

The Woman and the Animal in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*

Gurpreet Kaur

*Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry,
United Kingdom*

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the affinity between women and animals through a lens of material postcolonial ecofeminism. Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* 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 assign the woman and the animal to inferior and stereotyped positions. The woman and the animal, then, become mediators for each other. The notion of violence is key in exploring patriarchal oppression of both women and animals in Desai's novel. A key argument that is furthered in this paper is that the 'other' in the form of the woman and the animal is centred in the novel although both the woman and the animal are removed and distanced from society in this novel. While the woman becomes the mediator through whom the animal can be read, identity politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. The position of ambivalence seems to occupy the heart of the protagonists in this story, with the women belonging neither to the cultural or the natural.

Keywords: Ambivalence, binaries, Indian, nature, nonhuman animals, postcolonial ecofeminism, women, violence

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to develop the perspective of materialist postcolonial

ecofeminism by analysing and discussing the novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) by the English-language Indian novelist Anita Desai (b. 1937). *Cry, the Peacock* was Desai's first novel to be published. I have chosen this novel written by Desai for analysis in this paper as it illustrates the continuity of her concerns, which colour most of her novels, namely, the position of

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E-mail address:

gurpreetkk1@gmail.com (Gurpreet Kaur)

middle-class Indian women and the use of animals and nature.

Postcolonial ecofeminism as a new perspective in literary studies is still in its nascent stage. The related fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated, to date, by a typically Euro-American point of view, and neither field addresses the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately. Both fields need to recognise “the ‘double-bind’ of being female and being colonised” (Campbell, 2008, p. xi). A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective involves the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus that makes it necessary to recognise that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

I will show in this paper that the ‘other’ in the form of the woman and the animal is central in the novel, although both the woman and the animal are removed and distanced from society. The position of ambivalence occupies the heart of Desai’s protagonists, particularly Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*; the women in this novel belong neither to the cultural nor to the natural. Desai’s novel predates as well as anticipates much of the contemporary debate on the connection between women and animals in society. The novel also provides an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial issues espoused in the fiction of male writers through a gender perspective while simultaneously considering the

specific processes that assign women and animals to inferior and stereotyped positions. The woman and the animal, then, become mediators for each other. The notion of violence is key in exploring forms of patriarchal oppression of both the woman and the animal in Desai’s novel.

WOMAN AND ANIMAL: AN OVERVIEW

It is important to contextualise, very briefly, the debate and argument surrounding women and animals historically and socio-politically. Patrick D. Murphy agreed with the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida when he stated, “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, 1992, p. 311).

Two important points arise from Murphy’s words quoted above. First, we are brought face-to-face with Cartesian dualism, with the nature/culture dualism going all the way back to the self/other dichotomy. Second, we are returned to the basic ecofeminist premise that this binary framework authorises various forms of oppression because it puts in place a set of hierarchical opposition. Descartes postulated that “the reason why animals do not speak as we do is . . . that they have no thoughts” (2007, p. 60). From this, he concluded that animals are “natural automata” (Descartes,

2007, p. 61), that is, they are mechanical and only have instinctual drives. Such Cartesian thinking has had far-reaching impact on the attribution of reason to men (culture, human) and instinct and emotion to women (nature, animal). Also, such philosophical generalisations have been naturalised to date and thus, allow certain oppressions and exploitation to take place, namely that of animals, women and other marginalised groups of people. This is most clearly seen when “women’s bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality” (Adams & Donovan, 1995, p. 1) and thus women’s ‘animality’ is used to deny them the rights of public citizenship. 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 or animals.

