

## **Nature-human Interface: An Ecocritical Study of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain***

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### **Abstract**

The idea of distinction or conflict between nature and human being is possibly the result of scientific prudence. Progress in science and technology develops the idea of nature as a mechanical system which may be used and exploited in the process of satisfying human desires. It results in the acceleration of changes in the balance of the environment. Thus, it is the need of the twenty-first century to explore the primordial relation of human with nature in science and philosophy, history and literature, perhaps the main objective is to save it. Again human dependence on environment for instrumental as well as intrinsic purpose is undeniable and ubiquitous. In the process of searching for fulfillment amidst desperation, human being finds nature as probably a suitable space. This paper makes an attempt to study how nature plays vital role in reshaping and restructuring human life as well as how human developmental practices (both scientific and cultural) corrupt and desecrate the environment. Moreover, it carries out the study of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, in the backdrop of Ecocritical ideas, in order to justify Desai's vision of nature and its relationship with the human in the novel.

(Key Words- Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment)

Expressing the idea of nature is an age old practice in literature. Indian literatures have given wide space for the expression of the richness of beauty and pro-creative potential of nature along with Indians' accord of love and reverence to the natural forces. But delineation of the human induced problems in nature is a recent trend in literature. In Anita Desai's fiction the presence of nature plays a crucial role in conditioning and constituting the world of the protagonist. In her writing it is found that the intricate phenomena occur in the psychological domain of the protagonists

and are reflected through the occurrence of the phenomena in the external domain of the natural world. In other words, Desai's external landscapes portray as well as influence the interior states of mind. The beauty and tranquility which the natural space emanates mold and reorient human thoughts and attitude towards it. Nature functions as the metaphor of joy, hope and fulfillment in the midst of crisis and desperation in her protagonist's life. Precisely, the idea of nature, in her fiction, is constructed through the relation between the infinite world of nature and the finite world of the protagonist. This paper intends to analyze the mode of textualization of such relationship and to foreground and examine the changing scenario of the natural spaces at the interface between human and nature in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. This is the novel in which Desai has presented different dimensions of human relationship with nature. Such dimensions are reflected through the attitude of the characters towards nature in the novel.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai has presented human relation with nature as intrinsic and instrumental as well. At one level nature influences and renders human being with happiness and mental peace but at the other level nature is treated as the object to be conquered in the process of satisfying unlimited human desires. In the novel intrinsic relation has been represented by Nanda Kaul and Raka where as the later is suggested by the description of environmental degradation in Kasauli. In the beginning, there is desire in the protagonists for escape to another world, which is conceptualized as distant and beyond pain and suffering of social life. This desired world is preferably a natural place because its remoteness peaceful ambiance may nurture a tormented mind. In this way, such relation is purpose-oriented and conditioned by the desire for fulfillment, represented by Nanda Kaul. Secondly, there is unconditional love for nature to enjoy and analyze deeper meaning and values which exists in the form of beauty, tranquility, joy etc. This relation perhaps triggers off emotional, aesthetic moreover philosophical communication between human and nature in the novel. The second part of the novel presents the picture of human

conquering and exploitation of nature for material development and cultural enrichment, which has been rationalized by the scientific prudence. Such act destroys the purity and richness of natural wilderness along with ecosystemic order and biodiversity. As a consequence the idyllic and remote natural places metamorphose in to semi-urban, commercial or industrial places. Thus, the pollution and deterioration of natural balance make life difficult to survive in such places. Such ideas are the possible tenets of ecocriticism which find significant discussion in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*.

Again Nature-human relation through the transgression of the disciplinary and conceptual boundaries of mind and matter, nature and culture etc is the central concern of ecocriticism. Greg Gerrard makes the point “The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself.” (*Ecocriticism: the Critical Idioms* 5). It is true that the interpretation of human position in relation to nature and the study of their understanding of the complexities of natural phenomena through the study of multiple and multivalent texts (may not be limited within the nature writing or pastoral) are the ecocritical convictions as in the view of Lawrence Buell “the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.” (Buell 1995, 7). In this respect it seems apt to interpret *Fire on the Mountain* as it presents a story in which the lady protagonist Nanda Kaul and her great grandchild Raka try to redefine their positions in the landscape of Kasauli. Both of them try to restructure their life in the presence of nature by transcending the disorientation of the monotony and complexities of modern life in Indian metropolis. Such rejection of the cultural space or social life and association with the natural world of Kasauli is perhaps the indication of the importance of the presence of nature in redefining the self and restructuring the internal world of the protagonist through the placidity of nature. Again this novel presents the

purposefulness of nature in contrast to the disintegration of modern life as well as it serves the interface of meaning between the dualistic premises of non-human nature and human culture by sharing the fundamental idea that human culture is connected to the natural world that instills happiness.

