



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Fault Lines in Ecofeminism

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ABSTRACT

Women's association with nature has been debated for long now. Some have moved beyond this debate and have started to look at the repercussions of this assemblage more than its reasons. In this paper, I use a South-Asian/postcolonial text to show that there are fault lines within women-nature assemblage. Pertaining to the study of women-nature connection in literature, there are limited representations that are studied and theorized: a) women as showing care and compassion for nature and life in general, or showing a lack thereof owing to internalized patriarchy, or their material circumstances; b) women and nature being oppressed by androcentrism; c) women in biomorphic unity with nature. In literature, when women are shown in biomorphic unity with nature, the depiction is usually that of a pleasant natural environment where women are shown to be one with nature. What is least studied and lacks theorization is that women-nature connection where neither women nor nature is in its best form. I call it bad-women-bad-nature connection.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Women-Nature Connection

Phrases like "women-nature connection" and "women's closeness to nature" irk most feminists as these phrases seem to refer to women as inferior as compared to men and culture. In the dualistic construction of man/woman, and culture/nature, man is superior to woman and owns the cultural sphere; woman on the other hand is related to nature for her physicality and animality. Women have been associated with nature since antiquity. Nature, according to anthropologist Ortner (1972) is one common devalued entity in every culture. Culture in contrast is considered superior hence creating a dualism of culture/nature. In order to establish their superiority, men relate themselves to culture and everything else to nature that they consider inferior to them, including women. This as a result creates a connection between nature and women. Connecting animals and all the weak that would include women, people of color, children, underclass, people with different sexual orientations is not a new phenomenon either Gaard (1993); Warren and Erkal (1997); hence, grouping all the oppressed humans and non-humans together and associating them with nature. Consequently, culture/nature dualism also implies man/woman, man/nature, master/slave, superior/inferior, colonizer/colonized dualisms where former is always considered better than the latter. Dualism according to ecofeminist philosopher Plumwood (2002) is neither a simple dichotomy nor an ordinary set of binary oppositions. It, on the contrary, "results from a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated other" (p. 41). Hence, in man/woman and culture/nature dualisms, man and culture deny their dependence on woman and nature respectively. Another significant reason for women-nature connection is their reproductive ability that results in the embodiment of both. Both women and nature reproduce hence have bodies and body is inferior to mind, leading to mind/body dualism. Men in contrast 'produce' which is a function of the mind and not body.

Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes (Plumwood, 2002). So there exists a reason/nature dualism where everything related to culture and reason is 'male', 'human' and 'civilized' while everything that is related to nature is 'feminine,' 'nonhuman' and 'primitive' (p. 45). Most feminists believe that women-nature connection is essentialists and should be dismantled. Plumwood acknowledges that women have been culturally associated with nature and this association has resulted in 'othering' of both women and nature. This exclusion and denial repudiates women's entry into the "master model" which is a synonym for "human model" and any feminism that champions women's "full humanity" without challenging this model is shallow and inadequate (p.23). Plumwood suggests that ecofeminism should be called to the aid of feminism because it can provide an "escape route to the problematic that the traditional association between woman and nature creates for feminists, to a position which neither accepts women's exclusion from reason, nor accepts the construction of nature as inferior"(p. 20). Plumwood is not only critical of the equality feminists who simply deny woman-nature association and raise women to the status of "reason" and "rationality" but also condemns those ecofeminists who endorse the idea of woman- nature connectedness "without critically examining how the association is produced by exclusion" (p. 20).

Ecofeminism clearly has two schools of thought regarding women-nature connection. Constructivist ecofeminists suggests that women have been culturally associated with nature because of their socialization as nurturers and caretakers in every society. Spiritual or cultural ecofeminists on the other hand believe that women are essentially close to nature. Despite their differences, both the schools of thought agree that both women and nature have been devalued and oppressed in a patriarchal society, and that the liberation of both goes hand in hand. In this regard Rosemary Ruether (1979) pointed out that there can be no liberation for women and no solution for ecological crisis until the "fundamental model of relationship" in a society continues to be that of male domination ("Motherearth" p. 204). Since then many ecological feminists (ecofeminists) have endorsed Ruether's basic idea that the environment is a feminist issue. American ecofeminist Karen J. Warren (1997) in her *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* states: "Trees, forests and deforestation. Water, draught and desertification. Food production, poverty, and toxic wastes. Environmental destruction and women. And women? What do these environmental issues have to do with women?" (p. 2). She asserts that women, especially in the Third World countries, are closer to their natural environments because of being the household managers, they are responsible for providing food, water, fuel—in short, sustenance to their families. Warren provides ample empirical data from the developing countries like India to show how women are active participants in playing out their roles as household managers and how the exploitation of these resources directly affects these women who depend on the natural resources for their survival.

