

The Sea as Sanctuary and Specter: Gender, Nature, and Trauma in Soosaiya Anthreas' *The Dance of the Sea*

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Abstract:

Soosaiya Anthreas' *The Dance of the Sea* is a survival novel that explores the intimate bond between coastal communities and their surrounding environment. Through the lens of ecocriticism, particularly as defined by Cheryl Glotfelty, this paper investigates how the sea functions not just as a setting but as a living force that shapes culture, identity, and survival. The novel provides deep insight into how natural forces influence gender roles and trauma narratives in the context of the 2004 tsunami that devastated Tamil Nadu's coastline. The main objective of this paper is to understand how the sea is more than just a background in the story. While earlier studies may focus on trauma or women's issues alone, this paper fills the gap by connecting environmental forces with emotional and cultural survival. Drawing from Judith Herman's theory of trauma as a disruption of memory and meaning, the novel reflects how survivors often live in fragmented states of fear, dissociation, and haunting silence. The characters' struggle to restore normalcy illustrates the long-term psychological imprint left by environmental catastrophe. The research focuses on the double nature of the sea, the psychological effects of disaster, and how the people rebuild their relationship with nature after trauma.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Gender and Nature, Environmental Catastrophe, Psychological Trauma

The Dance of the Sea presents an in-depth exploration of the relationship between coastal communities and the natural world, with particular focus on the lives of fisherfolk women, the beauty and menace of the sea, and the haunting aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The author of *The Dance of the Sea* is Soosaiya Anthreas. He is from a fishing village in Tamil Nadu and writes about the lives, struggles, and culture of coastal communities. This novel explores how nature, especially the sea, is deeply connected to the lives of coastal communities. The sea is shown as both a friend and an enemy offering peace and beauty, but also causing fear and disaster. Women in the novel show strength by supporting each other in the absence of their husbands, and the community tries to rebuild life after the tsunami. This research uses *ecocriticism*, based on the ideas of Cheryl Glotfelty, to study how the environment shapes human emotions, identity, and social life. The sea is both a life-giving and life-taking force, shaping culture, gender roles, and trauma narratives in a coastal society. The novel shows how individual and collective identities are reconstructed amidst disaster, displacement, and grief. It also shows how loss of land and tradition affects identity in coastal communities.

The novel portrays the sea as both a source of peace and a threat to life. In one passage, the sea is described as gentle and rhythmic:

when the sea was silent and sleepy, the kattumarams moved ahead and veered smoothly. They seemed to enjoy heaving with the rhythm of the tide and the ebb in its forward movement. However, when the sea was choppy with the arrival of the moon closest to Earth, the rough and violent waves broke over the aft and fore of kattumaram. They impeded their journey seaward and made kattumarams surge violently. Now slowly, the kattumaram diminished in size before vanishing totally from our sight. As the kattumaram sailed out to the sea and towards the horizon, the eight hundred metre high Marunthuval Malai -being part of Western Ghats-standing behind it would slowly sink into the sea. During the night, it had to depend on both the sweep of light shafts sent out by Muttom lighthouse, and the constellation of stars in the sky, to establish the accuracy of its geographical position(110)

This reflects a sense of harmony between the people and the ocean. Yet, this harmony is constantly threatened. During the tsunami, the sea becomes violent, breaking the boundaries between land and water and leaving destruction in its wake. The absence of men, who are often at sea, forces women to rely on each other for emotional support. The women in the seashore keeps nature to the side in the absence of their husbands,

They took a fresh breath of air from the cool breeze that flew from sea towards them, as they sought comfort from each other for their troubled souls in the absence of solace from their husbands. This solace was sometimes needed to soothe the pain that their souls suffered from the loneliness. There was no hutment to obstruct their view of the sea, and the sea could rush in to touch them if it wished. They seemed to speak to the sea to resolve their problems.(69)

It is further noted that women are so helpful to each other in the absence of men, as the incident between Asha and Gloria shows, “Once, in the past, Asha had slipped into an inundating Odai. In the fall, Asha injured her elbow and badly sprained her ankle. Gloria rescued her and carried her home. This incident united their souls.”(69) This quote illustrates how the sea becomes a silent companion to their emotional world. Furthermore, the rescue story between Asha and Gloria shows how shared suffering builds sisterhood. Gloria serves as a voice for social change. Her concerns reflect the ongoing struggles faced by women and the poor. Gloria is always interested about the improvement of life for the fisherfolks, so as usual after meeting Gregory, she speaks about things as,

Gloria, immediately after completing the ritual of her inquiry about his health and about his kids, opened the usual topic, which she used to discuss whenever the time and opportunity permitted:

- Public toilets for women
- Drinking water pipelines
- Cleaning water wells and revamping
- Illuminated common reading rooms
- Land rights for fisherfolk in Parish (64)

