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An Ecocritical Approach to Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism a new branch of study seeks to explore nature human correlation. It gains its prosperity due to man's indifference to nature that finally results in natural degradation and its adverse effect upon human society. This paper attempts to emphasize the interference of the human and physical world. Nature, the mother, plays a pivotal role to mould human character redirecting suppressed human emotion. The title "Fire on the Mountain" itself literally signifies a natural phenomena and symbolically manifests different human emotions against a natural backdrop - the death of Nanda's dream world, purification of Raka's agile soul and Ila's departure from an intractable society.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Fire, Physical World, Mountain

The term Ecocriticism may simply mean the study of the relationship between Nature and literature. Ecocriticism as a concept first arises in the late 1970s at the meetings of the W.L.A (western literary Association). U.S critic William Rueckert first uses the term 'Ecocriticism' in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Thus Ecocriticism spreads most rapidly in USA and A.S.L.E (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), the major organization for Ecocriticism worldwide, was founded in 1922.

The UK version of Ecocriticism is Green Study. The concept of Green Study has its root in the writings of the Romantics (1790-1830A.D) there is a difference between American and U.K version of ecocriticism. Nature is a thing of celebration to the Americans but the British variant tends to be more 'minatory'. The British warns the reader of "environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neocolonial forces" (Beginning Theory 242).

Peter Barry Opines:

"Perhaps the most fundamental point to make here is the ecocritics reject the notion that everything is socially and / or linguistically constructed. For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it"(Beginning Theory 243).

Richard Kerridge in his essay "Environmentalism and Ecocriticism" argues:

Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forest* (1992), a study of the meaning of forest in western culture from antiquity to post modernity, shows wild nature in a dialectical relationship with civilization. Wild places provide so lace for exiles, release for repressed and outlawed feelings and space for adventurous forays beyond the restriction of law and domesticity...(Literary Theory and Criticism 532).

Lawrence Buell's opinion in ecocriticism is "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 7). Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* happens to be out and out apposite so far as this opinion is concerned. Here Nanda and Raka both abhor human banding and turn to the placidity of nature restructuring their lives transcending the tedium of modern Indian metropolis.

The environmental historian Donald Worster reports:

Nature should be regarded as a Landscape of patches of all sizes, textures and colours, changing continually through time and space, responding to an unceasing barrage of perturbations (Worster 72).

Desai presents a varied and vivacious landscape of Kasauli through the mountains with its flora and fauna, smell, dust storm, long spells of rain, sudden flowers blooming after a night of rain, Carignano with its starkness and barrenness, Nanda with her aspiration for final solitude and Raka with her intrinsic burning rage as well as her urge for the purification of the much tormented soul.

Another eco-critic Greg Gerrard points out:

The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of relationship of the human and non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself (Gerrard 5).

Thus the nature plays a crucial function in redefining and restructuring the ideologies of the society and interpretation of human position in relation to nature.

From the outset, Anita Desai carefully and elaborately introduces the landscape of Kasauli especially the mountain which "seems to be not only a real empirical space, but also a symbol of shelter, freedom and fulfillment which Nanda Kaul at last receives after long years of unfulfillment"(3). When she first comes to the place, she often co-relates the mountain with the heaven of Hopkins's poem.

"I have desired to go/ Where springs not fail, /

To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail/ And a few lilies blow".

"And I have asked to be / Where no storms come/ Where the green swell is in the heavens dumb, / And out of the swing of the sea" (59).

But very subtly the author does not mythesize Kasauli, indeed it is not a heaven but a place corresponding to the “historical facts of the colonial past” (Kundu 143). The mountain along with its dormant intonation of isolation and remoteness stands bare only with its Pines and Cicadas to which Nanda assimilates herself. In this juncture Kundu's opinion is apt to remember:

The fictionalized mountain space emerges as a site that symbolically implies Nanda kaul's tragic predicament as well as her wistful dream - the long cherished and long suppressed longing for 'a room of her own', a world of her own (Kundu 157).

