

Ecocritical Deliberations in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's writing offers a rich tapestry for ecocritical analysis, exploring the intricate relationships between humans and nature in a way that challenges conventional narratives. *Fire on the Mountain* serves as a profound exploration of the relationships between humans and nature, reflecting the complexities of ecological concerns through its characters and setting. Desai's nuanced portrayal encourages a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of life, emphasizing the need for harmony between humanity and the natural world in an era increasingly marked by environmental challenges. Through an ecocritical lens, the novel reveals the intricate ties that bind human experiences with the rhythms of nature, prompting readers to reflect on their own place within this web of life. Anita Desai employs nature, atmosphere, the associations of memory and action in a recurrent pattern to derive a set of symbols and images that create a web of inter-related meanings. Words have a mystic quality, an evocative power, and when employed as symbols they indicate what lies beyond their surface meaning. Ecocriticism is a literary approach that examines the representation of the natural environment, ecology, and the human relationship with the non-human world in literary texts. This paper aims at examining, in brief, ecocritical deliberations in her *Fire On The Mountain*.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, transformation, ecological concerns, solitude, imagery, allusions, illusions

I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's writing offers a rich tapestry for ecocritical analysis, exploring the intricate relationships between humans and nature in a way that challenges conventional narratives. *Fire on the Mountain* serves as a profound exploration of the relationships between humans and nature, reflecting the complexities of ecological concerns through its characters and setting. Desai's nuanced portrayal encourages a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of life, emphasizing the need for harmony between humanity and the natural world in an era increasingly marked by environmental challenges. Through an ecocritical lens, the novel reveals the intricate ties that bind human experiences with the rhythms of nature, prompting readers to reflect on their own place within this web of life. Anita Desai employs nature, atmosphere, the associations of memory and action in a recurrent pattern to derive a set of symbols and images that create a web of inter-related meanings. Words have a mystic quality, an evocative power, and when employed as symbols they indicate what lies beyond their surface meaning. Ecocriticism is a literary approach that examines the representation of the natural environment, ecology, and the human relationship with the non-human world in literary texts. The novel explores the complex and often conflicting relationship between the human characters and the natural world. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul, seeks solitude and a sense of connection with the natural environment, while her granddaughter Raka struggles to find her place within the natural setting. The novel incorporates the story of Nanda Kaul, the widow of a University Vice-Chancellor, who leads a solitary existence in her spacious mountain villa, Carignano, and tries to guard her hard-earned peace from the world of "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries." Her physical and emotional solitude that she has "prepared for all her life" is, however, suddenly shattered first by a letter from her daughter Asha, announcing the proposed journey of Raka, Nanda Kaul's great-grand-daughter; and thereafter by the child's arrival, Nanda Kaul feels a strong repulsion for all contacts, relationships and responsibilities; it is nauseating "to converse again when it was silence she wished. to involve oneself to involve another," and she resents it all. However, Raka is more of a recluse than Nanda has bargained for. The girl avoids and "rejects" her grand-mother instinctively, even when Nanda Kaul makes efforts to get closer. The females live together, yet apart, each exploring her own existence. Into their separate worlds intrudes Ila Das, an impoverished friend of Nanda Kaul. Ila Das disturbs their peace by her raucous voice. The same evening the news of her grisly murder shatters Nanda Kaul completely. The novel concludes with the psychical and then physical demise of the protagonist, with Raka announcing that she has set the mountain on fire.

The natural elements, such as fire, water, and mountains, are used as powerful symbols to explore themes of transformation, isolation, and the human condition. The shifting and unpredictable nature of the Himalayan landscape mirrors the emotional and psychological journeys of the characters. Fire is a throbbing reality pulsating through the book which becomes all-pervading Reality in the end. It is the central pivot in the novel. Throughout

the book, the novelist does not let the reader forget its presence. There are scattered references to the "burnt house" and the "charred tree." The first fire that Nanda Kaul and Raka watch together as a "copper glow" is far away across the valley; it is so far, indeed, that "it was like a fire in a dream-silent, swift and threatening" (p.74). As Elizabeth Reuben points out, Kasauli itself is dreamlike-a dream of freedom and secrecy." Towards the end of the novel, both the dreams are realized. The fire becomes a reality and Nanda Kaul attains her final liberation, when Raka announces, "Look, Nani-look-the forest is on fire." Tapping, then drumming, she raised her voice, then raised her head to look in and saw Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling" (p. 145). In the end Anita Desai makes the reader suddenly aware of the Reality that lies beyond this world of illusion, the Maya. As soon as her fictive world is shattered, Nanda Kaul admits the harsh realities of life that "all those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only fabrications: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills" (p. 145). At this point her ego, the great "I" is dissolved, her identity is annihilated and she attains freedom. The individual becomes a part of the Cosmic Consciousness. The fire is symbolic of the flame of sacrifice "in which Illusion is transcended by Reality." Nanda Kaul casts away her "Being" with all its fabrications and lies and becomes one with the Ultimate Reality. The fire which crackles and hisses nearby "symbolizes the funeral pyre-the ultimate consummation." It is, like death, the great unifying principle-whether it is Nanda Kaul with her regal dignity or Ila Das, the ridiculously pathetic figure, both die, and thus end their finite existence on this earth. Their mortal remains will be consumed by fire which reduces everything, that comes in its way, to ashes. The title of the novel is also symbolic and suggestive. Whatever greenery and vegetation is surviving after the long spell of the scorching heat, is destroyed by an act of violence-setting fire to the hill-side by a deranged Raka; similarly the two old women after "the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence" are destroyed.

