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## From the Perspectives of Ecosophy: Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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### **Abstract:**

From the perspective of Ecosophy Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* carries appropriacy. Her fiction is associated with both Naess's ecological wisdom and Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*. While Nanda Kaul's and Raka's connection with nature leads them to the ecological wisdom, Pasture Institute's brutal behaviour towards animals, Illa Das's rape and murder and frequent forest fire urge the need of Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* Where environmental ecology will be bound up with social ecology and mental ecology.

**Keywords: Ecosophy, Ecocriticism, Ecopsychology, Ecofeminism, Anita Desai, Pasture Institute, Women, Fire, Mountain, Animals, Barrenness.**

By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of *sofia* (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities. (A. Drengson and Y. Inoue 8)

Without modifications to the social and material environment, there can be no change in mentalities. Here, we are in the presence of a circle that leads me to postulate the necessity of founding an "ecosophy" that would link environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology. (Guattari 264).

While the definition of ecosophy by Naess concerns the association of ecological movement, reverence for nature and the intrinsic value of other beings, Felix Guattari refers to ecosophy as the means to liberate society that was dominated in the then period by the pattern of social cataclysm and Marxism. Through the notion of ecosophy Guattari inserts ecological framework within it which brings the intersections of social and environmental grounds. Guattari draws out his view in respect of traditional perspectives of ecology, which alienating human beings from

nature creates ambiguity in the relationship. After Arne Naess ecosophy earns a new field by the psychoanalyst Felix Guattari for whom ecosophy is the connector of environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology. From this view we see ecosophy in the harmonious relationships of nature, society and mind which are interrelated to each other. Thus Naess's ecological wisdom takes a wide and vibrant outlook of nature, humans, materiality, and individuality. Hence, "Ecosophy is political and calls for a new politics, a new subjectivity, a new vision, and yet also resists saying, or showing what that new vision, subjectivity, or politics might look like" (H.Greenhalgh-Spencer 326). Like Guattari Andrew Stables and William Scott as well as Christine Winter argue that ecological catastrophe is related to forces created by consumerism and capitalism. The structure of ecosophy that Guattari follows is rhizomatic which permits multiplicities and non-hierarchical entries which reflecting the notion of assemblage hold humans, non-humans, structures, ideologies, practices, and beliefs as branches which can shape an integrated assortment. The notion of assemblage does not mean to be connected with machinery in spite of Guattari's knowledge of assemblage where benefits through machine comes from its non-hierarchical environment but for Guattari "the idea of assemblage is meant to draw attention to relationality and to the multiplicity of identity, where human and non-human can be synchronously subjects, objects, and somewhere in-between within larger wholes, and where this positionalities can change, overlap, and interact" ( H.Greenhalgh-Spencer 328). Guattari argues that modification is necessary in the fields of material, social and ideological which together create the need of hypothesizing ecosophy that identifies new expressions, combined with the ecologies of material, social and mental. Mental ecology refers to the relationships between human beings and nature on account of ecological and psychological values. It searches for the ways of expansion and development of the emotional bond between human beings and the natural world, hence aiding individuals to attain nurtured ways of life reducing the gap between human beings and nature. What Sharon Cameron advocates is "to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature , and sometimes about how the mind sees itself" (*Ecocriticism Reader* 351). In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake" (*Ecocriticism Reader* 351). But to attain the attention to the position of human beings in the natural world as well as to attain the attention to their survival they should be conscious of the workings of human mind to be attached with nature. Nature writers, to find out the consciousness along with its understanding, are instantly exploring, upsetting, exciting and alleviating their own minds. This state of mind has been described differently by different writers. While Thoreau terms this state of mind as "awakening", Dillard and Abbey apply the word "awareness", though Dillard uses "seeing" and "stalking" for stimulated consciousness. The worldwide ecological crisis brings out the consciousness of the writers to ascertain environmental justice among the readers so that they are able to be aware of the impacts of their surroundings. Scott Slovic states that "both nature and writing ( the former being an external presence, the latter a process of verbalizing personal experience) demand and contribute to an author's awareness of self and non-self" (*Ecocriticism Reader* 352). The writer after meeting the

different regime of nature becomes attentive to its otherness and becomes more conscious of his or her power over the unknown. Regarding social liability at the present age Naess states:

