

Representation of Man and Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

*In the recent time, studies related to environmental problems have flourished all over the world. It has emerged as a subject matter of global importance that seeks to discuss the major environmental issues like climate change, deforestation, global warming and its impact on entire human race. These issues have been raised in different platforms as nations across the globe are reflecting on various environmental challenges and committed towards bringing the environmental damage level down as much as possible. Literature, in all forms has tried to explicate this subject matter throughout the ages. The romantics are known for their primary interest on writing about nature's influence upon human beings and the impacts of industrial revolution and urbanization on nature. In 1990s, a newly formed concept called 'ecocriticism' gained prominence in the literary world which aims to re-examine the man-nature relations and the possible threats posed on nature by human activities. Indian literature is also enriched by various eminent writers and thinkers who has reflected on the abundance of nature present in the mainland of India in their writings. Among them are famous novelists like Rabindranath Tagore and poets like Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt etc. Anita Desai is also reckoned as one of the major literary figures in modern Indian English literature whose work exposes the close affinity between nature and one's personal experiences. Bearing this in mind, the present paper intends to study the significant role played by nature in Desai's Sahitya Akademi winning novel *Fire on the Mountain* and explore the ecocritical aspects of the novel.*

Keywords : 1.Climate Change; 2. Deforestation; 3.Environmental challenges; 4.Ecocriticism; 5.Nature

Fire on the Mountain displays Anita Desai's keen observation of nature and her sincere attempt to portray the correspondence between man and nature. It is replete with vivid and picturesque descriptions of the hill town of Kasauli. The novel shows us the significant role nature plays in shaping a human life. Nature has offered so much to the mankind. Starting from the human civilization nature has offered everything that human beings needed to survive. It has helped and provided resources in order to sustain life. Nature acts as a remedy, as a healer for those who are in distress. But in course of time nature's benevolence has been dishonored by human beings.

Human activities have started to destroy the quality of nature and ecosystem. The rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization has destroyed the beauty and purity of nature. These activities have severe repercussions and gradually humans are facing serious environmental challenges. From time to time, men have witnessed the ravaging side of nature. People across the world suffer from natural disasters like earthquakes, storms, floods, and are failed in their attempt to control nature. This dual aspect of nature is broadly discussed in ecocriticism and in this respect *Fire on the Mountain* is an excellent representation of this subject matter.

Before the discussion let us look into the term 'ecocriticism'. The term 'Ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology : An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Rueckert defined ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." But as a critical approach it has its origin in the USA in the late 1980s and in the UK in the early 1990s. Cheryll Glotfelty is considered as the founder in USA who together with Harold Fromm published a collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996) where they developed the theory in a detailed manner. According to Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (1996: xviii). It insists on exploring the correspondence between nature and human. Ecocritics question on how nature is represented in the text. They probe into the role played by the physical setting with connection to the plot of the text. They also reflect on the human interaction with its natural surroundings present in the text. While in Britain ecocriticism is more popular as green studies and is more inspired by the British Romanticism of the 1840s. The founding figure in green studies is Jonathan Bate who authored *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 1991). In green studies the concentration is placed on reading the impact of nature in human life as well as the exploitation of nature and environmental issues. Therefore on a brief note the prominent feature of ecocriticism is to study the connection between human and ecology and to discuss various environmental challenges emerging across the globe.

The opening of *Fire on the Mountain* introduces us with Nanda Kaul, a retired vice -chancellor's wife , mother of several children who anxiously watches the postman making his way towards her and deep down she felt if she could stop him for she didn't like the idea of associating herself with her past acquaintances. It was dreadful for her to again establish contact with them. She wanted to be alone, undisturbed as:

"Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life ---as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief ---and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever

else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction." (3)

The use of images and symbols here displays Desai's attempt to portray her characters as embodiment of nature. Nanda's retirement from all the duties and responsibilities towards her family is compared with the withering, aging garden of Carignano. When she arrived at Carignano for the first time she felt "Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection." (33-34)

Nanda's character can be identified with 'nature' as most of her years have been spent in taking care of her family members. Her efforts till now can be identified with the giving nature of 'nature'. She remembers her old life in her old house as

"There had been too many guests coming and going tongas and rickshaws piled up under the eucalyptus... The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made up... Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom... Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after." (32)

Nanda longed for silence, stillness all her life. "It was difficult to attain in those years in that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped, without ceasing." (25) She would try to take a break for an hour amidst her busy day and she would practice stillness only for that sixty minutes. But now, Carignano has offered her the desired stillness and isolation and the much needed break. The only soul around her is her cook, Ram Lal. Her desires to disappear into the mountain air, into the forest manifests her desire to escape from the mundane reality. She wants to merge with the pine trees and wants to be unnoticed.