Many feminists have argued for the rejection of this connection as they believe that women's liberation can be achieved by dissociating women from nature which would help in women's entry into the cultural sphere. They consider woman-nature association essentialist as it is because of women's bodies and bodily experiences that they get equated with nature. I have already said somewhere that rejection of this connection cannot solve the problem. On the contrary, understanding of this assemblage allows to see the deeper causes of the twin oppression of women and nature. In extension of the same argument, I argue that by understanding the good vs. bad dichotomy within nature, we can understand the good vs. bad woman dichotomy too. Good-woman/bad-woman binary has also existed forever. A good woman is the one who acknowledges her inferiority and submits to the will of man, a bad woman on the other hand is the one who questions this power dynamic. Not that we have not understood the cause of good woman vs. bad woman dichotomy, but dealing with the good vs. bad both in woman and nature would shed light on the twin dualization and may suggest an escape route from the twin oppression.

1.2. Women-Nature Representation and the Gap

Pertaining to the study of women-nature connection in literature, there are limited representations that are studied and theorized: a) women as showing care and compassion for nature and life in general, or showing a lack thereof owing to internalized patriarchy Plant

(1989); Shiva (1988), or their material circumstances (Jabeen, 2019) b) women and nature being oppressed by androcentrism, c) women in biomorphic unity with nature. In literature, when women are shown in biomorphic unity with nature, the depiction is usually that of a pleasant natural environment where woman is shown to be one with nature. Literature is abound with such examples and numerous ecocritical and ecofeminist studies are found on this connection. What is least studied and lacks theorization is that women-nature connection where neither women nor nature is in its best form. I call it bad-women-bad-nature connection. It is imperative to clarify what is good/bad dichotomy in nature. It will be easy to understand this if we first have an over view of good/bad woman dichotomy and then draw the parallels between women and nature. A good woman is Mary like—innocent, naïve, submissive, docile, humble, selfless, harmless, sacrificing etc. A bad woman on the other hand is Eve like—treacherous, seductress, intelligent, authoritative, selfish, evil etc. The list of the attributes of both Mary and Eve are not limited to what I have listed here. Good/Bad woman, or Mary/Eve dichotomy stems from the larger conceptualization of patriarchy. Man vs. Woman is at the root of this dichotomous construction. Woman is inferior to man and is to be defined in relation to man. She is good if she conforms to the principles and values set for her by patriarchy. She is bad if she does not conform. It is important to remember here that even if she conforms, she remains inferior, albeit good. One could ask, if she is good, why she can't be equal and not inferior.

Answer to this question lays bare the agenda/narrative behind the definition of goodness. The goodness of a woman, that patriarchy defines, in fact ensures her inferiority. Everything that labels her as a good woman also makes her totally opposite of a man. The narrative of goodness around her inferiority helps patriarchy thrive. A woman has to be opposite of everything a man is so that she remains different, hence inferior. If she tries to get close to any attribute that patriarchy associates with man—brave, intelligent, emotionless, fearless, independent—she becomes bad. In patriarchy, a bad woman is a threat as by eliminating the difference between man and woman, she challenges the superiority of man. Just as a tame, domesticated woman is a good woman; tame and domesticated nature is also good nature. Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, barren land, jungles and the untamable creatures are all bad aspects of nature because they don't fulfil man's purpose—of asserting his superiority over nature by taming it. These bad aspects of nature challenge man's power and expose his limitations. Within the good/bad dichotomy of nature, there is beautiful/ugly dichotomy too, especially in representation of nature in literature. It is this bad-women-bad-nature connection that I study in the following section.