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 types of oppression are interconnected. Therefore, the connections between and the oppression of women and animals cannot be viewed in a vacuum, independent of other forms of “abuse, degradation, exploitation and commercialization” (Adams & Donovan, 1995, p. 3). According to Susanne Kappeler, sexism and speciesism have to be viewed together with racism, classism and nationalism (in the form of the power of the state) and scientific discourse, all of which legitimise the exploitation of

women and animals to a large extent¹. Such interconnections work at times by animalising women (speciesism) and by feminising animals (sexism), and some nonhuman, animal terms can function as racial epithets. This also goes to show that the relationship between speciesism and sexism is not unidirectional.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have stated:

Postcolonialism’s major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism and miscegenation, language, translation, . . . voice and the problems of speaking of and for others—to name just a few—offer immediate entry points for a re-theorising of the place of animals in relation to human societies. . . . [However], the metaphorisation and deployment of ‘animal’ as a derogatory term . . . make it difficult to even discuss animals without generating a profound unease, even a rancorous antagonism, in many postcolonial contexts today. (2010, p. 135)

One of the potential problems that this statement immediately illuminates is that of priority: In this context, should animals or women be given priority? I would like to stress that this paper is not about privileging one group over the other, that women and

¹I 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

animals here are not viewed as being either/or. This paper is about exploring the series of interconnection between these two groups, women and animals, in a postcolonial woman author's writing as well as rupturing the space between the binaries, culture/nature, human (man)/animal (woman), as an ambivalent position. It is important to do so because a failure to challenge these binary distinctions undermines a more complete understanding of the workings of oppression.

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, 1993, p. 61). The constructedness of this connection, then, exposes two points. First, 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, 2012, p. 33). Implicit in this is the notion of power and hegemony, that is, who is in power and who gets to represent whom and in what way, where some humans themselves may be lumped together with animals. Second, 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 regard to representing animals. Margo DeMello stated:

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. (2012, pp. 287–288, original emphasis)

However, critics such as Marion Copeland (1998) and John Berger (2007) have spoken in defence 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" (Berger, 2007, p. 255; Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 251). It is also 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 instances². I suggest that

²For an in-depth account of and comments on the debate about anthropomorphism with regard to women and animals, see Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990); Greta Gaard (Ed), *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993); Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Eds), *Animals and Women* (1995); Val Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics" in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (1997); Marion W. Copeland, "Nonhuman Animals" (1998); Simon C. Estok, "Theory from the Fringes" (2007), and; Lawrence Buell, "The Misery of Beasts and Humans" in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001)

Desai be posited within the framework of recuperating anthropomorphism when reading her novel. Part of her strategy is to allow human readers to identify with the characters, their feelings as well as the interaction between women and animals in her novels, in which she deploys a certain necessary anthropomorphism, to use Copeland's term.

CRY, THE PEACOCK

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* is a story about a sensitive young girl, Maya, who is obsessed with a childhood prophecy of disaster. An albino astrologer had predicted death to either her or her husband four years into their marriage. Believing that she is the one to die, she hovers on the brink of neurosis and insanity. However, in a moment of epiphany, an idea takes root in her mind that since the astrologer had predicted death for either of them, it may be the life of Gautama, her husband, and not hers that is threatened. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks that since he is so detached and indifferent to her and life in general, it will not matter to him if he dies. After this realisation dawns on her, she asks Gautama to accompany her to the roof of the house to enjoy the cool air, and he does so, lost in his own thoughts. They walk towards the terraced end of the roof, and Maya looks enraptured at the glow of the rising moon. As Gautama moves in front of her, hiding the moon from her view, she, in a fit of frenzy, pushes him over the parapet. It remains in the end for Gautama's mother and sister to take away the now completely

insane Maya from the scene of tragedy to the house of her father.

There is no actual or literal peacock in the story. The image of the peacock crying during the first monsoon rains is entrenched in Maya's mind when she suddenly gets the idea that it could be Gautama who is to die. The entire idea in her mind is framed by a refrain that repeats itself in the novel, "Pia pia I cry, miomio I die" (Desai, 1980, p. 82), mimicking the cry of the peacocks during mating, where "cry" and "die" then assume critical significance when Maya thinks about killing Gautama. The image of the peacock, then, from being associated with positive connotations when Maya marries Gautama, becomes a progressively negative image as Maya thinks about killing her husband.