The sea initially stands as a symbol of daily sustenance and rhythm. It is the pulse of the fisherfolk’s existence. However, the tsunami causes a dramatic ontological shift. What was once beautiful becomes ominous:

Dead bodies were collected from various corners, uses bushes, riversides, thorny woods, and marshes. Immediately after the tsunami, the entire population of fisherfolk deserted the village; only a few people did not move, of whom Moeasan was one. He dared to spend the nights among corpses. The sound of waves that unleashed the devastation and destruction still lingered on to haunt the hearts of all under the cover of darkness. The collapsed roofs, the broken walls stood desolately as witness to tell their story of the razed houses. Household paraphernalia cluttered the deserted streets, which included kora grass sleeping mats, winnow made of coconut thatch, wooden rat traps, olakai, narpetti, tails of ray fish, framed pictures of various gods and saints, chairs, tables, utensils, clothes, trunks, rosaries, and various properties of fishermen.(188)

This moment signifies the rupture, the aesthetic of the sea has changed. Where earlier it carried fish and cool breezes, now it carries death and echoes of trauma. Pathan’s tragedy is emblematic of personal trauma embedded within communal catastrophe. His inability to save his wife and children, who “It was this Pathan who lost his wife and children in the tsunami. Pathan’s family were all trapped inside his house as the doors were shut. Unable to unbolt and open the door, they died within the column of water.” (188), is not just a tragic anecdote, but a collective echo. Their deaths within ‘the column of water’ symbolize the inescapable grip of the sea’s fury. The image of dead bodies collected from ‘bushes, riversides, thorny woods, and marshes’ brings nature into the narrative of death, where every aspect of the environment becomes complicit in trauma. The description is haunting, suggesting that grief has taken into the land itself.

The narrative of Rebecca and Catherina shows how women, often considered the custodians of home and culture, are forced to recalibrate identity and space after the disaster. Rebecca’s transition from rural to urban life in Anbillam is not merely geographical, but ideological. She begins navigating public life, financial management, and motherhood in the absence of her husband, still away working in Kuwait. Rebecca’s story intersects gender with displacement and adaptation. Her adjustment, however, is not without loss. The locked room in Anbillam, a decree by Stella, serves as a metaphor for the unspoken, the trauma unprocessed, and the memory suppressed. Months after the tsunami, the fear continues in insidious psychological forms marks the death of Catherine,

Then the end came. It was on the thirtieth day past the tsunami that Gloria breathed her last. Catherina stood close at this time and noticed that the movement of the needle in her wristwatch came to an abrupt halt and stood still forever to mark her time of departure. Catherina was puzzled and frightened. It was her habit to ask the time from her watch whenever Gloria was nearby. Catherina, shocked and shattered, fell abruptly on the floor and lost consciousness. The hospital soon exploded with cries and oppaari. Rebecca kept me in the dark, and I had no clue during my stay abroad about Gloria’s sufferings from the tsunami’s onslaught, her final hours, and her death. (191)

The text unravels how trauma distorts perception: barking dogs, slamming windows, or breaking cups are no longer safe. This is where the disaster transcends the physical and begins infiltrating the biological and psychological systems, echoing Judith Herman’s theory of trauma as a disruption of memory and meaning as,

Because these altered states keep the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness, they prevent the integration necessary for healing. Unfortunately, the constrictive or dissociative states, like other symptoms of the posttraumatic syndrome, prove to be remarkably tenacious. Lifton likened ‘psychic numbing,’ which he found to be universal in survivors of disaster and war, to a ‘paralysis of the mind.’(32)

The psychological scars of the tsunami run deep. The trauma is clearly expressed: “The sound of waves that unleashed the devastation and destruction still lingered on to haunt the hearts of all under the cover of darkness” (188). The trauma also manifests as fear and superstition: “The simple bark of a mongrel in a dark and silent night will turn out to be an eerie voice” (205). These examples reflect how environmental disasters disrupt not only the physical world but also the mental stability of survivors. A year after the tsunami, Chinnakudisai becomes a ghost town, ‘stood without doors,’ moaned like a restless ghost tormented by manthiravathis.’ The description uses anthropomorphic and gothic imagery to show how



physical space has absorbed the trauma of its residents. The house is no longer shelter but specter. The sea, in retreat, has left behind not only wreckage but an altered relationship with space, memory, and self.

In *The Dance of the Sea*, the tsunami turns the home into a site of death and exile. The sea, a provider, becomes an intruder, dismantling the very ecological harmony that defined the lives of the characters. Thus, the novel becomes an ecocritical text, questioning anthropocentric assumptions and showing how nature and trauma connect. Furthermore, the novel underscores issues for women post-disaster. The sea emerges as both a nurturing and destructive force with the emotional, cultural, and social lives of the people.

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