
Eco-Spirituality and Feminine Resistance: A Postcolonial Eco critical Study of Anita Desai's *Rosarita*

Dr Samra Saeed¹ and Dr Maria Masood²

*Researcher, School of Humanities, Glocal University, Saharanpur, U.P. India.

**Principal, Rayyan International School, Kashipur, Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract: The intersection of ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality in literature highlights the intricate relationship between nature, gender, and resistance. Anita Desai's *Rosarita* presents a compelling narrative where landscapes are not merely passive settings but sites of contestation, transformation, and self-discovery. This paper examines how Desai employs eco-spirituality as a tool for feminine empowerment and postcolonial critique, portraying nature as both a sanctuary and a battleground for the novel's protagonist. The study explores how *Rosarita* critiques the patriarchal and colonial exploitation of both women and the environment. The novel's protagonist, Bonita, experiences an evolving relationship with nature, which ultimately enables her to challenge dominant Western mechanistic worldviews that separate culture from ecology. Her journey illustrates how ecological consciousness and feminine identity are intertwined, revealing the ways in which landscapes act as both archives of memory and sites of historical erasure. Additionally, this study situates *Rosarita* within a broader literary tradition of environmental humanities, drawing comparisons with works that challenge the erasure of women's ecological agency. This paper argues that *Rosarita* serves as an essential contribution to postcolonial ecofeminist discourse, providing a nuanced critique of how patriarchal and colonial structures have historically erased women's ecological agency. By reclaiming nature as a sacred and resistant force, Desai challenges hegemonic narratives and offers an alternative vision of history, identity, and environmental justice.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Eco-Spirituality, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Feminine Resistance, Anita Desai, *Rosarita*.

Introduction: Eco-Spirituality as Feminine Resistance in *Rosarita*

The relationship between women and nature has been central to ecofeminist discourse, particularly in critiques of patriarchal and capitalist structures that exploit both the environment and women. Plumwood (1993) argues that Western thought is

built on dualisms—mind/body, reason/emotion, and culture/nature—that privilege masculinity while relegating femininity and nature to a lower status. This devaluation, she suggests, enables both ecological destruction and the marginalization of women. Similarly, Shiva (2009) contends that capitalist and colonial paradigms strip indigenous and feminine ecological knowledge of its legitimacy, reducing nature to an extractive resource rather than a site of renewal. Anita Desai's *Rosarita* embodies this an ecofeminist critique through the journey of Bonita, whose relationship with natural landscapes serves as both an act of resistance, and a form of spiritual refuge.

The novel frames the ocean, gardens, and open landscapes as spaces of feminine autonomy, in contrast to the rigid patriarchal structures that seek to confine her. Bonita's deepening connection to nature allows her to reclaim fragments of her mother's past, challenging hegemonic narratives that erase women's histories. Desai's depiction of the ocean as a keeper of untold stories reflects how eco-spirituality fosters resilience, aligning with Shiva's argument that nature is a living, sentient force rather than a passive resource. By centering Bonita's transformation within the rhythms of the natural world, *Rosarita* resists patriarchal and colonial paradigms, reinforcing the ecofeminist claim that spiritual and environmental liberation are intertwined.

1.1 A Brief Introduction to *Rosarita*

Anita Desai's *Rosarita* is a contemporary novel that explores the intersection of gender, postcolonial identity, and ecological consciousness. Set against the backdrop of Mexico and India, the novel follows Bonita, a woman who embarks on a personal journey to unravel the hidden past of her mother, Sarita. Through her physical travels across landscapes and her psychological encounters with nature, Bonita begins to reclaim a forgotten history of feminine resilience, artistic expression, and ecological wisdom that was erased due to colonial and patriarchal domination. The novel's rich and descriptive prose offers a dual narrative—one that is deeply personal to Bonita and one that reflects broader environmental and feminist struggles. Gardens, ocean shores, and enclosed natural spaces serve as metaphors for the restrictions and liberations of women in patriarchal societies. Desai uses these settings to show how memory, identity, and environmental consciousness are interconnected, making *Rosarita* a significant literary contribution to ecofeminist and postcolonial studies.

Bonita's journey is not merely a retracing of familial roots but reclamation of feminine agency through nature. As she uncovers her mother's suppressed artistic ambitions and spiritual connections with the land, she realises that nature is not just a backdrop to human lives but an active force that remembers, resists, and regenerates. This philosophical and ecological depth aligns the novel with postcolonial ecocriticism, slow violence theory, and eco-spirituality, making *Rosarita* an important text for understanding women's resistance through

environmental consciousness.