The pleasing and satisfying aspect that Carignano offers to Nanda is its barrenness. Her solitary life has found meaning in the barrenness of Carignano. The occasional flight of an eagle resembles Nanda's solitary life in the mountain. Her reluctance to plant any other plants in her garden or to add another tree to the group of apricot trees or pines clearly projects her state of mind. She doesn't want anyone to intervene in her life. She seemed to like the garden for its bareness just the same way her own life is filled with emptiness and she seems to cherish it. But the news of her great granddaughter's arrival has stepped into her isolation which she refers as an "unwelcome intrusion" (3). Nanda is exasperated as she doesn't want to take responsibilities of anyone anymore. She is old now and what she requires most is her peace of mind and a break from all the duties and responsibilities.

Raka on the other hand is 'a shy, lonely school girl, a convalescent guest, who is 'a recluse by nature, by instinct', as opposed to Nanda, a 'recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation' (M.K.Naik, 253). Unlike her grandmother's expectations, Raka doesn't want to be taken care of by anyone. She is a loner and loves to roam freely and rejects human company. She likes to explore nature and its beautiful aspects. She would prefer to disappear from the sight of

people now and then as Nanda observes:

“She was like a rabbit conjured up by a magician-drawn unwillingly out of the magic hat, flashing past Nanda Kaul, then vanishing in the dark of a bagful of tricks.” (51) "She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine needles of the hillsides, like her own great grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing-to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and the pines of Kasauli." (52).

Raka's ill health has brought her to the mountains of Kasauli as everyone has advised her to go the mountains in order to recuperate from her illness. Her illness has turned her life into monotonous and bitter from which she wants liberation which is why she is inclined towards her great grandmother and any social life. She finds the devastating scene of the burnt house in the hills inspiring and awe-striking as her own life is a mess and the only things have surrounded her till now is medicines, pills and hospitals and a closed room filled with tensions and desperations. But Carignano has helped her in recognizing her true and strong urge to explore nature around her. The cities where she has been never offered her what she wanted. ‘But Carignano has so much to offer.’ (99)

The third character that Desai presents in the novel is Ila Das, who is a childhood friend of Nanda and works as a social worker in Kasauli . Ila represents an old connection to Nanda's past life. She reminds Nanda of her old life in Punjab University with her husband and her daughters which Nanda, on the other hand does not want to be reminded of .Despite all the miseries in her life, Ila's conviction to fight against the prejudices of society demonstrates her as a strong woman. She is quite the opposite of Nanda and Raka who otherwise inclined towards any social company. Ila's character can be compared with the strong character of nature, resisting all odds.

“All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject between the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature.” (1996 : xix) The experiences of these three persons with nature have been a formative one. They give us insights into their dilemmas, their loneliness, and the ways they're anticipating to find solace in their miserable lives .Kasauli has connected the three souls once again. Nanda's refuge in nature is not just about withdrawal from all the duties and responsibilities but it is also about her contemplation over her own life. While Raka being ill all the time, now has finally found a way to liberate herself from all the bondages and restraints. Ila being poverty stricken after her brother squandered away all their family money is finally able to find a job as a social worker in Kasauli. Though not enough yet it opens a new source of income for her and helps her to provide for her sister as well. Her job also develops a change in her perspective towards society seeing the plight of the villagers in remote kasauli. Another pleasant news Kasauli offers to Ila in due course, is Nanda moving to Carignano.

