

## **“COULD I HAVE DONE MORE?” - AN EXPLORATION OF *THE MUSEUM OF FINAL JOURNEYS* THROUGH THE LENS OF ZOO CRITICISM**

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### Abstract:

Zoo criticism is one of the fastest growing subfields within ecocritical literary studies. It is concerned with how the relationship between human beings and animals gets reflected in literature. However, it should be noted that zoo criticism is more than simply the study of animals represented in literary works. It has distinguished itself by the ethical stand it takes and its commitment to the animal community as a significant thing rather than merely as a thematic study. Zoo critics try, by a revisionary reading, to bring in to light the writer's biocentrism worldview reflected in his/her work so that the readers can be aware of the drastic outcome of destroying the wild and the savage. My endeavor in this paper is to study *The Museum of Final Journeys*, the first novella of Anita Desai's new book, a trio of linked novellas about the art world, *The Artist of Disappearance* published in 2011 through the lens of zoo criticism.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Ecocriticism, Wilderness, Zoo criticism.

As a distinctive critical approach to literature, zoo criticism was not inaugurated until our present century. In fact, it is one of the fastest growing subfields within ecocritical literary

studies. It is concerned with how the relationship between human beings and animals gets reflected in literature. However, it should be noted that zoo criticism is more than simply the study of animals represented in literary works. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have said: "...zoo criticism – as we might term its practice in literary studies – is concerned not just with animal representation but also with animal rights" (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 18). It has distinguished itself by the ethical stand it takes and its commitment to the animal community as a significant thing rather than merely as a thematic study. Zoo critics try, by a revisionary reading to bring in to light the writer's biocentric worldview reflected in his/her work so that the readers can be aware of the evil consequences of destroying the wild and the savage. Thus zoo criticism is oriented towards heightening the readers' awareness and even towards inciting them to social and political action. It is a means of keeping the human community from destroying the non-human community thus maintaining the ecological balance of the world. Zoo criticism emerged only in the present century and since then a growing amount of scholarship has focused on it. However, it is remarkable that zoo criticism though directed towards specific goals (that is, to protect the non-human community on earth) preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing the readers' attention to its profound concern for ecological degradation or imminent catastrophe which is the burning issue of the day.

Now this burgeoning interest in the animal world and its representation in literary works can be explained in the following way. The reigning philosophy and religion of western civilization were anthropocentric; that is, they viewed human beings as superior to animals and so as for free to exploit them to meet their own needs. One may recall God's declaration in the first twenty-six verses of the *Genesis* that man must have dominion over everything on earth "dominion over the fish of the sea, This view in Christianity gives rise to the humanism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Let us recall what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have said:

the urgent contexts of eco-catastrophe and the extinction of many non-human species, that a radical re-drawing of this foundational relationship [between human and non-human species] has occurred. (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 134)

Thus a radical shift in the conception of the wilderness or the animalistic is found in European history and culture – shift from the Puritan concept of it as a dark and evil thing to the view expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins in his "Inversnaid":

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet. (13 – 16)

The Romantic Period is:

The turning point in the long Western tradition of human transcendence and domination over nature. The central view in innovative Romantic literature and philosophy, in England and

Germany, is that the root of the modern human malaise is its separation... from its original unity with nature, and that the cure for this disease of civilization lies in a reunion between humanity and nature that will restore concreteness and values to a natural world in which one can once more feel thoroughly at home, in consonance and reciprocity with all living things (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 102).

However, ecocriticism as a separate discipline emerged in the early 1990s in the U.K. to explore the relationship between literature and environment "with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 98). As Simon C.

However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, zoo criticism has been inaugurated as a new critical discourse within ecocriticism as a means of challenging all kinds of violence done to animals and pain inflicted on them. In fact, a profound concern for all savage practices towards animals gives rise to this new field of criticism. Still, it is not easy for the animals to escape anthropocentric attitude

Thus zoo critical study of literary works is badly needed to prevent the ruthless destruction of animal species with the explosion of the human population. My endeavor in this paper is to study *The Museum of Final Journeys*, the first novella of Anita Desai's new book, a trio of linked novellas about the art world, *The Artist of Disappearance* published in 2011 through the lens of zoo criticism.