2. Fire on the Mountain as a South-Asian/Postcolonial Ecofeminist Text

In this section, I discuss *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai to show how this literary text presents good/bad women and good/bad nature binaries that reflect women-nature connection and their twin oppression. The reading of the text helps me identify and comment on the unique woman-nature connection that does not fit into the typical women-nature connection paradigm where women are either in a biomorphic unity with nature, are taking care of nature and life in general because of their compassion, or conversely, are damaging the natural environment around them because of their internalized oppression. I call the depiction of women-nature connection in the selected text unique not only because this depiction is unusual but also because it lacks theorization. A close reading of the text would help theorize bad women/bad nature dichotomy by highlighting the fault lines in the existing ecofeminist paradigm. *Fire on the Mountain* is Desai's widely read and discussed novel. Like most of her other novels, *Fire* is also seen as Desai's statement on the existentialist dilemma of her characters. Solanki (1992) in her *Anita Desai's Fiction: Patterns of Survival Strategies* states:

It is generally believed that Desai's protagonists suffer from a nagging sense of alienation, rootlessness, ungratifying interpersonal relationships, anxiety and despair. In their pursuit for an authentic existence, they seek to withdraw from the world of action and involvement. They feel tormented by a sense of non-belongingness and find isolation inherent in all human relationships. (p. 3-4). Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* are two such characters who are "burdened by their uniqueness" (Solanki, 1992). In these two, Desai presents an extremely unconventional image of an Indian woman and a child. A conventional Indian woman is expected to be the mistress of the house who is

responsible for managing the house, taking care of the family, and being a great hostess. Nanda Kaul's past life is reflective of her conventional role that was enforced upon her. Her current life in Carignano, Kasauli, in isolation, is her retreat from her past life. The news of her great-granddaughter Raka coming to live with her reminds Nanda of the life full of responsibilities that she had found escape from after her husband's death. She thought of the veranda of their house...over which she had presided with such an air as to strike awe into visitors...she had sat there, not still and emptily but mending clothes, sewing on strings and buttons and letting out hems, at her feet a small charcoal brazier on which a pot of *kheer* bubbled...Into this din, a tonga had driven up and disgorged flurry of guests...and how everyone had said, 'Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? ...and her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them. (Desai, 1997, p. 17-18).

She goes on to remember her sons and daughters and her uncomfortable confinements and how Mr. Kaul had wanted her "always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table...entertaining his guests" (p. 18). Raka's arrival, for Nanda, after being done with of all these responsibilities, is like "getting that noose-slip once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully" (p. 19). Nanda's resentment toward her past life is uncharacteristic of a typical South-Asian housewife that may easily label her as a bad woman who does not fit in her prescribed role. However, her bitterness has solid reasons that force her to become resentful. She is reacting against the patriarchal oppression that forced her to function in a way that she did not desire. Some critics read Nanda's retreat from the household full of responsibilities to the hill station that was once a sanctuary and a safe haven of the colonizers from the Indian way of life as a colonial practice. Jill Didur in her "Guns & Roses: Reading the Picturesque Archive in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*" states: "Hill stations were a creation of the British Raj and imagined as Edenic spaces for settlement and escape from the heat of the plains and Indian culture" (2013, p. 499). Nanda finds escape from the family whereas "the hill stations in British colonial culture were seen as ideal places for courtship and family time, 'a suitable environment for childbirth . . . , matrimony and the burial of kin, the central rites de passage of the colonial community'" (p. 509). Didur in her paper argues that the hill stations and the colonizer's practice of 'retreating to the hills' during the British rule in India is a colonial practice of "appropriation, commodification, and instrumentalization of land and environment" (p. 499). Didur finds Nanda's "postcolonial retreat" (p. 512) in line with the colonial practice of distancing oneself from those one finds burdened with. Didur relates Nanda's retreat to the colonial practice and her act of viewing the place to "picturesque gaze"—a dominantly 'male' practice. Nanda's character challenges the idea of women's care and compassion for life because of their roles as caretakers and household managers. Didur sees her escape from motherly responsibilities imposed by patriarchy as a "masculine distance" (p. 509). Didur justifies her claim by alluding to Nanda's treatment of the postman where she feminizes him:

Her focus on the postman's 'swollen bag' of mail as he approaches her house ironically inverts their gender roles, and frames the letter he will deliver from her daughter Asha as an unwanted pregnancy, an 'intrusion and distraction' from her normally solitary existence in her beloved hilltop property (p. 3). (p. 509)