The sense of belongingness and the idea of regeneration emerging with hope also prevail in the novel. Nanda's longing for isolation has also developed in her a sense of belongingness to Carignano and has helped in reviving and reshaping her own life. She hopes on reviving the beautiful flowers planted by the old lady who used to live in the house in the hill that got burnt down by the forest fire. "one shower of rain will bring out hundreds of flowers-lilies, dahlias--- that she must have planted. You'll see them one day."(62) The blooming of pink zephyranthes down in the hillside after the first fall of rain suggests nature's capacity to restore and rebuild itself the same way does Nanda and Raka and Ila's endeavor to build their own in Kasauli .

Studying the impact of human activities on the environment is a key aspect of the ecocritics .Lawrence Buell observes, "Human accountability to the environment is part of text's ethical framework."(Buell 1995:7). The desires of human to conquer everything of nature have done a lot of harm to it. *Fire on the Mountain* meticulously represents these issues. The novel bears the instances of factories, industries being constructed in the hills of Kasauli and the devastation they bring to the place. Raka's first rendezvous with nature upsets her as she sees the chutes emerging from the chimneys of a factory, discharging factory waste into the ravine. It is the Pasteur Institute where doctors make serum for injections. They experiment mainly on animals like dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs and others. Raka is worried by the incongruity and the exploitation done on innocent animals by the experimenters whom she views as oppressors. "See those chutes? They empty the bones and ashes of dead animals down into the ravine. It's a bad place. Don't go there."(49) She is advised by Ram Lal to not go near the Pasteur Institute.

Another significant example of environmental challenge exposed by the author is the occasional forest fire events in Kasauli. The sharp increase in air temperature, decline in precipitation, change in land use patterns due to activities like clearing forest covers, grazing etc. ignites the massive forest fire in places like Kasauli in Utrakhand. Forest fire is one of the repercussions of the exploitation of nature in the hands of men. Forest fires in Kasauli has destroyed many peoples' lives and they also pose a threat to the future generations as it pollutes the air by emitting carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and ozone gases into the air.

Ram Lal recounts, "I can't tell you how many forest fires we see each year in Kasauli. Some have come up far as our railing. You can see how many of the trees are burnt, and houses too. Once the house down the hill, South View, was burnt down to the ground before the fire engine arrived."(58)"

Not only Raka and Ram Lal, Nanda also shares the same concerns for Kasauli. She is upset at the sight of Kasauli's withering beauty. "What is that peculiar instrument on top? Frightening. Like an atomic reactor Or some such scientific monstrosity. And so much barbed wire around. A shame." (63).She expresses her sadness over how the gardens of kasauli has been destroyed over time and the turning of the most beautiful garden of Kasauli into an army billet, pointing out how people's unorganized and unsustainable activities harms the environment.

Ila, being a social worker strives to spread awareness among the villagers about health, sanitization as well as about the social evils like superstitions, child marriages etc. But her attempts did not result in a desired manner and it rather ensued conflict between Ila and the villagers. This situation can be identified with men's attitude towards the exploitation done on nature. Ila observes, "It's so much harder to teach a man anything ..." (141)

The situation gets worsened when Ila involves in an argument with Preet Singh and becomes a victim of rape and murder. The violent act can also be put in a contrast with men's atrocities on nature suggesting how the natural resources are too ripped away by people.

The novel through its narrative and representation probes into the hazardous activities of men leading to environmental crisis. Ecocriticism not only revolves around man-nature relations but it also questions the very stand of literature against the depletion of environmental resources. As Coupe defines ecocriticism as "an approach to literature which considers the relationship between human and nonhuman life as represented in literary and which theorises about the place of literature against environmental destruction ." (2000-705) *Fire on the Mountain* offers the readers insights on the condition of Kasauli and its people. The novel's endeavor is not just to capture the unhappy, unsuccessful, deteriorating status of the three families concerning Nanda, Raka and Ila but also the deterioration of Kasauli's environment.

To conclude, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* acts as a mediator between nature and human. Desai's penchant for various images and symbols display the natural beauty of Kasauli. Nanda, Raka and Ila together puts forward a very strong image of nature and their position in it. The novel presents before us a contrasting picture of callousness of urban life and a life in quietness amidst nature. The man-nature interaction in the novel also helps us realizing about the various emerging issues of environmental challenge and the need to rethink the ways to develop a sustainable future. The novel strongly puts forward a message about the co-existence of men with nature in harmony.

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