Nature and human relationship is a fundamental question in the history of humanity. In Jonathan Bate's words it is "a key intellectual problem of twenty first century" (*Green Studies Reader* 3). Ecocriticism as a form of literary theory interprets a great array of literature, from Renaissance theatre to modern econovels, sci-fi, wild life documentaries, studies various ideas from Plato to Postmodernism, from *the Bible* to the Vedic literature in order to examine the dimensions in such relation. (Ph.Bourdieu 72). Its study of various critical theories from formalism to post-structuralism and deconstruction is to rescue nature from the construction of "nature" as a term within cultural discourse without which it doesn't have meaning. (*Green Studies Reader* 2). In this sense its endeavor is to establish nature as a living entity which influences human existence, existing beyond the signifying system perpetuated by the cultural theories. It attempts to study the importance of the natural world in life and literature. As in Jonathan Bate's view ecocriticism as a "strategy of foregrounding the role of natural environment in the genesis of the text" (Rigby *Ecocriticism*, 157). It is true that Nature has its own independent existence, functions as the creating and contributing force for human culture and remains conceptually unaffected by the culture. The question arises culture requires nature for its enrichment but does nature require culture for its existence and meaning? In this regard Bill Mckibben's remark that "nature's independence is its meaning" (*Green Studies Reader* 7) possibly serves the answer. It may be acknowledged that nature's presence is required for the nourishment of human thought and imagination and for satisfying human aesthetic desire. Such ideas have been projected as the central theme to be discussed in *Fire on the Mountain*.

*Fire on the Mountain* dramatizes the reality of a modern Indian household through the character of Nanda and Raka who have different vision and approach to the natural world of Kasauli. Here Nanda Kaul, the widow of the Vice-chancellor is presented as a “recluse of vengeance” (FM\* 52), an old woman who has got tired after taking the burden of the house hold throughout her life. For this she refuses the social life where responsibilities and duties never end, where she has suffered with the disintegration of family life. In order to avoid it she has abandoned such life to stay on the mountain. She has decided to “be left to the pines and the cicadas alone. She hoped she would not stop” (3). And she finds “the place, and the time of life that she had wanted and prepared for all her life” (3). Her life in the natural world of Kasauli is perhaps the compensation and alternative of the distorted reality of the family life in which she has been chained. Her idea of getting proximity with the nature in the mountain is with the intension to get engagement with the joy of nature, to keep the sordid experiences in the back of their memory and to try to live in the present by getting respite from the unpleasant past.

Nanda’s longing for silence, seclusion and segregation have been traced at the mountain. Her attraction to Carignano, in Kasauli is perhaps due to ‘its barrenness’ (p, 4) in which she aptly situate herself. Here she can be identified with the loneliness of the place which indicates her alienation. Nanda’s unwillingness to plant any tree in the garden suggests her disinterestedness after leading a long mechanical life with over imposed responsibility and in self deception. “The loose pebbles of the garden pleased her as much as rich turf might another. She cared not to add another tree to the group of apricots by the verandas or the group of three pines at the gate.”( 32). The given rather than the made is perhaps a matter of beauty and joy for her. Here the idea is that the garden on the mountain itself is sufficiently beautiful and satisfying for a recluse like Nanda where human attempt is not perhaps required to make it structured and appealing. In other way the garden suffers due to the reluctance and complacency of Nanda Kaul who does not want to add anything to her solitary life. In spite of the

emptiness, the land inspires fulfillment in the protagonist's life which her husband's large house, "the intense and busy world" (31) cannot promise. Kasauli with its solitude presents an essential harmony which seems to bring about an order in the dejected life of Nanda Kaul. Its enriching view appeals the woman who wants to settle her life in a remote place far from the clamor of a city. This place not only helps her to get rid of unpleasant experiences but also to forget the distorted past. It is clear that the mountain offers a space where the nature and dimension of a relationship with it can be examined.