Didur on the one hand refers to Nanda's retreat to a colonial practice and on the other hand refers to her escape as "masculine distance" (2013, p. 509) which apparently exclude her from femininity and portray her as a 'bad woman.' However, both of these claims can be countered from an ecofeminist perspective. Nanda's 'retreat' from the patriarchal oppression via a practice that itself embodies 'othering' and oppression is paradoxical. Although Nanda has retreated to a hill station, she does not try to 'appropriate', 'commodify', or use the place for its 'instrumental value', as the colonizers did. Kasauli's environment, a combination of nature, and 'development' in the form of Pasteur Institute, roads, and railway lines etc., attracts Nanda more for its bareness than its picturesque beauty: "What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness. This was the chief virtue of all Kasauli of course—its starkness. It had rocks, it had pines. It had light and air. In every direction there was a sweeping view" (Desai, 1997). Nanda never tries to change the place: "Unlike any other owner of house and garden, she had not said: Here I will plant a willow, there I will pull out the Spanish broom and put in pampas grass instead" (p. 31). Nanda identifies herself with the place. Once occupied by the colonizers, they appreciated its beauty and at the same time appropriated it to suit their interests. Now the place stands on its own telling the tale of

oppression at the hands of colonizers. It is this current state of the place, especially Nanda's house that she feels at home the most: "It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely. How could it ever have belonged to anyone else? What could it possibly have been like before Nanda Kaul came to it? She could not imagine" (p. 5). Having escaped from her past life, and leaving behind the burden of responsibilities imposed by patriarchy, Nanda thinks she is just like Carignano—misused once but free now. She is however wrong about her freedom and that of the place too. Her great-granddaughter Raka comes to live with her following her as a responsibility that she thought she had escaped from. Her illusion about Kasauli as a sanctuary that has been left alone by the oppressors also proved wrong when Ila Das, her friend gets raped and strangled to death during her visit to Kasauli. Nanda wants to escape the patriarchal oppression in the form of unwanted duties and she wants the place too to be left alone by human intrusion in the form of imperialistic developmental plans.

Barrenness and starkness are certainly not the typical pleasant images of nature. They are 'bad' and 'ugly' aspects of nature, and Nanda, who is also not the typical 'good' woman anymore is just like these aspects of nature. Desai has carefully drawn these parallels to show: a) left on their own, both, women and nature may not necessarily be what men expect of them—groomed, pruned, kempt; b) long term oppression makes women and nature reactionary, and their reactions are in turn unconventional, hence unpleasant. Kasauli was once appropriated by the colonizers according to their own aesthetics. Once deprived of its own ways, now it gives the image of a desolate place. Similarly, Nanda was also *appropriated* to suit the demands of her patriarchal husband; now has become bitter and resentful. Her discomfort at the news of Raka coming to live with her, and Ila's visit is a proof of her embittered behavior. Treating Nanda's escape from the responsibilities as "masculine distance" is also problematic. It essentializes men and women as masculine and feminine, as if denouncing her responsibilities would make her less of a woman. The relationship that Nanda has with the place and its environment is unconventional but denouncing it as 'colonial' or 'masculine' undermines the complexity of her character. Her character challenges the romanticized notion of women-nature connectedness where 'care' and 'compassion' are considered essential feminine characteristics. Nanda does identify herself with nature and she does live in a biomorphic unity with it but the aspect of nature that she finds solace in is not the typical beautiful imagery of nature. On several occasions she identifies herself with a tree or an animal:

She fancied she would merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one, to be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake. She would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the dessert, a lizard on a stone wall. (p. 23). Herself a grey cat, a night prowler... (p. 26)

Nanda's desire to be like a "pine tree", "charred tree trunk in the forest", "a broken pillar of marble in the dessert", "a lizard on a stone wall", "a grey cat", "a night prowler", reflect her extreme desire to be left alone. It highlights her resistance toward appropriation for a more instrumental purpose—woman's appropriation for fulfilling household responsibilities, and nature's appropriation for its commodification. The aspects of nature that Nanda identifies with are those that either don't have any instrumental value, or have lost it. It is her this unique connection with nature that sheds more light on the twin oppression of women and nature.