1. Theoretical Frameworks in Rosarita

Desai's engagement with eco-spirituality and feminine resistance can be analyzed through three critical frameworks:

1. **Ecofeminism** – Understanding the shared oppression of women and nature under patriarchal systems (Plumwood, 1993; Shiva, 2009).
2. **Postcolonial Ecocriticism** – Investigating how environmental degradation is linked to colonial histories of violence and displacement (Mukherjee, 2010; Nixon, 2011).
3. **Eco-Spirituality and Myth** – Exploring how traditional ecological wisdom offers an alternative to capitalist modernity (Carson, 1962; Merchant, 1980).

Each of these perspectives provides a valuable lens to examine how Desai reimagines the relationship between nature, gender, and postcolonial memory.

2.1 Landscapes as Feminine Resistance in Rosarita

The novel's use of landscape as a metaphor for feminine resilience is evident in Bonita's reflections on her mother's past. The descriptions of nature in Rosarita are not mere backdrops for human action; rather, they serve as parallel narratives to the lives of women in the story. Bonita experiences nature as a carrier of lost histories, an entity that remembers what patriarchal society has sought to erase: "The afternoon unfolded like a scroll, its beginning and its end both invisible" (Desai, 2024, p. 12). This passage suggests the cyclical nature of time and memory, positioning the landscape as a silent custodian of the past. Bonita's journey into landscapes once inhabited by her mother transforms into an act of reclamation, as she begins to see nature as both an archive and an active force in shaping identity.

The novel further highlights the spiritual connection between women and nature, depicting landscapes as a refuge from patriarchal oppression. When Bonita reaches the ocean, she experiences a deep sense of release and recognition, as if the sea itself is communicating something to her: "Apart from the sound of the waves rushing in, crashing into the rocks below the garden and withdrawing with a long sigh, there is no other sound, and the house seems uninhabited" (Desai, 2024, p. 49). This aligns with eco-spiritualist perspectives, which argue that nature is not simply a resource but a sacred, sentient force that carries wisdom and healing (Carson, 1962; Merchant, 1980). The ocean in Rosarita becomes a symbol of maternal memory, mirroring Bonita's own search for her mother's past.

Desai also uses gardens and enclosed natural spaces to symbolize women's containment within patriarchal systems. Bonita recalls the garden of her childhood, a space nurturing and confining, reflecting her mother's unspoken frustrations:

You are back in the garden in India that you had known in your earliest years, the years no one mentioned again once they were over, the time when Mother was absent and you were taken to live in your grandparents' house in Old Delhi (Desai, 2024, pp. 12-13).

This passage resonates with postcolonial and ecofeminist critiques, that examine how women's histories—like landscapes—are often overwritten by colonial and patriarchal narratives (Nixon, 2011).

By reclaiming these natural spaces and uncovering their hidden histories, Rosarita challenges hegemonic structures and offers an alternative vision of feminine resistance through eco-spirituality. Desai's depiction of nature as an ally to women's struggles positions Rosarita within a broader tradition of feminist and ecological thought, making it a powerful literary contribution to ecofeminist discourse. Anita Desai's Rosarita aligns with these perspectives, portraying nature as a spiritual and psychological refuge for its protagonist, Bonita, while also illustrating how landscapes function as a form of resistance against patriarchal and colonial erasure. The novel's lush descriptions of landscapes and their spiritual undertones depict nature as both a memory keeper and a silent witness to women's struggles. The shifting terrains—gardens, ocean shores, and Mexican plazas—reflect the fluidity of identity, memory, and resistance.

Nature as Sanctuary and Subversion: The Role of Eco-Spirituality

3.1 Memory, Identity, and the Natural World

Throughout Rosarita, nature serves as a repository of ancestral memory and feminine self-awareness. Bonita's return to the landscapes of her childhood reflects a deep ecological and psychological bond with her surroundings, underscoring how nature is both a space of nostalgia and revelation. The novel illustrates how landscapes function as sites of emotional and spiritual reawakening, aligning with eco-spiritual theories that view nature as a sacred force of renewal. "The scene that should be so foreign to you is, at its deepest level, utterly familiar. You are back in the garden in India that you had known in your earliest years" (Desai, 2024, pp. 13-14)

This passage reflects Bonita's internal struggle—the garden, though geographically distant, remains embedded in her consciousness, much like her mother's forgotten artistic identity. Nature in Rosarita is not a passive setting but an active participant in shaping identity and memory. It echoes Plumwood (1993)'s argument that nature and female subjectivity are deeply interconnected, particularly in patriarchal societies where both are systematically subdued. Bonita's recognition of nature as a living memory also resonates with Carson (1962)'s eco-spiritual ethos, which argues that natural landscapes hold emotional and historical significance that cannot be erased by human constructs.