I think that intellectuals might consider their intellects in a more Spinozistic way, and cultivate...a loving attitude towards what (they) have insight into, while considering it in an extremely wide perspective. And Intellectuals might do this without making the terrible mistake of becoming sentimental or fanatical. (*Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* 14).

At the stage of the post-industrial ecological calamity it is noteworthy to study human society through a reassessment of the awareness of 'nature' as it appears in the writings of different critics who though writing in an urban setting, try to communicate for nature; and thereby appreciate and deals with the difficulties of human beings with nature. Anita Desai, from her awareness of contemporary situation, connects herself with the basic concerns of ecosophy in ecological context. Usually she shows her utmost interest in showing the connections between human beings and nature. So she is generally believed to have addressed human beings' innermost relationship with nature and also human beings' behavior and their domination over nature. Thus Anita Desai's thought does not remain stop in Naess's ecological wisdom but Guattari's ecosophy is also reflected through human mind which assimilating the societal ecology fuses with environmental ecology. *Fire on the Mountain* stimulating Eco consciousness foregrounds the landscape by appreciating human actions in nature's terms, by assigning the varied nature of mountain biosphere, by representing the ecosystem of that setting and by describing some spontaneous natural processes; and thus highlights on a important bond between man and nature. And finally the novel cautions us against the man-made damage on environment in the form of excessive population, the Army Billet, The Pasteur institute and its experimental killing of animals. The title of Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* speaks a lot where ecosophy is reflected through the terms 'fire' and 'mountain'. On one hand fire acts as both destroyer as well as purifier and on the other hand, mountain refers to emotional detachment, emptiness and rigidity. Both metaphors have their own individuality in respect of mind which in fusion with society may bring ecological wisdom. We see Nanda Kaul's inner destruction in her husband's house and purification in company with nature. On one hand she feels loneliness and on another hand we see her rigidity in lonely surroundings. Desai unites frequent fire on the mountain with suppressed fire in Nanda Kaul's heart in order to take the readers at the threshold of human civilization. The Jewish philosopher Spinoza equates the 'highest virtue' with the understanding of nature. Spinoza says that Naess has learnt that truth and human society depend on the nature's basic material, the variety and majesty of the natural world. So when nature is in threat, both truth and human society will become critical. In *Fire on the Mountain* nature's majesty is felt through the eyes and heart of Nanda Kaul whose thought and action are led by ecological wisdom or 'sofia'. In the beginning of the novel Anita Desai reconciles nature's

bareness with that of the barrenness of Nanda Kaul's heart which expects nothing without loneliness.

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.(Anita Desai 3)

It is only barrenness of Kasauli that magnetizes Nanda Kaul . “What pleased and satisfied her so, at Carignano, was its barrenness.”(Anita Desai 4) Anita Desai clearly shows how Nanda Kaul's innate spirit is emotionally involved with nature from where Nanda Kaul not only gets comfort but in times of interruption she feels nature's association with her. “On the north side the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall, the sun glared, scoured and sharp. It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely.”(Anita Desai 5) Actually Anita Desai seeks to establish an utopian relation between human and non-human world, between nature and literature through the images she has depicted. Here nature has been sketched in such a way where Nanda Kaul's every thought and action have been replicated through the elements of nature. Naess says:

Modern ecologists almost unanimously emphasise the importance of togetherness and cooperation in the plant and animal world. The ecologists emphasise the restrained forms and conducts displayed in conflicts, and the importance of the utilization of dissimilar ‘niches’ in existence, that is the avoidance of direct collision. (Naess 170)

