

Ecocriticism and Representation of Nature in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

*Nature, as a theme of all popular forms of culture is somewhere down the line, inescapable. Sometimes nature has been glorified and cherished and also at times it has been neglected. Literature swarms with works dealing with representation of the natural environment, the mountains, the rivers, hills, meadows, landscape etc. Literature being the most popular form of culture has never remained unaffected by this indispensable theme of man and his physical environment, human and non- human relations. The settings of place, environment and overall ambience are represented meticulously by writers in their works of literature to bring different and desired effect. Ecocriticism originated as a theory with a predominant purpose of a microscopic view of a cultural text in context to its commerce with nature. Indian writing in English is an area on which ecocriticism has been applied only sporadically. Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain* (1977) which won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1977 is a novel firmly established in the landscape of Kasauli. The novel depicts the gradual destruction of the ecosystem of the Kasauli hills and its eventual destruction by devastating forest fire. Interestingly the characterisation in the novel also echoes this gradual desiccation. The dryness of the hills of Kasauli is reflected in the character of Nanda Kaul. The violation and death of Ila Das is akin to the conflagration of the forest fire*

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wilderness, withdrawal.

The word 'Ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay titled 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' (1978). In this essay he suggested "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." The two works which officially heralded 'Ecocriticism' were *The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (1995)* by Lawrence Buell. In this ground breaking work, Buell offers four criteria for determining whether a text is environmental: first, "the non-human environment is present not merely as framing device"; second, "the human interest is not the only legitimate interest"; third, "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation"; and fourth, "there is some sense of the environment as a process."

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm included Rueckert's essay in their edited volume *The Ecocriticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996)*. In 1989 Western Literature Association meeting, Glotfelty had urged literary critics to develop an ecological approach to literature. At the same time Glen Love delivered a speech titled 'Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism.' Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term 'Ecocriticism' gained currency. In 1992 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established along with the Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) in 1993.

A basic definition of Ecocriticism, was given by Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)*, 'the study of the relationship between literature and the environment.' Pramod. K.Nayar explains Ecocriticism as "a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying

particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with the ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches." Ecocriticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being brought on that environment by human activities. Ecocriticism seeks to explore whether in a cultural text, environment is treated with debilitating attitude or it has been glorified.

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) Nanda Kaul, the chief protagonist has withdrawn to the Kasauli hills and lives alone in Carignano, the house which symbolizes the austerity and isolation of Nanda and "everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house." (Desai 1). The narrative delineates the plot on two levels, the first being the story of Nanda Kaul who has withdrawn herself to Carignano. The withdrawal is self-chosen and willingly she has detached herself from all other associations of her life of a busy householder which she has been all her life till she comes to Kasauli to lead a sequestered life where there is no 'unwelcomed intrusion and distraction'. On another level the author has delved deep into the inner lives of the major characters. Raka, Nanda Kaul's great-grandchild, who has arrived to Carignano to convalesce and whose arrival has perturbed Nanda's so far maintained composure. Her arrival was like a blow of a breeze creating ruffles on the surface of a placid lake. The cuckoo and eagle scene is symbolic of Nanda's two different phases of life. "She wished, it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle—gliding, with eyes closed" (Desai 21) The eagle's flight which Nanda wanted to imitate gliding with eyes closed represents the present state of Nanda where

she wants to be a recluse out of vengeance while cuckoo bird's soft musical calling had a domestic tone which symbolizes her past life of duty and obligations. Ila Das's arrival was a commotion in Nanda's cocooned life. The self chosen and self made Vanprastha life was being thwarted by her presence as she was the common association with Nanda's past life; life which she wanted to liberate herself from, life from which she has chosen to withdraw herself, a life of obligations and duties, of facade and pretense.

Heise believes that ecocriticism 'investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or authentic genres and tropes, and what assumptions about nature underlie genres that may not address this trope directly'. There is a bounteous use of nature imagery and interior monologues to demonstrate the condition of Nanda Kaul's perpetual inner conflicts and of her bland deportment towards everything around her; firstly towards Raka, "to Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown from plains to tease and worry her (Desai 44)." In these lines Raka has been compared to a 'mosquito'. Nanda finds to be her alter ego, on some level there is certain similarity between the two of them which exerts an inevitable association –which neither of them desired - between the two. She is so much like her, who is so much comfortable in this seclusion. Raka considers Nanda as one of the pine trees murmuring at her, the 'grey sari' of Nanda is called 'a rock'-all components of bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden" They were both alike in certain aspects but one thing which was conspicuously unique in Raka's disposition was that "she had the gift of avoiding what she regarded as dispensable" (Desai 69) and Nanda was one of those dispensable objects. "But Raka ignored her. She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless." And then towards her friend Ila Das. When Ila calls her on phone she starts reminiscing her past life and the image of white hen, she watched, "drag out a worm inch by inch resisting from the

ground till it was snapped into two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation (Desai 23). Nanda wondered how this child is not dependent on her and freely wanders around the hills and ravine all by her, how she is relishing her unleashed experience in this dry and 'sare' Kasauli hills. When she observes Raka would secretly wish "to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (Desai 48) and in fact Nanda had put in efforts to acquire this characteristic "she had practiced this stillness, this composure for years...." (Desai 25)