The following sections will analyse the relationship between Maya and her pet dog, Toto, and then expand upon those points and talk about another aspect, the bodily exploitation of both women and animals, also seen through Maya and the animals around her. Two scenes, the monkeys at the railway station and the cabaret dance scene, illustrate the inter-linkage of the exploitation of women and animals. Before that, it will be important to discuss Maya and Gautama's relationship briefly in the context of the suffering of women and animals as one possible interconnection between the types of oppression.

Maya and Her Pet Dog, Toto

The novel opens with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. Toto's body "lay rotting in the sun" (Desai, 1980, p. 1) as Maya waited for

her husband Gautama to come home and bury the dead body. Maya subsequently moves the bed on which Toto's dead body is laid into the shade of the lime trees and "[sees]its eyes open and staring still, scream[s] and rushe[s] to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continue[s] to cry and [runs], defeated, into the house" (Desai, 1980, p. 2). A number of issues regarding both animals and women are exposed through the recounting of these mundane actions and Maya's reaction to her pet dog's death.

The pet animal is a major topic of study in human-animal studies, including ecofeminism. A pet is generally defined as a companion animal, and the act of naming a pet "incorporates him or her into the human social world and allows us to use their name as a term of address and a term of reference" (DeMello, 2012, p. 149). Maya, in constantly referring to her dog by name in her thoughts and soliloquies, confers upon him a distinct identity and personality. In giving Toto a distinct identity and a definite place in her life, she refuses to deny Toto's material reality and history, of his body that she has known and seen rotting after death (her emphasis on Toto's body runs throughout the novel; here are two examples: "small white Toto, small white corpse" [1980, p. 24]; "the impact of his body as he flung himself upon me" [p. 21]). Toto's identity is not effaced, and he does not become an "absent referent" (Adams, 2010, p. 66).

It can be argued at the same time that Maya, in speaking for the dog, may be speaking for herself and her plight. Sanders

and Arluke invoke explained the concept of constructing "dialogues with the self" (2007, p. 67) through a pet, and this is something that Maya does engage in. However, it is important *not* to view this negatively as Desai uses this as a strategic device to contrast Maya's husband Gautama's reaction to the death of the dog. Gautama comes back from work late and,

he did all that was to be done, quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work. He telephoned the Public Works Department, he had them send their scavenging truck to take the corpse away. . . . 'Yes, yes, the bed too,' he said. 'By all means, burn it too.' When the truck left, he came to her [Maya]. . . . 'It is all over,' he said. 'Come and drink your tea, and stop crying. You mustn't cry'. (Desai, 1980, p. 8)

Gautama's reaction to the dog's death is the complete opposite of Maya's. In saying that he takes care of everything "like a surgeon's knife at work" (Desai, 1980, p. 8), Desai is implicitly invoking the image of scientific discourse by referring to a typical instrument of medicine, the surgeon's knife, to suggest the distancing of humans, especially men, from animals. Gautama's actions here are purpose-driven and not communicative, making him detached and unemotional. This is similar to the "unemotional and detached language of scientific reports" (Birke, 1995, p. 32) used by Desai here to describe Gautama's actions. The effect of this, then, is that "caring and connectedness are stereotypically associated

with femininity, and thus typically *devalued* in the pursuit of objectivity and detachment” (Birke, 1995, p. 323; Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 323, my emphasis). This can be seen here when Gautama keeps telling Maya that she needs to stop crying and just have a cup of tea, and ultimately “forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether” (Desai, 1980, p. 9) and forgetting Toto, too. In espousing his philosophy of detachment that he often quotes from the *Gita*, both Maya and Toto then become absent referents for Gautama; Gautama forgets the dog and his name within a few days of the dog’s death and does not remember it even after Maya’s prompts. To Gautama, a pet is replaceable, and he gets a cat for Maya as a replacement for Toto. Maya relates this to a comment made by Gautama in the early days of their marriage that she looks like a cat (Desai, 1980, p. 27). With that in mind, Maya tries to forge a relationship with the cat, but the cat “scorned to have [her] touch her secret dreams” (Desai, 1980, p. 33). It is significant that Maya does not name the cat. Maya’s relationship with the feline, then, does not convey the same familiarity and intensity as her relationship with the dog, and towards the end of the novel, before pushing Gautama off the parapet, both she and the cat are almost indifferent to each other.