The unconventional character of Nanda along with her unusual connection and relationship with nature highlights a specific aspect of women-nature connection. Women, like nature (and like men) also have the ability to be wild; however like nature, they are also tamed and domesticated by the patriarchal society. Nanda's tale that she tells Raka about her father's private zoo where he kept wild animals in a cage is symbolic of Nanda's own life encaged by the responsibilities that she does not want to take. She finds no pleasure in motherhood and in being the mistress of the house. It is in Carignano, Kasauli that she finds her freedom. "She reveled in its barrenness and emptiness. The loose pebbles of the gravel pleased her as much as rich turf might another. She cared not to add another tree to the group of apricots by the veranda or the group of three pines at the gate" (p. 31). Nanda's lack of interest in the garden and the birds around not only reflects her abhorrence for

responsibility but also reflects her interest in the things as they are. She does not want to be a caretaker or a steward of the garden, but allows it to grow as it is. Her identification with nature (wishing to be like a tree trunk for example) and allowing the garden to grow as it is symbolizes her desire to be freed of domestication in the form of duties. She also wants to be like those plants and trees that grow on their own without any human interference. Her unique relationship with nature however does not rid her of patriarchal oppression. She being a 'bad' and 'unconventional woman' and the nature around her being 'barren' and 'ugly' does not warrant hers as well as nature's freedom from the patriarchal oppression.

Like Nanda Kaul, her great-granddaughter Raka is also a unique character. Before Raka's arrival, Nanda imagines her as "no more than a particularly dark and irksome spot on the hazy landscape—a mosquito, a cricket, or a grain of sand in the eye" (p. 35). It is through Raka that the readers can see the true face of the place. Immediately after her arrival, she starts observing things that the readers cannot see through Nanda's gaze. She is quick to find the "club that her grandmother had spoken of, but deserted now, asleep" (p. 43). She also sees Pasteur Institute that she initially mistakes for a factory that "dominate[d] the landscape – a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked" (p. 42). When she questions Ram Lal the cook about the 'factory', he tells her that the "doctors make serums for injections" there (p. 44):

When a man is bitten by a mad dog, he is taken there for injections – fourteen, in the stomach. I've had them myself. Once a whole village was rounded up and taken there – 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. (p. 44)

Raka's small adventures enable her to see those aspects of the place that neither she was told by her grandmother, nor are the readers told through Nanda's perspective. It is because of this contrast between how Nanda sees the place and how Raka views it that Didur finds Nanda and Raka's gaze contrasting. She finds Nanda's gaze as picturesque while Raka's as anti-picturesque: "Raka's recurring disturbing encounters with the presence of the Pasteur Institute throughout her time in Kasauli prevent her from aligning her view of Kasauli with her great grandmother's picturesque gaze" (Didur, 2013). Considering Nanda's interest in and her identification with the barrenness of the place however tells a different tale. She in fact does not find Raka opposite of herself: "Nanda saw that she [Raka] was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment" (Desai, 1997). Raka is what Nanda aspires to be. Nanda has only been able to see the effects of patriarchy on herself and the environment while Raka observes the effects and causes of colonization too on the place. Nanda's identification with the place reflects her desire to be freed of patriarchy that fails her; Raka's very presence at Carignano is the proof of Nanda's failure. The way Nanda cannot escape responsibilities imposed by patriarchy; Kasauli is also still haunted by colonization in the form of 'development' that Raka explores. Through characters like Nanda and Raka, and the places like Kasauli, Desai presents the effects of patriarchy and colonization on the human and the non-human. Both the characters and the place, the way they are presented, are not what traditionally an Indian woman and a child, and a hill-station are. On the contrary, they are presented as affectees of patriarchy and colonization. Just as Didur sees Nanda in 'colonial' and 'masculine' terms, K. J. Phillips in "Ambiguous Tragic Flaw in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*" sees Nanda as Aristotle's tragic hero and *Fire on the Mountain* as "a perfect tragedy in the Greek mode" (1990, p. 3). According to Phillips, Nanda, like Aristotelian tragic hero of noble birth, who after fulfilling her responsibilities, retreats to a sanctuary.