The trope of Wilderness has been suggested by Greg Gerrard in his work *Ecocriticism* (2012) as:

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available...it is a construction mobilized to protect particular habitat and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility. (Gerrard 66)

In Indian context wilderness can be related to deep recess in forests, caves in the mountains, the peaks of Himalayas: Kailasha, Amarnath etc. where sages used to live meditate and practice yoga. The concept of wilderness can also be associated with the popular Ashrama system of ancient times, Vanaprastha Ashrama. The idea of withdrawal into the wilderness after a life of a busy householder is a trope, common in the Hindu religion. It is termed as Vanaprastha. However, it was not possible for Desai to deploy this concept of Vanaprastha in the narrative for the sake of the plot of the novel to show Nanda Kaul withdrawing to an ashram although this concept has been explored in *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). The idea of Vanaprastha suggested by A.L. Basham in a chapter

entitled 'Society: Class, Family and Individual' of his book *The Wonder That Was India*(1954) is:

According to the letter of the Sacred Law, when a householder's hair turns white, and he sees his sons' sons, he should become a hermit, either leaving his wife to the care of children or taking her to the forest with him. There, living in a little hut on the alms of villagers or food collected from the wilds, he should perform regular rites at his sacred fire...he may add to his hardships by deliberate self-mortification...this is the stage of life of the vanaprastha, the forest hermit . . . He should not wish to die/nor hope to live/ but await the time/ as a servant awaits his wages.... (Basham 175).

However, if in popular imagination such a withdrawal indicates a withdrawal to a peaceful life characterized by prayer and meditation, this is belied by the novel. Firstly the Kasauli hills are dry and bare. This is no sylvan surrounding of deep forests, wandering deer, singing birds etc; this is a world which has been rendered dry by the lack of rain and the inequitable distribution of water (the cantonment area is lush and green while there is no water to put out forest fires in Kasauli).

Ecocriticism tries to foreground the representation of nature and attitudes towards nature and in this context the whole novel is replete with the delineation of nature, variety of animals and trees etc. Raka's attitude towards her physical environment is very friendly and she seeks solace there she did not want people around her but wilderness for which she would disappear suddenly, silently and when she would return "her brown legs scratched...her eyes very still and thoughtful as though she had visited strange lands and seen fantastic, improbable things that lingered in the mind"(Desai 50) They both lived in the same dry and bare ambience but with different perspectives, on one hand Raka is enjoying this solitude naturally and nonchalantly on the other hand Nanda had to acquire this with efforts " if Nanda Kaul was recluse out of

vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct” (Desai 52).

Gilbert & Gubar had given a term ‘feminist rage’, which stems from cultural dispossession and suppression, is being developed in Raka. She is a little girl who is already facing rejection in life. Her quarreling parents have pushed her to the margins of the family and she has been packed off to the great grandmother. Nanda had welcomed and nurtured the child she may have felt accepted and developed into a mature accepting human being but Nanda ignores her often initially and lets the child go hungry and lets her be totally free. The effect on Raka is not one of empowering freedom but of feeling unwanted again. Her setting the mountain on fire could represent firstly; an early development of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar called the ‘feminist rage’ and secondly; William Rueckert suggests that the destruction that human community inflicts upon Nature, this predisposition is what ecologists call the “self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature.”

The rape and brutal murder of Ila Das in the forest in *Dark* raises a conscious of dual domination of male on nature as well as women. Both are exploited by men without considering the plight of either of the two. The dryness of the hills of Kasauli is reflected in the character of Nanda Kaul. The violation and death of Ila Das is akin to the conflagration of the forest fire. The symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* and is highly significant from the thematic point of view. The mountain symbolizes Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka’s wild nature. “Nanda is the ‘rocky belt’, dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like the forest fire.

The news of murder of Ila Das shakes the very foundations of Nanda Kaul’s self poise. The dreadful news tumbles down the façade which Nanda had built over the years

in this seclusion. Now a snapshot of all the past events starts rolling in front of her eyes like a film camera and she begins to face those harsh realities from which she had tried to escape over all these years. As Patricia Waugh suggests:

Wild places provide solace for exiles, release for repressed and outlawed feelings, and space for adventurous forays beyond the restrictions of law and domesticity, but the discoveries made there are, like Robin Hood and his follower, eventually re-assimilated by civilization. . . . (Waugh 532)

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