DeMello stated that “[t]he term ‘pet’, after all, was a fifteenth-century English term meaning ‘spoiled child’. This word probably derived from the French term *petit*, or ‘little’, and grew to mean anything or anyone that was spoiled or indulged”

(2012, p. 149). Maya, too, has been spoilt by her father’s upbringing in a middle-class anglophile household, where she describes herself in her childhood as akin to a “toy princess in a toy world” (Desai, 1980, p. 78). Gautama gets exasperated by her sensitivities and indulgences and mocks her, saying sarcastically that “everyone must bring a present for little Maya—that is what her father taught her” (Desai, 1980, p. 98). Desai here is pointedly drawing attention to the ennui and emptiness of the middle-class woman, who reacts in various ways to family-based, sanctioned codes of righteous feminine conduct. Anuradha Roy states that in Maya’s case, her father’s benevolent tyranny creates a situation in which “[t]he powerlessness of women is . . . generated within the structures of the family, through apparently nurturing institutions and individuals” (quoted in Jackson, 2010, p. 35). Maya’s father’s attitude towards fatalism that he has taught her, that one must accept all things and everything will be all right, offers Maya no alternative reaction to the astrologer’s prophecy of death. Feeling utterly lost and insecure by the hounding of the prophecy, Maya desperately thinks, “Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour?” (Desai, 1980, p. 84). She ultimately realises that her father, husband and brother are all extensions of each other and of male ways of thinking that are essentially alien to her nature: “‘The stagnant dregs of sentimentalism available only to the decadent’. Who had said that? Arjuna? Gautama? It could have been either.” (Desai, 1980, p. 117). Maya tries

not to 'accept', and rebels against fate and fatalistic thinking engendered in her by the men in her life and, in doing so, she is deemed a misfit, a neurotic (exclaimed repeatedly by Gautama), and eventually, insane. When she withdraws into her subjective world, then, Maya is a completely othered 'pet'.

Maya and Gautama's Relationship

The dualism of culture/nature, rational (detachment)/emotional (attachment) and human/animal, are literalised in the figures of Gautama and Maya as a couple. In deriding Maya and not losing any opportunity to put her down, Gautama uses animal pejoratives (in a negative sense) for Maya:

You have done it once again, Maya. You go chattering *like a monkey*, and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking. But, *being a creature of pure instinct*, you do, every now and then, stumble—purely by accident, I'm sure—upon the salient point of the problem. (Desai, 1980, p. 20, my emphasis)

The blatant categorisation of Maya as "monkey" and "creature of pure instinct" slots her into an inferior position with regard to the males in her life. In comparing Maya to an animal, two things simultaneously happen here. Firstly, the denotation of the animal by Gautama falsely distances him from animals and, in the larger picture, distances humans and animals from each other, reinforcing false dualisms in place.

Secondly, through the binary divisions, the woman here is effectively excluded from humankind. Joan Dunayer stated that "[l]inguistically ousting women from humankind has force because lack of membership in the human species condemns an individual, however thinking and feeling, to inferior status" (1995, p. 19). Similarly, the use of an animal in an image as a negative connotation reflects the belief that a nonhuman species does not merit equal consideration, dignity and respect.