At one level while the barren rocks of the mountain garden serves as the metaphorical extension of Nanda Kaul's inner self, at the other it brings peace and fulfillment in her. The fresh flowers in the garden of Carignano bring joy and freshness in her as she walks across it. Here, Nanda Kaul's leaving of the social life may not be regarded as a mere escape rather it is the transcendence to realize contentment in the lap of nature. But the natural environ may not render absolute fulfillment in its real sense to her as her consciousness is replete with the stark realities of her past, and she is unable to engage herself completely in the calmness of nature in the level of perception. However, Nanda's retreat to the silence of the mountain by renouncing every responsibility fulfills her desire to get emancipation from the troubles of life. So the possibility of her great granddaughter's arrival at Carignano is regarded by her as "an unwelcome intrusion" (3) and the responsibility, she has once discharged, does not want to take it again. "Discharge me, she groaned, I have discharged all my duties. Discharge" (33). Her seclusion may be regarded as bliss for her, her atomistic existence on the mountain; remote from the cluster of the family members makes her to identify herself as a part of the natural world where the wearied body and tormented mind can be in a complete rest. It seems that Nanda's desire for solitude is out of compulsion rather than predilection.

As mentioned above the desire of Nanda for escape to the mountain, is not only to set her body and mind free from painful circumscription in the plain but also

to contemplate herself and nature. She is a recluse; an ascetic tries to go beyond by refusing any attachment and obligation, love and bondage, cares and anxieties etc. Her refusal is “seemingly marked with a state of expectation” and is “both a voicing of her rejection” and “unwillingness to identify” herself within the existing social structure (Uniyal, *The Fiction of Margaret Drabble & Anita Desai: Women & Landscape* 198). This is the social structure which has bestowed her with the tormented experience, where she has been deprived of her husband’s love and respect etc., “she had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess” (*Fire on the Mountain* 32) Here the appearance does not correspond with the reality. The well reputed house of the Vice-chancellor casts disintegration within its four walls, behind the immaculate personality of the vice-chancellor is hidden infidelity. Nanda Kaul, “Vice-chancellor’s wife” who appeared to be a happy woman and was an object of envy to the outside world (Uniyal 192), “always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining room, entertaining his guests” does never remain satisfied in her role. In contrast to it in Kasauli, the visible is the real, the beauty is the actuality. Here all qualities of nature may be realized through perception. From ecocritical point of view Nanda’s retreat is not her mere displacement or migration from one world to the other for fulfillment where she searches for her root and where she is nostalgic for the past rather it is a movement from one point to the other in the ecosphere as ecocriticism presents an expanded view of the world to include the entire globe. (Sikha Kumari 3) Irrespective of climate and culture ones settlement in a new place, in a certain way, may be regarded as rehabilitation rather than displacement.

Indeed Anita Desai’s fiction does not present pagan veneration or Romantic aspiration for nature. In her novel, there is no presence of Wordsworthian credo or Thoreau’s passion to come closer to nature in order to understand its deeper meaning and to see through nature ‘a glimpse of the divinity’ rather the characters come closer to nature to fulfill their individual purpose. Raka’s love for nature and solitude is natural and not compulsive like Nanda. She wants to be lonely and to be free from the

clutches of anyone, more particularly of Nanda, in order to enjoy the nature around Carignano. As a recluse “by nature, by instinct” as “is born to it simply”, the tranquility and solitude of the mountain act as the inspiring forces for her. “The safe cozy, civilized world” of the city is like a prison for her “to which she owed no attachment” (FM 100). Natural world and “the reality outside appealed so strongly” to Raka (109). To her the whole natural world is a unit and unitary as she does not value the world in terms of comfort it does provide, rather she ascribes importance to nature in the conceptual level like the romantics. Thus there is no difference between Kashmir and Kasauli as in her perspective the later has “much to offer” (99) like other places. And her visit to the never-ever-visited places in Kasauli is perhaps to find the mystery of the land (99).

Raka repudiates the very ideas of “schools, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience” (65) rather wants to be as free and swift as the west wind.<sup>i</sup> She needs solitude and “pursue her own secret life” perhaps to contemplate the meaning of life in the presence of nature and examine its mystery “amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli” (52) “Kasauli supports her desire to be undisturbed, unquestioned, unnoticed” (Uniyal 202). As Neeru Tondon observes: “She explores her existence beyond the surface meaning of life. Like a discoverer she scrutinizes each and every object of nature with a keen intensity of a scientist” (Tondon 176). It is clear that her admiration for nature leads her to study nature. In spite of being a new comer her familiarity with and understanding of the place is more than that of any other else. “She knew a Kasauli that neither summer visitors nor upright citizens of the town ever knew” (FM 69). Raka’s deep sense of love for the mountain house Carignano is recognized by Nanda. “It belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka alone understood Carignano, she alone valued that” (88).

