives contribute to ecofeminist discourse and environmental ethics within Indian English literature.
5. To evaluate whether Desai's literary treatment of women and ecology promotes a sustainable coexistence model or critiques existing exploitation systems.



**Figure 1.1: Screening Process of the Study**

## Conclusion

Anita Desai's literary treatment of women and ecology operates on two synchronous levels. On one hand, it critiques existing systems of exploitation, while on the other hand, it subtly offers a different way of being together sustainably. Through her nuanced portrayals of female protagonists, such as Maya in "*Cry, the Peacock*," Sita in "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*", and Nanda Kaul in "*Fire on the Mountain*," Desai shows how industrialization and patriarchal forces have marginalized both women and nature. Her female characters, as those rooted in nature, gravitate toward ecological situations to counteract feelings of alienation and emotional repression through the social norms in which they exist. Desai does not depict nature as a static and singular stage, but as an active and responsive world that embodies the emotional states of her female characters. This connection between the emotional oppression of women and the devastation of the environment is a critique of the dominant systems that nourish themselves on control and estrangement. At the same time, Desai's female characters' spiritual and emotional investments in nature are marked by a desire for simplicity, solitude, and harmony, which resonate with the ecofeminist aspiration for interconnectedness and care. Desai's stories can be read as a statement for a world based on empathy, mutual respect, and ecological sensibility as the basis of human relations to the environment. Therefore, while she exposes the damage of hierarchical and patriarchal systems, her writing also gestures toward the possibility of a more ethical and sustainable dream of symbiosis between women and nature. Anita Desai's chosen novels also give a sense of the character of the relationship with nature for women; thus, her position is particularly situated in an ecofeminist context. Desai offers characters like Maya, Sita, and Nanda Kaul to share stories that aim to show how (patriarchal society) women are marginalised and connected to the environment. The female protagonists, who are generally emotionally and spiritually engaged with nature, provide examples of the double oppression they experience and the healing possibilities that are revealed through a relationship with nature. These stories highlight the impact of environmental degradation on women's lives, while also critiquing unsustainable systems and dehumanising practices that cause their harm.

Desai's fiction not only depicts nature as a setting but also intentionally integrates it as a dynamic entity, which mirrors, pushes against, and even absorbs the inner-life states of her characters. The intervening research reveals that Desai's writing engages with environmental ethics by advocating a model for coexistence based on empathy, self-reflection, and respect for the natural world. Although she may not consider herself an ecofeminist writer, the ways in which she incorporates gender and ecology into the fabric of her writing disrupts anthropocentric and androcentric ways of seeing the world, and performs sustainability through a subtle but effective type of storytelling that is powerful. In a world where individuals are faced with increasing ecological disasters, reading Desai's novels with an ecofeminism framework allows for a deeper engagement with the entanglements of environmental and gender justice. Desai's fiction acts as a literary call for ethical living, pushing her readers to face their relationship not only with women but also the planet, and dream of a new, just, and sustainable world.

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