The eventual tragedies—Raka setting the mountain on fire, and Ila Das being raped and murdered—are the result of Nanda's 'flaw' for she "may recognize that she herself has contributed to Raka's anarchy, by not reaching out to her sooner. Moreover, she has contributed to Ila's murder, by refusing to offer Ila a place to stay" (p. 3). Like a typical tragic hero, "Nanda is somehow responsible for all the violence, although she has intended only peace for herself—a reversal exactly in Aristotle's terms" (p. 3). Phillips provides three interpretations for the violence that occurs in the novel—firstly, Nanda by refusing to continue her feminine duties can be the cause of violence; secondly, the story is a tragedy of Nanda herself who despite wanting to be left alone without any worldly responsibilities starts feeling for Raka and her emotions eventually bring pain; thirdly, the society punishes all the three

women—Nanda, Raka, and Ila—for being unconventional. Phillip asserts that Desai, ambivalently shifting between these three views, saves Nanda from total blame by portraying her as a victim too who seeks refuge and affection so “tragedy occurs not primarily because of prideful solitude or because of an inescapable nature of things...Instead, disaster results from society's flaws, which could be changed” (p. 8). Phillips insight on the text and the three interpretations are compelling as the text supports all these views. Nanda's and Raka's actions that bring tragedy and violence are not the essential features of their personalities but reactions to what has been done to them. However, it is also important to note that Nanda's “prideful solitude” Phillips (1990) is a façade and there are clear hints in the texts. Didur also seems to assert that Nanda's retreat to Kasauli was a choice when she refers to it as ‘masculine distance’ and ‘postcolonial retreat’ but there is evidence in the text against it. Once, when Nanda hears the news of Ila's rape and murder, in extreme agony, she makes several confessions and one of those is: “she did not live here alone by choice, she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing” (Didur, 2013). The reason Nanda believes she is happy at Carignano is that right before being transported to Carignano, she realizes that “the care of others was a habit that [she] had mislaid. It had been a religious calling she had believed in till she found it fake. It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life spring had dried up” (Desai, 1997). After her husband's death, her sons and daughters came to distribute the belongings among themselves and escort her to Kasauli. She had no option left. With her husband departed who had never loved her and children whom she had brought up “to be busy and responsible,” (p. 31) she had to live alone. What Phillips and Didur seem to assert is that Nanda's retreat to the hill station is a choice she made but the textual evidence proves that although she was never satisfied by her past life, she was forced by her circumstances to don a character that paints her in a negative light.

Desai seems to deconstruct the binaries within humans, and within nonhuman nature through the character of Nanda and Raka, and through the description of non-human nature. By depicting the two as unconventional characters, Desai presents them as human characters who have the capacity to be what society does not approve of. Nanda does what a conventional Indian woman is never expected to do—live a solitary life, away from responsibilities. Sharrad (2013) in his “Desirable or Dysfunctional? Family in Recent Indian English-Language Fiction” discusses the “major shift in outlook” in the Indian fiction where certain norms regarding a family and family life are dismantled (p. 123). Conservative critics see this trend as “symptomatic of the decline in morality, loss of nationalist ideals enshrined in Gandhi's principles of selfless service, godless Western influence” (p. 124), which clearly depict Nanda as a bad woman. Sharrad also see this shift as a modernizing trend where family is no longer the center (p. 125). Raka too, a young female child is unlike a conventional female child. Being a victim of domestic abuse and neglect, she develops those aspects in her personality that are usually not desirable in children. This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one... The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. Not so the nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy...Not so the clubs and parks of the cities in which she had lived but to which no one had given her the necessary pass...Carignano had much to offer...it was the best of places she'd lived in ever...It was the ravaged, destroyed, and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her. Desai (1997) (p. 90-91) Raka, who had just recovered from her illness, is brought up in an environment of domestic abuse. What Nanda Kaul suffered most of the time was mental torture but Raka has seen her mother being physically abused. Just as Nanda is disillusioned with a conjugal family life, so is Raka. Both Nanda and Raka identify with the dilapidated because for them this means being left alone. When Nanda hears the news of Ila's rape and death she faces the ugliness and the harsh reality once again that she thought she had left behind. The news strikes her like a lightning bolt that jolts her back to reality:

She had lied to Raka, lied about everything...they had not had bears and leopard in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen—he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David... And her children—the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice. She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. (p. 145)