Desai presents nature as physical phenomena inspire human existence. She does not try to represent the natural world as “an illusion” or a concept rather she projects nature as an organic system having purpose (teleology) which is inherent in



the ideas of Aristotle and Theophrastus (Bourdeau, "The Man-nature Relationship and Environmental Ethics" 10). Loneliness and silence are perhaps the fascinating purposes in Kasauli. Nanda Kaul as well as Raka is the beneficiaries of that purpose. As mentioned above Kasauli, as the metaphor for nature, with its silence enhances Raka's passion and curiosity to know about its dimensions where as Nanda wants to give relief to her wearied limbs without any disturbance. It gives relief to the sick body and fretful mind of the characters. It promises recuperation of Raka who "looks like a ghost" as suffering from typhoid (*Fire on the Mountain* 17). "She is very weak and the heat and humidity of Bombay will do her no good. Everyone who sees her says she should go to the hills to recuperate" for which Raka's family members "cannot think of a better way for her to recuperate than spend a quiet summer" in Kasauli (17). It seems clear that an urban world causes disease and suffering, which cannot be alleviated by its methods. But nature as a living force not only inspires imagination but also brings about recovery of health in Raka.

This is the urban world, through its promising development in industries and infrastructure brings about transformation in the nature's phenomena. Such 'transformation' in ecological view, is synonymous with conquer, desecration, plunder etc. of natural environment. As a fact human being has been "the very instrument" of ecological imbalances of which human becomes one of the subsequent victim (Vatsyayan 158). It is true that ecocriticism deals with the study of the relationship between ecology and cultural artifacts or literary work of art, along with the problems in ecosystematic balance which is caused due to human induced changes and their influence on literature. *Fire on the Mountain* not only presents the gritty description of unpleasant family life but also presents the picture of gradual distortion of the natural world represented by Kasauli. Dust and squalor that swallow up the places in the mountain, the nude rocks, pebbles along with the occasional patches of tall pine trees that gives a deserted view suggests the deterioration of the natural land of Kasauli. The remoteness has been 'dedistanced' by scientific intervention and

tranquility of the place is replaced by the clamour of the people from the plain. Sometime in the past the place was perhaps so beautiful that for Nanda Kaul it was like “heaven” and now perhaps, she ruminates over the glorifying picture of the place which results unhappiness in her. She says that the place was so beautiful and appealing in nature that during her first visit to the place she “used to think of Gerard Manley Hopkin’s poem”: “I have desire to go/Where springs not fail/ To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail/ And a few lilies blow...Where the green swell is in the heavens dumb/ And out of the swing of the sea” (64). The absence of that quality now saddens her. As a part of bizarre cult, modern tourism promotes the idea of customization of the natural spaces. While walking down the ravine Raka finds:

“There were splotches of blood, there were yellow stains oozing through paper, there were bones and the mealy ashes of bones. Tins of Tulip ham and Kissan jam. Broken china, burnt kettles, rubber tyres and bent wheels” (53).

These are the ways by which the serene and beautiful natural spaces are corrupted and despoiled. In Kasauli “tourists and passers-by often scratched their names into the succulent blades and there they remained- names and dates, incongruous and obtrusive as the barbed wire” (63). And Nanda Kaul laments for the ruining of ‘this quiet place’ by “too many tourists, too many army” (63). The empty, grey mountain with occasional green patches perhaps lies to remind human being of their insensitivity for nature.

Industrialization not only devours the natural spaces and inspires people to migrate and settle there but also destroys the idyllic remoteness of such places and pollutes the earth and the sky. In Kasuli the chimneys of factory “thrust out cushions and scarves of smoke” disfigures and pollutes “the milky blue of the afternoon sky” and the factory waste is disgorged in to ‘the ravine’ (46). Its squalor widely affects and blights “the pines, the only vegetation” of that place. The pasture Institute established