In *The Comedy of Survival* Joseph Meeker wrote that human beings are the only literary creatures of the earth. So, the creation of literature, as the significant feature of human beings should be analysed with awareness and honesty to discover its control upon human behavior and natural environment, to find out its responsibility in human survival and its coming effect in human relationships. Nanda Kaul's thought being merged with pine trees deals with a keen relationship between human beings and nature. She feels her entire being with the company of nature. “What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness”. (Desai 4) Nanda Kaul's suppressed spontaneity has been expressed through the symbol of eagle who “swam through this clear unobstructed mass of light and air”. (Desai 4) Nanda Kaul's inner spirit is obstructed through different kinds of patriarchal chains and she has not so courage to overcome with it and is compelled to make her personal desires to be hidden in her lonely heart. She is so much associated with barrenness that she cannot even tolerate hoopoe's shrill screams in the peaceful composition of nature. Her barrenness does not even allow the playful appearance

of the postman and the boy. “Hurry man, she mentally snapped- get it over with”(Desai 5). While the postman delivers a letter to Nanda Kaul she allows it unenthusiastically Her condition is compared to that of day lilies that “bloomed desultorily, under the apricot trees to the veranda...” (Desai 13) After getting the letter Nanda Kaul feels irritated and to soothe her soul and to get rid of her uncomfortable situation she places the letter on her lap and stares at the sportive appearances of nature. Nanda Kaul’s suppressed spontaneity has been expressed through the symbol of eagle who “swam through this clear unobstructed mass of light and air”. (Desai 4) Nanda Kaul’s inner spirit disturbed by the appearance of the white and yellow butterfly and “made her look down at the letter”.(Desai 15)

The obligation of ecosophy is to search a variety of views on ecological contexts, cultivating profound and congruous connections between location, society and the natural world. Naess terms his own ultimate philosophy Ecosophy T, acutely persuaded by Norwegian *friluftsliv* Gandhian non-violence, Mahayan Buddhism and Spinozan pantheism. Naess’s Ecosophy T signifies self-realisation, the realization of self for human beings which later paved the way for deep ecology movement. Being influenced by Rachael Carson’s *Silent Spring* Greg Garrard demonstrates how the modern ecology lies in threat by the unrestrained claim of human domination who not only pollutes and humiliates his environment but devastates the correlation between human and non-human world to accomplish his own demand. Thus pastoral harmony rapidly surrenders to disastrous destruction. Guattari says in *The Three Ecologies*:

Social ecosophy will consist in developing species practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family, in an urban context or at work, etc. Obviously it would be inconceivable to try and go back to the old formulas, which relate to periods when the planet was far less densely populated and when social relations were much stronger than they are today. (*The Three Ecologies* 34)

Nanda is attracted to Carignano for ‘its barrenness.’(Desai 4). Nanda is like Carignano, stark, alone and barren. The lonely house and the lonely place are the symbols of her lonely life. Nanda has no choice but to accept her great-grand daughter. As she sits alone, she sees an eagle, ‘its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle—gliding, with eyes closed’ (Desai 21). She is compelled to accept Raka into her house. Her inner heart desires this freedom while outer force interrupts her. She hears ‘A burst of crackling and hissing, as of suddenly awakened geese, a brief silence, then a voice issued from it that made her gasp and shrivel...’(Desai 22) as if “our senses are what connects us with nature directly, and so naturally...our senses open us to intertwining and intimacy (*Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment* 12). Fernando Castrillon illustrates David Abram’s belief “ on the felt experience between the body as sensing and sensuous, and the living, vibrant earth makes

manifest the ecological soul of phenomenology” (*Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment 2*).