3.2 Nature as Resistance Against Patriarchy

Desai's depiction of landscapes critiques patriarchal efforts to control women's agency, mirroring Shiva (2009) argument that capitalist and colonial structures erase women's ecological knowledge. Sarita Rosarita is forced to abandon both her artistic and ecological awareness, reflecting the systematic suppression of female creativity and environmental consciousness under patriarchal rule. "She had

talent. Francisco saw that, wanted to help it to flower. And you say she gave up on returning to India? But why?" (Desai, 2024, p. 11).

This question—posed by Vicky—illuminates how societal constraints stifle not only artistic ambition but also the spiritual and ecological connections women forge with their surroundings. Sarita's artistic suppression parallels her disconnection from nature, reinforcing the ecofeminist idea that creative and environmental suppression are interconnected (Shiva, 2009). Desai's use of second-person narration also plays a critical role in emphasizing this loss of connection. The intimate and interrogative nature of the prose draws the reader into Bonita's journey, compelling them to confront the gendered erasures of both personal and ecological histories. This aligns with postcolonial and ecofeminist critiques (Mukherjee, 2010) that explore how women's knowledge—whether artistic, ecological, or cultural—is systematically dismantled in patriarchal and postcolonial narratives.

Ultimately, *Rosarita* highlights how women's bonds with nature serve as acts of resistance against patriarchal erasure. Bonita's rediscovery of her mother's past is not just a personal revelation, but a symbolic reclaiming of lost ecological and artistic agency. By intertwining memory, identity, and the natural world, Desai crafts a narrative of resilience and resistance, positioning eco-spirituality as a vital force in reclaiming suppressed female histories.

2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Tracing the Erased Histories of Women and Nature

4.1 Slow Violence and the Colonial Gaze

Nixon (2011)'s concept of "slow violence" describes environmental destruction as a gradual, often invisible process that disproportionately affects marginalized communities. In *Rosarita*, this theme extends beyond physical landscapes to include the erasure of women's stories and their deep connection to the land. The novel portrays this gradual erasure as both a personal and historical phenomenon, where memory, identity, and nature are systematically overwritten by patriarchal and colonial forces.

"You are wrong. You are not done with her. You have undressed, climbed up into your own bed and are trying to still your mind, free it from all the incoherent talk and disturbance, clear for a night's sleep, when you hear the most shrill and penetrating screams emerge from the Trickster's room." (Desai, 2024, p. 46).

This passage reflects both literal and metaphorical violence, aligning with postcolonial ecocritical arguments that feminine histories have been systematically erased under colonial rule (Mukherjee, 2010). The Trickster's scream symbolizes an interruption of historical amnesia, forcing Bonita to confront the inconvenient truths of women's forgotten narratives. The colonial gaze in *Rosarita* mirrors this process, where indigenous and feminine ecological knowledge is dismissed as unreliable or inconvenient.

Desai's novel critiques how imperialist ideologies reduce both nature and women to passive subjects, reinforcing the parallels between environmental destruction and the suppression of female agency (Nixon, 2011; Plumwood, 1993). By engaging with postcolonial ecocriticism, *Rosarita* foregrounds women's erased histories, challenging the dominant narratives of both colonial and patriarchal systems.

Comparative Analysis: *Rosarita* and Global Ecofeminist Narratives

Anita Desai's *Rosarita* engages with broader ecofeminist and postcolonial discourses that explore the intersections of gender, nature, and systemic erasure. The novel aligns with global ecofeminist narratives by portraying women's deep-rooted connection with the environment while critiquing patriarchal and colonial disruptions of these relationships. Through Bonita's journey, Desai illustrates how landscapes become spaces of memory, resistance, and transformation, paralleling an ecofeminist critique of environmental degradation and female marginalization. Similar themes are evident in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where the Sundarbans' tidal landscape symbolizes both ecological resilience and female agency, challenging state-driven environmental control. Mahasweta Devi's *Dhowli* and Aranyer Adhikar foreground the struggles of indigenous women, exposing how corporate and state interests exploit both nature and marginalized female bodies. Margaret Atwood, in works like *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, critiques how industrial modernity disconnects women from ancestral ecological wisdom, reinforcing patriarchal dominance over both nature and female autonomy.