Nanda's realization that she had told fabricated stories to Raka to have something interesting to tell her, her confession about never understanding or loving her children and being forced to leave her house and live in Kasauli, and Raka's setting the mountain on fire are parallel. Both have suffered and reacted in their own way. Nanda's reaction was mild. She could not even cry out loud but Raka's was extreme. Both the characters have been 'smoldering' and it is only Raka who eventually lets it out. Their actions—mild in Nanda's case, and extreme in Raka's case—are examples of violence that they commit by being forced by their circumstances. Desai does not necessarily portray them as 'bad' characters as the detailed context that she provides for their actions justifies them. Nanda's lack of interest in her responsibilities is justified by the patriarchal oppression that she has been through almost all her life. Raka's setting the mountain on fire is an outlet to her anger for her oppressed childhood, and an attempt to destroy, once and for all, which was gradually rotting away by the 'maldevelopment' Shiva (1988) of the place by the colonizers. Just as Desai has shown women's and children's capacity for violence as a reaction, she depicts non-human nature too in its not-so-romantic form. Wang (2009) in her article "Toward a Literary Environmental Ethics: A Reflection on Eco-criticism" observes:

If we just recall what has happened in the past few years, we cannot but face the following events: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, draughts and tsunamis: All these natural disasters ubiquitously suggest that the capacity of the earth to be reformed by mankind has already reached its limit. The earth, as well as nature, is now ruthlessly taking revenge on mankind and killing people. (p. 297)

What is interesting here that it is Raka who is taking revenge on behalf of all—herself, Nanda, Kasauli—by setting the mountain on fire. Nanda, Raka, and Kasauli, all were tested beyond their limits and Raka puts an end to it by setting the mountain on fire.

3. Conclusion

Desai in this text has a unique way of portraying human-nature relationship. This text does not portray women and children among beautiful natural imagery. Major characters are not portrayed as those 'wounding' the mother earth or getting their wounds healed by the balm of the natural environment. On the contrary, they are just there as part of the biosphere that also includes those aspects of nature that are not always beautiful. The imagery of jackals chewing the bones of mad dogs and then biting the dogs that would then bite the humans is just one such example from the text (Desai, 1997). This apparently 'ugly' aspect of human and non-human nature not only helps to dismantle the binaries within nature, but also helps to see how colonization and patriarchy may trigger violence that brings out the 'ugly' in nature, human and non-human. The depiction of female characters who have the capacity to be wild and revengeful, just like nature, also counters the argument of those who detest woman-nature assemblage and argue for dismantling this connection for being essentialist by focusing on the bodily experiences of women and nature. This also highlights that women-nature assemblage is not only for tamed and domesticated women and nature whose only function is to serve man. On the contrary, this assemblage also hints toward the fact that women, just like nature can be revengeful when they are tested beyond their limits. It dismantles the dualistic construction of women being essentially timid and selfless. This understanding may help in finding an escape route of this twin domination. Wild, untamable, carefree women have been historically labeled as mad. Understanding this so called madness of women with reference to their connection with nature hints toward the causes of this *madness* which lie within same oppressive patriarchal structures that try to dominate nature.

The text highlights that a patriarchal society treats women and the environment alike where both are used for their instrumental value—women for fulfilling their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and the environment is appropriated to suit the needs of the patriarchs. Nanda spends most of her life fulfilling the responsibilities of a wife and a mother. Her act of going to live in Carignano is not shunning her responsibilities, in fact she has lost her function of a wife with her husband's death, and that of a mother too with her children all married and settled. It is after her departure from the Chancellor's house when she realizes that all the sacrifices that she made as a wife and mother were the 'uses' she was put to. With her husband dead and her children with their own families and jobs, her 'services' are not required anymore. Her presence at Kasauli and her apparent satisfaction with the 'barrenness' of the place are symbolic, as her identification with the place reflects how colonization and patriarchy

affect women and the environment in the same way. The way colonizers used the place for its instrumental value, so did Nanda's family use her, for her wifely and motherly duties. By showing bad woman and bad nature parallel, the text highlights the trajectory of the twin oppression. Both good women and good nature are good only when they have instrumental value, when they cannot fulfil this utilitarian purpose, they become bad and ugly. This bad women-bad nature connection cannot be regarded as merely symbolic.

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