in the place pierces “the white sky” and lashes “black whips of smoke” which fills the pristine air with the smell of cinders, boiling serum, chloroform and spirit (54). The institute uses various animals’ limbs like dogs’ brains, guinea pigs’ guts for medicinal purposes: “The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look in to them” (48). It also keeps different animals like rabbits and guinea pigs for scientific tests. The residue of the carcasses of the animals thrown in the ravine after scientific use get rotten and leads to the pollution of Kasauli; eating the flesh and bones of the poisonous carcasses by the animals results in madness: “Jackals come at night to chew the bones. Then they go mad and bite the village dogs. The mad dogs run around, biting people” (49). It is true that sanity is natural. On the contrary, madness is against the order of nature and here it is the effect of “scientific monstrosity” (82). Moreover, this is the infliction of harm and injury on the non-human creatures by the modern science. In addition to this, industrialization in the hill not only spoils the natural view but also increases “the heat of the summer afternoon” (80). Thus, the hills which once were considered as “summer holiday home” (65) are now “blotted out by smoke and summer haze” (83). The hill station also runs out of water in the summer. “There is not a drop of water to spare in the Simla Hills, in June” even to save the jungle from forest fire (82). Such scenario surprises Raka as she has heard of “the beauties and delights of the Himalayan hill-station” (46) and not of an industrially blighted place.

The green roofed large building which has been left locked, with its empty tennis court along with other abandoned buildings on the knolls of Kasauli suggests modern human desire for the acquisition (conquering) the earth. This practice seems to be insensible misuse of the fertile land which is shrinking very fast and may pose threat to future generation. If, in the American ecologist-scientist Aldo Leopold’s ethical concept of land as a “community, is the basic concept of ecology”, and an object to be “loved and respected” <sup>ii</sup> and if misuse of land is an ‘ethico-economic problem’ such practice may be regarded as the violation of ethical principles

pertaining to the land and the environment. From ecological perspective, such advancement seems to be the attempt of modern science to “dominate the Landscape” by corrupting its existing appeal.

It is true that destruction in massive intensity is an ecological problem. Ram Lal says “I can’t tell you how many forest fires we see each year in Kasauli” (FM 58). This fire causes the destruction of lives including human and animals, property and the depletion of natural resources. In John Passmore’s view the “problems in ecology” are no doubt “the features of our society arising out of our dealings with nature” (Gerrard, *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom* 5). The burning of the houses on the mountain suggests that man as a victim of the malevolence of nature which seems to be the result of the destruction of “the subtle and suggestive pattern of nature” (Tondon, 176). Sometimes such fires are accidental, but sometimes intentional, meant for human benefit and pleasure. It could be the work of the poachers or thieves could cause the impending death of the natural world. The natural world is self sufficient and human intervention in to the natural space corrupts its sanctity and order. “Garden House”, it had “the most beautiful garden in Kasuli. Now used as an army billet. The army’s everywhere” (FM 63). This seems to be the intrusion of the cruelty of mechanization in to the quiet land of Kasauli.

To conclude, the mountain Kasauli symbolically stands with certain existing principles and natural orders. In ecological view nature metamorphoses the old into new, creates the new immediately after destruction of the things unused. The symbolic fire set by Raka is probably having the purgatory effect to set a new order. “Down in the ravine, flames spat and crackled around the dry wood and through the dry grass, and the black smoke spiraled up over the mountain” (159). The destruction of the old dry objects on the top of the mountain opens the ground for the regeneration of new life, and new order for the future generations. That is the law of nature.

*Fire on the Mountain* presents the significance more of the natural land of Kasauli than that of the urban world. It is centrally concerned with the ideas pertaining to natural world and human position in it. Throughout the novel the idea of nature runs as strand to regulate the function of the characters. Nature reshapes the lives of Nanda and Raka. Its appearance often corresponds with the internal world of the characters. In this novel Desai has projected her vision of life and the world through the interaction between the protagonist and nature. Such as the importance of nature depicted in the novel, makes it a text suitable for ecocritical study, moreover eco-cultural analysis to find the dimensions of modern human relationship with nature. Apart from this, the account of changing in the way human interfaces with nature may reorient the readers to think about the future of the natural environ and human life. Finally, the novel presents the picture of Indian women by equating their attitude with the silence of nature instead of conveying ecofeministic or eco-poco political views of Anita Desai.

**Notes:**

i Refers to P.B.Shelley's "Ode to the West wind" in which the wind is considered as the most free and uncontrollable force of nature.

ii Refer to Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, in which Leopold develops Land Ethics. That defines a new relationship between people and nature and sets the stage for the modern conservation movement.

\*FM refers to *Fire on the Mountain*.

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