Admittedly, there are only a few novels in the history of Indian English Literature, which can be read zoo critically. In fact, a serious concern for savage practices towards animals seems to be lacking in earlier works. *The Museum of Final Journeys*, the first novella of Desai's latest book *The Artist of Disappearance*, is one of a few literary works in which there is a commitment to the animal community as a significant thing rather than merely as a thematic study. The novella is set in 'a remote outpost' of India. The narrator of the story is "a mere sub-divisional officer in the August government service." (1) The very opening lines of the novella give us a succinct account of his journey to a place of his first posting (5) was unwilling to stay in such a "desolate place". (5) However, he had nothing to do but stay there. Everything including "the high-pitched whining of mosquitoes" (6) and "large, winged ants" (6) which drowned in his gravy was too much irritating for the city-bred officer.

One day, an aged man named Bijan came there to invite the narrator in order to show the private museum that his employer had left behind so that he could request the government to "take it over and maintain it." (21) We come to know that the museum was introduced by Srimati Sarita Mukherjee who came of a wealthy family famous for its "love of art and literature". (16) Her only son Jiban, having lived abroad for many years, could not cope up with village life. Moreover, he had no interest in their ancestral property and so, he left their estate to his mother to take care of. Then, he set out for a long sea voyage to several eastern

countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaya, Cambodia, China and Japan. To his mother's utter surprise, he started to send from there "such objects as had never been seen" (20) in their part of the world. "One room after the other was filled with these objects...Visitors came to the house and were astonished by what they saw." (20-21) This is how the museum was created by Sarita Devi. The officer got excited to learn about the museum and wanted to visit it.

Now Desai's description of the curious in the museum, as well as the narrator's reaction, questions human compassion for non-human species of nature. In fact, lack of human compassion for animals is a central concern in the novella under discussion. The narrator calls the museum a 'chamber of death' or a 'mausoleum' (27). Here he noticed some old photographs of dead animals – "a dead tiger with its mouth propped open in a snarl" (26) and "a recently murdered elephant" - (26) and their murderer with "a gun in his hand and a row of barely clad servants" (26) who seemed to be their beaters. In the adjoining hall, he saw a number of "beasts slaughtered...embalmed and stuffed to look lifelike." (26) by the ancestors of the family, who were great hunters. The narrator, who may be taken to be the mouthpiece of Desai, condemned the practice of hunting as a form of entertainment. Let us recall such lines as:

...my father had also been a hunter in his days and I had not liked to look on his trophies or hear about his exploits which sounded boastful and made my mother cringe. I probably looked merely blank as I stared at the scalloped and scaly skin of a crocodile or of a python, mottled and moth-like, one resembling broken rubble, the other faded netting... the next chamber was one of the stuffed birds and they did little to improve my spirits...the only creatures visible in these chambers were the spiders that spun their webs to make shrouds for the birds and the geckos that probably fed on the spiders...In one doorway, a gecko caught by the slam of the door had left its fragile skeleton splayed against the plaster like a web spun by one of the spiders, to stay till it peeled. (26-28)

Thus, exploitation of animals considered other or marginalized in this anthropocentric world is severely criticized by Desai. In this context, one can't help recalling the famous lines spoken by the old Duke in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

Come, shall we go and kill us venison?

Beings native burghers of this desert city,  
Should, in their own confines, with forked heads  
Have their round haunches gored? (II.i. 21-5)

Indeed, animals have traditionally been looked upon as other and we consider ourselves privileged. This othering can also be called 'scepticism'. In her novella, Desai clearly protests

against this specicism or marginalization of non-human species. Numerous carcasses of animals preserved in the museum made the narrator of her novella depressed. We may do well to cite such lines as:

Their sad obsolescence cast a spell on me and I wanted only to break free and flee. (35)

Indeed, the narrator wished to “bring the tour to an end” (34) but the guide didn’t intend to let him go. Instead, he took him “to what was evidently the end of the extensive compound” (36) so as to show the last gift sent by Jiban to his mother. To his utter astonishment, he could see an elephant standing chained.