Desai vividly describes the Himalayan mountain setting, highlighting the rugged terrain, dense forests, and diverse flora and fauna. The natural environment is not merely a backdrop but an integral part of the narrative, shaping the characters' experiences and emotional states. Carignano is another palpable symbolic presence in the novel. This structure, standing isolated on the ridge, overlooks the Himalayan "line of ice and snow sketched upon the sky" (p. 4) to the North and "the flat and seer" plains to the South. It has witnessed numerous comings and goings of its various British masters till it is finally bought by Nanda Kaul after Independence. It has withstood the flux of time. It is, thus, the impersonal reality which unites its various masters and represents the Unifying Principle. Moreover, it is here that the three main characters Nanda, Ila and Raka-meet. Each looks at Carignano from her own angle. Nanda Kaul loves it for its "harrenness." Raka feels that Carignano is the best of the places she has lived in but its "orderly austerity [is] something she found confining, restricting" (p. 9). For Ila Das, the house and Nanda's presence in it is "a little bit of past come alive" (p. 132). Carignano serves as a vitalizing and unifying agent for the three females, so different in their outlook. Moreover, this house though old and dilapidated, has a dignity of its own, but it is haunted by the ghosts of its erstwhile occupants who died in it. Likewise, Nanda Kaul has a dignity of her own and she too is obsessed by the apparitions of her unsavoury past. The three pine trees in the garden represent the three people around Nanda-Raka, Ila Das and Ram Lal. Desai subtly addresses the impact of human activities on the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. The novel touches upon themes of deforestation, the exploitation of natural resources, and the consequences of urbanization and development on the local environment. Anita Desai employs here atmosphere, landscape and nature symbolically in order to evoke the feelings of her characters, revealing thereby hidden mental turmoil or attitudes. The emptiness and barrenness of the house, referred to again and again in the novel, speak of Nanda Kaul's state of mind. She exults in its stark uncultivated garden and has no wish to expand it or to improve upon its existing condition, much as she "no more wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radically single life" (p. 31). From Carignano, Nanda Kaul sees the far-off snow line touching the blue sky on one side and the scorching plains on the other side. The cool, clear, ethereal blue colour stands for peace, rest and depth, whereas the white snow-line signifies purity. The far off peaks symbolize future. The shimmering plains below towards which she gazes, "with its rocks and gullies and sharply spiked agaves, to the plains of Punjab a silver haze in the summer heat-stretching out to a dim yellow horizon... indicate the life that she has led. This period of her life has become dim and yellow with the passage of time but has not lost its scald. Mrs. Desai's deft correlation of individual psychology to the landscape and atmosphere heightens the symbolic effect of her imagery. Raka's alienation and the stunted growth of her soul is highlighted by her demented wanderings in search of the chillingly desolate and macabre places in Kasauli. She is attracted towards ruins and ravages, desolation and devastation, "the ravines where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pine that rattle in the wind, the wind-levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attraction" (p. 91). Raka, herself, is symbolic of an unfortunate union. Her abnormal behaviour and her aversion to beauty, speak of her traumatic childhood. In a brilliant passage the author reveals Rava's tortured vision of her life with her parents:

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept... (pp. 71-72). Raka, as such, does not represent the soft or tender aspect of the Moon-the planet she is named after. It is Luna which affects her mind. The caretaker of the burnt house which Raka visits one night mutters on seeing her running, "The crazy one The crazy one from Carignano" (p. 91). Anita Desai uses bird imagery, sights and sounds of nature to weave recurrent patterns and to give insight into the situation. The repeated "domestic call" of the cuckoo is symbolic. Nanda Kaul is recalled from seclusion and harnessed once again to her domesticity. It is interesting to note that Nanda's urge for freedom, represented by the imagery of eagle sweeping down the valley, is counteracted by the clear "domestic tones" of the cuckoo singing in her garden. On the other hand, Raka's abnormal psychology interprets the cuckoo's call not as "domestic." For her it is the call of the "wild, mad birds from nowhere" (p. 91). These are "demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade"... (p. 90). By using the cuckoo imagery and letting the characters interpret it, the novelist makes up comprehend two different psychologies the attitude of Nanda Kaul who strives to be alone but cannot help being called to duties and Raka's intrinsic urge for desolation. Another frequently used imagery in the novel is that of the hoopoe feeding her nestling. Nanda knows that the hoopoe has her nest in the eaves outside her bed-room window, but she deliberately avoids watching the tender scene of the young ones being fed because "it was a sight that did not fill her with delight" (p.4). When Raka refers to the "babies" of the hoopoe Nanda Kaul repeats the word "Babies" with "disdain" (p.66). This has something to do with her loneliness. Not because she dislikes the birds but she is herself "alienated" from her children. The author prepares us for this final revelation that "the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them" (p.145). Similarly, the lapwing "the haunted, fearful bird, distracted and disturbed" (p.26) her by its "nervous and agitated" calls, indicate Nanda Kaul's emotional upheaval where she watches her husband driving back after leaving "one of the guests," who, we know, is Miss David.