The Monkeys at the Railway Station

According to Dunayer, "[e]very negative image of another species helps keep that species oppressed" (1995, p. 17). Here, in light of the negative comparison between Maya and a chattering monkey, it is important to discuss the scene at the railway station in which Maya is distressed by the plight of caged monkeys waiting to be shipped off to America for scientific laboratory experiments. Maya

went towards them, looked at them through tears, watching them move, feverishly, desperately, in cages too small to contain their upright bodies. . . . Long furred bodies swarming upon each other, till limbs and tails were twisted together, the elegant lines of their muscles contorted nightmarishly—the work of some fiendish maniac. And one that [she] saw was perfectly still and quiet, backed into a corner by the frantic bodies of its companions, and gazed out with eyes that had melted into liquid

drops about to slide down its pinched, indrawn cheeks. Its brow was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity, and its hands, folded across its thin belly, waited to accept it. Then it spied on something on the platform beside it, and, with famine swiftness, shot out one arm and picked it up, brought it close to its face for inspection, and sniffed it. It was only a monkey-nut shell, empty. A small whimper broke from the animal as it dropped the shell, then was silent again, waiting. (Desai, 1980, pp. 129–130)

Marian Scholtmeijer stated that “[t]he injustices suffered by women—the suppression, silencing, and violence—are arguably an extension of the more easily identified abuse of animals” (1995, p. 232) and that

[o]ne way [of] ensuring that animals are not alone in their pain [is by] means of a posited kinship between victimized women and victimized animals, [where] women writers both reclaim the fact of women’s suffering and challenge the isolation of human from animal that permits aggression against animals in the first place (Scholtmeijer, 1995, p. 235).

Desai here attempts to show how Maya and the monkeys’ suffering is linked. Maya’s distress at the animals’ distress is apparent here, and Desai does not necessarily privilege one over the other. Through her tears, when Maya tells Gautama that the

monkeys are hungry and thirsty and that they should not be in cages, Gautama’s reaction is to dismiss her cries as excessive female sentimentality, just as her reactions to her dog Toto’s death are dismissed by him. The validity of Maya’s feelings and sentiments at the animals’ suffering, which she identifies with, is completely estranged from Gautama that only a connection and concurrence with the animals (monkeys) can tell of and validate Maya’s isolation here. In this sense, then, Maya’s sense of resignation at her fate, her feelings of sadness and isolation, for example when she cries out, “let me out! I want to live Gautama, I want to live!” (Desai, 1980, p. 131), would have remained indescribable without the example of the monkeys in the station.

Also, note that in the passage quoted above, through Maya, Desai’s focus shifts from describing a cage-load of monkeys to one single caged monkey. She describes this single monkey’s ordeal and the resulting suffering in minute detail. This strategy is what Scott Slovic (2015) termed as singularity. He posited the concept as focussing on one single image or individual for affective and effective purposes, especially in eliciting compassion (compassionate feelings) towards the individual (and in extension, towards the whole group, which in this case, is that of the monkeys). Desai, realising the potential for using such a move, has used this strategy even before academic research commenced on singularity. This highlights the understudied postcolonial ecofeminist corpus of work relating to this field and its

contribution to the academic research and debate that has thus far been ignored.

The focus on the corporeality and materiality of the monkey's bodies, also a clear reference to animals subjected to cruel experiments in the cosmetic industry, points to the reduction of these animals to mere body parts for exploitation in the name of scientific progress to benefit humanity. Such exploitation is thoroughly rationalised and legitimised through scientific and hegemonic discourse by the state to secure general public acceptance, in this case seen through Gautama's reactions and even his mother's reaction, when they recognise that "something must be done immediately about it" (Desai, 1980, p. 130), but remain distanced enough from the plight of the monkeys to let them be transported for scientific experiments. The monkeys here are considered a factor of production, and are thus tightly crowded into small cages with feeding and watering largely neglected to minimise operational costs so that people in power (scientific companies and multinational corporations, among others, are hierarchically at the top) can benefit. In this analysis, then, suffering is not accidental but a "logical outcome of a system that demands profit above all else. This extends from the economic system into the political system" (DeMello, 2012, p. 274), as exemplified by Gautama, the main male voice of reason, politics and the public sphere in the novel.