Naess states:

Modern ecology has emphasized a high degree of sym-biosis as a common feature in mature ecosystem, an interdependence for the benefit of all. It has thereby provided *a cognitive basis for a sense of belonging* which was not possible earlier. Family belonging, the tie of kinship, has a material basis in perceived togetherness and cooperation. Through the extension of our understanding become possible to develop a sense of belongings. Through the extension of our understanding of the ecological context, it will ultimately be possible to develop a sense of belonging with a more expansive perspective: ecospheric belonging. (Naess 168)

Ila Das, a friend of Nanda Kaul wanted to spend some time with her. While Nanda Kaul converses with Ila Das over the telephone, she watches ‘The white hen drag out a worm inch by inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation’ (Desai 23). Nanda feels she is being victimized like the worm in her desperate attempt to escape from Ila. ‘Still staring at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband’s face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach...’ (Desai 24). This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is a cruel reminder of her past suffering at the hands of the unfaithful husband and her present awareness about the ruthless realities of life. Her husband had an extra-marital affair with Miss David, the Mathematics teacher. Now, Nanda is helpless as she has to welcome Ila, which means disturbing her tranquility. It is the news of the arrival of her great granddaughter Raka that makes her exasperate as it makes her aware of the past facts and bindings. “Would Raka’s coming mean the opening of that old ledger again?” (Desai 32). We see how Nanda Kaul is psychologically dominated by her daughter’s excited plans in spite of her daughter’s well knowledge about her fond of solitude and how her reality is expressed through gushed gorge.

She gazed down the gorge with its gashes of red earth, its rocks and gullies and sharply spiked agaves, to the Punjab plains---a silver haze in the summer heat---stretching out to a dim yellow horizon , and said Is it wrong ? Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing? (Desai 18).

Ecosophy from Budhhist perspective which is revealed by Shakyamuni that everything in this world is connected to each other and this connection helps one to surpass his suffering, finding happiness with others and in the harmony with nature. With this self-realization the mental

ecology is revitalized through the realization of worldly illusions and it helps to be free from false attachments that we may call our false-self. Social ecology, through the power of compassion, binds the society to make it free from bitterness and depression; while environmental ecology teaches one to perceive the oneness with nature.

In Sanskrit Raka means full moon but this Raka was not round faced, bright or calm. “Nanda Kaul thought she looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or mosquito, minute and fine, or thin precarious legs.”(Anita Desai 43) Nanda Kaul unwillingly welcomes Raka. She still thinks her an intruder, an outsider. Both have no interest to communicate. But what Nanda Kaul notices that Raka has the gift of vanishing mutely into the hills and the forest. We see Raka’s keen relationship with nature as if she symbolizes the ethics of wilderness. Raka, whose physical image is not matched according to her name, but her name indicates a natural element which she carries always. It is only Ramlal with whom Raka shared her thoughts and from him she comes to know about the Pasture Institute :

It is where doctors make serum for injections. When a man is bitten by a mad dog , he is taken there for injections -fourteen ,in the stomach. I’ve had them myself. Once a whole village was rounded up and taken there- a dog had gone mad and bitten everyone in the village. The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too many animals. They use them for tests”. (Desai 48)

We see how animals are being dominated by man for the purpose of his research. Western intellectual history structures culture against the wild, savage and animalistic which later on question about their justice through ecological degradation. Animals as metaphors are used expansively and wildly by western culture, where ecosophy ties human mind in society to lead to mould environmental ecology. In this respect Naess’s ecosophy, through his notion of deep ecology, deeply examines human subsistence through relational philosophy. Freire clearly marks human beings as separate entities from the world of animals, living organisms, and material things. For him, only human beings possess the capability of thought and this skill separates him from the animals. He further argues that animals, and other living and non-living organisms survive ahistorically and this ahistorical position of them does not allow them to engage in life. He asserts that the intellect which human beings possess distinguish their existence from the rest of the world. We study how the supremacy of human beings over the animals makes the place weird and ethereal. Raka becomes anxious “by their incongruity and their oddly oppressively threat” (Desai 49) while observing the Institute walls. Ramlal warns her :