The abundant use of literary symbols and allusions reflect the psychology of Nanda. She reads *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* and the passage that strikes her is so symbolic of her own mental self that she smiles at its appropriateness. It reads as follows:

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage-brush, but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look" (p. 27).

This description matches not only the emptiness of Carignano but the mind of Nanda Kaul as well. The next book she reads, *The Voyages of Marco Polo*, also correlates to her psychology. Under its effect she spins exotic stories for Raka, which give her mental tranquillity. As psychiatrists point out, dreams, fantasies, myths and day-dreams represent wish fulfilment and "reduce the strength of a motive by means of symbolic satisfaction."⁹

Nature, too, corresponds with human moods and fancies in *Fire On The Mountain*. The thunder in Chapter 16, speaks well of the inner turmoil of Nanda Kaul. The storm that rages in her heart leaves her beaten like the "hydrangeans, beaten by the rain." But, under the impact of this inner as well as outer storm she continues telling stories to Raka, recapturing a glorious past with Venice glass, Moghul miniatures and Persian carpets. Slowly, the storm outside subsides, the sky clears and the snow-peaks glitter, simultaneously, Nanda's mood, too, lightens and she remembers with relish that "rainy days are lily days." She is able to tell this with natural ease for the first time to Raka. Outside, in the world of Mother Nature, rain brings out lilies-soft and tender and pink. This refers to the cordiality between Raka and Nanda Kaul. However, the lilies disappear after a brief appearance; similarly their cordial feelings also vanish and the usual attitude of neglect and mutual rejection prevails. In nature everything "was either bleached or blackened by heat and glare" (p. 92), so are their bleached or blackened by feelings. The same morning as Raka climbs up the steep hill she callously lets the pink zephyranthes crush under "avalanches of pebbles and gravels" (p. 89), here, her action is symbolic of her wish to no longer continue that tenderness which sprung up, like the lilies, between herself and her great grand-mother.

Situations are juxtaposed in a suggestive and symbolic manner in the novel. The dance in the club, for example, represents perversion. Life is a saga of suffering in which even loneliness or withdrawal does not afford any satisfaction. Finally, the urge for liberation "acquires a life-hating character, manifesting in an unnatural withdrawal or in a perverted movement. The dance at the club is symbolic of this perversion" (pp. 123-24). Ila Das in the novel represents the past of Nanda Kaul which she cannot shut out. Ila's screeching, unwelcome voice

can be interpreted as echoes from Nanda's unsavoury past which are jarring on her ears. This is also an eloquent commentary on the human situation. One cannot escape from his own existence. Man walks through this life with the burden of this past and present till finally he attains liberation when he sheds the load of this fictive world and merges with the elements in a total harmony. Nanda Kaul tries to run away from her past-physically, as well as mentally-but Ila is there to connect the threads and to remind her constantly of all that she wishes to blot out. The Utopian world that Nanda builds around her so carefully is suddenly shattered in the apocalyptic finale when she realises and admits that "It was all a lie, all" (p. 145). It is through Ila Das's death that the protagonist attains liberation. The fire seals their fate with final purification, Ila, as a social reformer, is symbolic of a reformer, an innovator whom the world does not tolerate and hence crucifies. Her gruesome murder represents the Great Crucifixion.

Movements and activities are often used suggestively in the novel. When in disturbed state of mind, Nanda Kaul walks around the garden with short steps. Raka's movements, on the other hand, are furtive and sly, which speak of her intrinsic secretive nature. Nanda's efforts to make friends with her great grand-daughter and walk through the remainder of her life with this child by her side, is conveyed by the author effectively by the symbolic "walk" which the two take together to the Monkey Point. However, Nanda sits on one of the benches at the foot of the knell because she has neither will nor energy to climb up, while Raka energetically goes up. This obviously suggests the forthcoming final "rest" that the old woman is soon destined for. The monkeys, jumping on the trees with gay abandon, represent the primitive animal force in man. Through the ecocritical lens, "Fire on the Mountain" emerges as a nuanced exploration of the delicate balance between human existence and the natural world, highlighting the profound impact of environmental degradation on both the physical and the emotional landscape

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