The Cabaret Dance Scene

The cabaret dance that Maya witnesses with Gautama and his friends proves to be

a frightening experience for her. It brings her face-to-face with the exploitation of the cabaret dancers, which then triggers her memory about a bear dance and the exploitation of the bear that she had seen as a child. The cabaret dance routine is depicted at length by Desai in the novel, and the juxtaposition of the exploitation of the women and the memory of the bear dance distils the workings of Maya's subconscious mind into concrete reality: her own oppression, the cabaret dancers' oppression and the bear's oppression all bound together by the same forces of oppression. Desai uses descriptive animal phrases such as "wild catcalls," "the howls of preying wolves hunting in packs, in the darkening jungles" and "little animal cries of voluptuous invitation, as cats do when they mate" (Desai, 1980, pp. 73–74) to illustrate the cabaret scene in terms of the sexual exploitation of women. Using such language also points to the objectification of both women and animals, where "each spangle was a price tag, each price tag proclaimed the price of their breasts, their rumps, their legs. The spangles were bright, the prices were low" (Desai, 1980, p. 74); such objectification of body parts is part of the process by which women and animals have been reduced to "isolated and productive *consuming* units" (Berger, 2007, p. 256, my emphasis). Here, it is helpful to consider Carol Adams' analysis of the objectification of women's bodies and how it is linked to the objectification of animals: "What is "the sexual politics of meat"? It is an attitude and action that *animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals*" (Adams, 2010, p.

4, my emphasis). Her analysis of sexual violence and exploitation of both women and animals elucidates the reactions of the (male) audience watching the cabaret, for example, the Sikh who shouts “Jolly good!” (Desai, 1980, p. 72) at the sight of gyrating women and “the fat man at the neighbouring table sobbing ‘Beautiful! B-beautiful b-bitch!’”(Desai, 1980, p. 74):

The process of viewing another as consumable, as *something*, is usually invisible to us. Its invisibility occurs because it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture. The process is also invisible to us because the end product of the process—the object of consumption—is available everywhere. . . . Through the sexual politics of meat, consuming images such as these provide a way for our culture to talk openly about and joke about the objectification of women without having to acknowledge that this is what they are doing. . . . It makes the degradation of women appear playful and harmless. . . . The sexual politics of meat traps everyone—“him”, “you”, and the animals who are supposed to be consumed. (Adams, 2010, pp. 15–17)

In highlighting the exploitation, degradation and objectification of the cabaret women, Desai's language does not make the animals absent referents here because this episode is immediately followed by the memory of the performance of the bear that Maya sees as a child. The effect of such a move is that it serves to highlight the connection between

such exploitation and objectification between women and animals, and different structures of oppression. Maya intuitively makes these connections; for her, then, the life of a wild animal, epitomised by the bear, becomes an ideal she wants to strive towards.

CONCLUSION

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* does not fit into the ideal home space typically defined by dominant gender discourse on the home and family. She is removed and distanced from society and, as such, characterised as an ‘other’ and yet is centred in the novel by Desai. This paper has explored the connection between these women and animals in Desai's novel without the aim of privileging one over the other. It is important to note that Desai does not offer any utopian or ‘ecotopian’ solutions to her characters' predicament. The novel, instead, shows and offers critical insight into the processes that assign women and animals to inferior and stereotyped positions and the ways in which these are resisted by the women. By re-reading and re-interpreting the novel to unsettle the binaries of culture/nature and human/animal through the fictional representation of women, the woman's ambivalent position emerges in the novel. Here, Maya's search for an outlet for herself culminates in fusion of both dichotomies, creation and destruction; in the end, not only does she kill Gautama, but going insane, she commits suicide as well. Narratively speaking, Maya is too much of an ‘other’ to be contained in the story. She is neither

aligned with the cultural sphere nor with the natural sphere, rejecting both in her death and illustrating her ambivalence.

The notion of violence has been key in exploring patriarchal oppression of both women and animals. Women and animals' suffering due to this violence is inextricably linked, and Desai forces us to pay attention to both wrongs against women and wrongs against animals. This also goes to show that the oppression of both women and animals is linked and that such oppression does not operate in a vacuum. Also, in several instances, the animal 'other' is centred and given importance in its own right in Desai's novel apart from the women.

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