They empty the bones and ashes of dead animals down into the ravine. It’s a bad place. Don’t go there....Jackals comes at night to



chew the bones. Then they go mad and bite the village dogs. The mad dogs run around, biting people....At night you hear jackals howling and people have seen ghosts ....The ghosts of people who have died of dog bite and snakebite roam on the hillsides. (Desai 49)

Guattari asserts that new assemblages will begin through carrying out the focus on non-human, so that the assemblages of human-nonhuman become understandable. Articulating new assemblages changes both mental and material orbs and constructs the prospect for modification and alteration. Guattari challenges that the practice of enunciating new assemblages is performed through modification, re-imagination, and re-experimentation in combination with human-nonhuman parts which are co-variably and consistently means in forming the political setting. Still, these new assemblages can be made through the elimination of capitalist values, present in multiple registers. For Bennet, “new anti-capitalist assemblages can emerge or can be provoked into existence by shared experience of harm”(H.Greenhalgh-Spencer 330).

J. Beyer states, “Our predominantly anthropocentric identity instead promotes an antagonism with the rest of nature and engenders paranoid fearfulness, and it inclines us toward an often-misguided posture of insensitive domination and control” (*Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment* 131).

Raka also comes to know about frequent forest fire in Kasauli from Ramlal. In this respect Anita Desai juxtaposes nature’s internal nature through the white hen’s lifting in the air and the sun’s moving up and down through the dusty storms and external nature through frequent fire in Kasauli resulted through the domination of man over nature. She boisterously delineates these two opposing sides when she draws out “A white hen was lifted into the air and tossed past the window in a frantic and fluttery arc, its squawks snatched out of its beak and shattered like glass”. (Desai 58) or when she depicts “The sun is bobbing in and out of the dust clouds, lighting them up in a great conflagration –a splendid bonfire that burned in the heart of the yellow clouds. The whole world is livid, inflamed. Only the closest pine trees showed, black silhouettes lashing from side to side”.(Desai 58) After depicting nature’s inner nature she represents the contradictory image of nature made out by the dominance of man who snatching out its natural wilderness leaves only the cruel truth of loss. Cronon states : “Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost his soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity”.( Cronon 80) Ramlal anxiously says to Raka about the impending danger : “This is how forest fires do start. I can’t tell you how many forest fires we see each year in Kasauli. Some have come up as 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”. (Desai 58)

Illa Das leaves Carignano which not only discloses Illa das’s misfortune in the past but her misfortune at present also. Illa das tries to prevent marriage of a seven year child of Preet Singh

and this brings about her tragedy. She is brutally raped and murdered by Preet Singh. In *New Woman/ New Earth*, Ruether states :

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this modern industrial society (Ruether 204).

Anita Desai shows here the separation of three ecologies which in their separated conditions bring out the chaos in human life which is led through the complexities of mind, nature and society. Ecosophy not only wraps ecological concerns, but also those backgrounds that occupy metaphors which contribute to a significant connection between the different portions of living and non-living organisms. While making revelation about ecofeminism Ynestra King writes, natural is the conventional analysis in ecofeminism. An understanding of the interconnected subjugations of nature which include psyche and sexuality, human repression and non-human nature in connection with the oppression of women.

J. Beyer states:

Ecocentric awareness is borne of experiences of intimate relating with the rest of nature. It is an experienced identification which necessarily involves deep compassion and care for all of nature (including humans), the same kinds of feelings and inclinations we hope to have for our loved ones. Lacking these experiences , we are prone to fall into identifying instead with modern culture's pervasive anthropocentric posture, the institutionalized barnacle incubator which promotes wall building and pathogenic alienation(*Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment* 131)

There is a kind of deep yes to nature which is central to my philosophy. What do we say yes to? Very difficult to find out – there is a deep unconditionally , but at the same time there is a kind of regret, sorrow, or displeasure...Nature is not brutal, but from a human point of view , we do see brutality-as we see yellow in the sun; as we see these fantastically blue mountains outside this window.(*Ecology, Community, Lifestyle* 15 )

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