While each writer approaches ecofeminist resistance differently—Desai through spiritual renewal, Ghosh via postcolonial displacement, Devi through indigenous activism, and Atwood in dystopian critique—they collectively reveal how ecological oppression is deeply gendered. By situating *Rosarita* within this broader literary tradition, Desai contributes to a global ecofeminist discourse that underscores the inextricable link between feminine identity, environmental degradation, and colonial-patriarchal violence.

5.1 Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: Climate Change and Gendered Ecologies

Ghosh (2016)'s *The Hungry Tide* investigates the fragility of marginalized communities in the face of climate change, focusing on the Sundarbans' delicate ecosystem and the struggles of its people. Like *Rosarita*, it depicts women as custodians of environmental wisdom, yet excluded from dominant ecological narratives. Bonita's realization of her mother's erased artistic and ecological legacy mirrors Piya's recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge in *The Hungry Tide*: "You take to the beach again to see how low the evening sun has dipped; and let the incoming waves rush up to your feet, then fall back in a frothy murmur" (Desai, 2024, p. 56). This echoes Ghosh's argument that ecological histories are often inscribed in landscapes and indigenous voices rather than dominant historical records (Ghosh, 2016).

5.2 Mahasweta Devi's *Dhowli*: Caste, Gender, and Environmental Displacement

Devi (1990)'s critiques the intersection of caste, gender, and environmental

displacement, much like *Rosarita*, where patriarchal structures deny women access to their own artistic and ecological pasts. Devi's protagonist, a lower-caste woman exploited by feudal power structures, parallels Sarita's forced renunciation of her artistic identity: "She had talent. Francisco saw that, wanted to help it to flower. And you say she gave up on returning to India? But why?" (Desai, 2024, p. 11). Both narratives expose how gendered oppression intersects with environmental and social displacement, reinforcing Shiva (2009)'s critique of how women's knowledge systems are erased under capitalist and patriarchal orders.

5.3 Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: Spirituality, Feminism, and Ecological Destruction

Atwood (1972)'s *Surfacing* explores feminism, ecological destruction, and spiritual rebirth in Western contexts, drawing parallels to *Rosarita*'s eco-spiritual themes. Both novels depict nature as an elemental force that helps women reclaim their lost identities, with their protagonist's seeking self-discovery through environmental immersion. Bonita's journey into the landscapes of her mother's past, much like the narrator's search for ancestral connections in *Surfacing*, suggests that women's histories are often preserved in nature rather than human archives. Atwood's assertion that "the body remembers what the mind forgets" (Atwood, 1972) is echoed in *Rosarita*: "The scene that should be so foreign to you is, at its deepest level, utterly familiar" (Desai, 2024, p. 12).

Conclusion

Anita Desai's *Rosarita* is a profound contribution to global ecofeminist discourse, engaging with the intersections of gender, ecology, and postcolonial resistance. Through its exploration of landscape as memory, eco-spirituality, and patriarchal erasure, the novel aligns with the broader literary traditions of Amitav Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi, and Margaret Atwood, whose works similarly critique the silencing of women's ecological knowledge and their marginalized relationship with the environment. Desai masterfully illustrates how women's historical and ecological consciousness is severed through colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal domination, reinforcing Nixon (2011)'s concept of slow violence, where destruction occurs gradually and imperceptibly, rendering both environmental and feminine histories invisible. Like Vandana Shiva (2009)'s critique of the erasure of indigenous ecological wisdom, *Rosarita* underscores how women's knowledge systems—whether artistic, ecological, or spiritual—are systematically suppressed under hegemonic structures. Bonita's journey of uncovering her mother's past becomes an act of resistance and reclamation, demonstrating that nature, memory, and identity are inherently interconnected and politically charged.

By situating *Rosarita* within a broader comparative literary and theoretical framework, Desai provides a nuanced and urgent critique of the ongoing suppression of women's ecological agency. The novel challenges Western and patriarchal epistemologies that disconnect women from land, memory, and creativity, offering an alternative vision where nature is not a passive backdrop but an active force of

resilience and transformation. The novel's engagement with eco-spirituality and feminine resistance suggests that despite historical erasures, landscapes retain traces of lost narratives, waiting to be rediscovered and reclaimed.

Ultimately, Rosarita affirms that both nature and feminine histories, though systematically erased from dominant discourse, persist as powerful undercurrents in the cultural and ecological fabric of societies. It calls for a reimagining of history and identity through an ecofeminist lens, where women's lost stories, much like the landscapes they once inhabited, are not entirely erased but merely waiting to be unearthed by those who seek them.

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