Here, in a rustling, a crackling bed of dry, sharp-tipped leaves shed by the bamboo stalks, and looming up in the striped shade like a grounded monsoon cloud, restlessly shifting from one padded foot to another as if fretting at its captivity, an elephant stood chained. Its trunk swung downward as if wilted by the heat and gave out long deep sighs that stirred the dust on the ground...She was the last gift Sri Jiban sent his mother. She travelled to us over the border from Burma.

We come to know that Srimati Sarita Devi looked after it as long as she had the strength and then she left for Varanasi leaving the elephant in Biju's care. The narrator noticed a bond of love between the curator and the monumental creature. Let us call up such lines from the novella as:

I saw that he laid his hand on the great beast’s flank with an immense gentleness; it might have been the touch a father bestows on an idiot son, a mad daughter or an invalid wife, gentle and despairing because she also provided him with the purpose of his life. (38)

The profound love felt by the curator for a non-human animal is suggestive enough of Desai’s message that we should stop exploiting animals which have every right to live on earth. In fact, the curator may be taken to be a representative of a rational human being who looks upon any non-human species as his own kith and kin. Despite being deprived of “even the basic nutrition and necessities” (38), he tried heart and soul to preserve this last gift sent by his employer. He would perhaps die to feed the huge animal and so he requested the officer to appeal to the government in order to take the museum into its custody. Unfortunately, the officer couldn't meet his request and was transferred to another place at the end of his training. The narrator admits:

I am ashamed to say that once I was transferred to the capital I did not look back, I did not keep in touch with the keeper of the museum and I never found out what happened to it, or to him...Elephants - now those are creatures which

make me uneasy still...Even when my children were young, I avoided zoos, circuses, any place an elephant might be sighted. (40)

Then, the nightmare the narrator had while he was still in the district seems to have immense symbolic significance. In this nightmare, a beast “devoured, blade by blade, leaf by leaf, an entire forest till it was laid waste, and then it raised its trunk and stepped forward to the tree where I [the narrator] was hiding.” (40) Here ‘beast’ represents all the non-human species tortured and tormented by the so-called civilized human beings. Deforestation on a large scale deprives elephants and other wildlife animals of their food and shelter and finally leads them to death. It is in this way that many non-human species are getting extinct thus disturbing ecological balance of the world. In his nightmare, the narrator saw the beast step forward to the tree where he had hidden. It seems to signify that extinction of non-human species will ultimately affect us. As the narrator puts it: “A death so huge as to be incomprehensible” (40) The epithets he used for the dead creature – ‘innocent’ and ‘defenceless’ - are noteworthy. The thought of huge creature “who dwindles from neglect and finally lies down not to rise again” (40) disturbs him every now and then. He asked himself: “Could I have done more?” (40)

In conclusion, it may be said that Anita Desai's *The Museum of Final Journeys* can be read zoo critically. It not only heightens the readers' awareness of the drastic outcome of destroying the wild and the savage but also incites them to social and political action. It echoes the writer's ecological consciousness and highlights the need for a prompt and vigorous concerted action so as to save the biosphere from the short-sighted human greed. In fact, anthropocentrism must needs be replaced by egocentrism. However, in the present scenario, only knowledge of ecocentric philosophy of life and looming ecological disaster is not enough as the quintessential need of the hour is effective social and political action. Indeed, the expression “Could I have done more?” implies that we could have done more than ‘stale iterations of yesterday's theory’. (Harold Fromm: “Ecocriticism's Big Bang: A Review of *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*” 7) In fact, it is for the sake of our survival that we should protect the wild and the savage. And this is what, I think, Coleridge intends to convey in poetic language to his readers when he says:

He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast  
He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all. (612-617)

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