Nanda, an element of sublime nature, is vehemently crushed by dominant discourse of patriarchal society. So her whack to find a desolate and forsaken world may be interpreted to look for a self-sufficient world. What Anita Desai has shown through Nanda, is an echo of the observation of Mary Daly:

Within a culture possessed by a myth of feminine evil, the naming, describing and theorizing about good and evil has constituted a maze/haze of deception. The journey of women becoming is breaking through this maze- springing into a free space, which is an a-mazing process (Daly 8).

The concept of wild nature represented through forest in Anita Desai's “Fire on the Mountain” truly becomes a hope of condolence in the lives of Nanda and Ila, both depressed by a male chauvinistic society. Raka rummages in the wild nature for a soothing hemisphere devoid of any parental discord. Throughout the entire novel Desai preoccupies with and nature and natural images to bring out dormant and vibrant human emotions. D Maya observes:

In the evocation of images that transcribed the human conditions and in the poignant fictionalization of the human predicament, Anita Desai's skill is incomparable (Maya135-136).

The novel centers round three women characters- Nanda, Raka, and Ila. Nanda Kaul, an old elegant lady, takes repose at Carignano being attracted by its barrenness and emptiness.

Kundu observes:

She is unique in her elegant isolation. She is thin and straight like the pines of kasauli high and empty like Carignano (Kundu 71).

Carignano, the house and garden, becomes an extended metaphor for her. Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and elimination, at a state of elegant perfection.

Nanda finds recluse in Carignano because “it was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life”(3). The vacuity of her prolonged marital life is explicit as she fancies “if she could merge with the pine trees and could be mistaken for one” (4) critic Indira argues “Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggest her desire for absolute

stillness and withdrawal from life" (Indira 97). Here Nanda finds herself as a yellow rose creeper which is creaking and moaning. Roma Kundu opines:

The creeper shows Nanda Kauls' life – She led a life which was full of incidents and she bore several children, but at present she is old, grey and lonely. The creeper symbolizes the temporal nature of young if age in the novel (Kundu 89).

Nanda pines for candestiness symbolically presented through an eagle.

An eagle swept over it, far below her, a thousand feet below, its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained it repose, in control. (21)

"The eagle is the emblem of complete separation here, a free soul that is not bound by any responses or duties, and is not concerned to any place or person" (Kundu 89).

She thinks of the past days in her life through the metaphor of the gorge: "like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children, servant and guests, all restlessly surging, clamoring about her" (19). It implies that though she wants to obliterate the "small but intense and busy world as a vice- chancellor's wife" (31) but she still carries the spaces within herself.

The postman in the early morning is an unwelcome sight because Nanda "Wanted no one and nothing else whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (3). Kundu defines "... The postman suggests a connection with the world below the mountain, along with its various demands calls, impositions, botherations, which she thinks she has left behind forever" (kundu73). The postman conveys the news of coming Raka to Carignano to convalesce. Raka seems nothing but an intruder to her.

Nanda wants to be in perfect unison with Nature "here hills melted into sky, sky into snows, snows into air" (30). She is atrocious to retain that stillness and composer which is "an art, not easily acquired" (25). But such covetable stillness is deferred 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" ...(22). It turns out to be the voice of Ila Das. While talking to Ila Nanda observes "the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation" (23). The violence of the animal world is slowly transformed into the human world. This virulent prey- predator image of a hen pecking at a worm reminds her the past days of suffering at the hands of her adulterous husband who never loves his wife and continues a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics teacher in the university.

Carignano, the house of Nanda, is essentially a man-made evidence in the uncontaminated nature but very soon it turns out to be an element of nature imparting a roof to the sad and desolate. The

history of the house is connected to that of India under British Raj. Carignano starts its journey with Colonel Macdougall's family in 1843 as his wife Alice "could not bear the heat in the military cantonment at Ambala in the plains and hoped to save her ominously pale children by taking them to the mountains in the summer"(6). But unfortunately all his endeavors are nipped in the bud slumping to sustain all his seven children who died prematurely. Macdougall and his wife often "gaze out across the valley to Sabathu where, amongst the white flecks of the gravestones in the military cemetery, their own seven children came to be buried, one by one"(6). Then it was brought by the pastor of the local church. He wants to make a cottage garden in the house but becomes able only in bringing up three apricot trees and bird-bath. Even after his story of success it is encircled with the tragedy and misery owing to the failure of his marriage.

His joy would have been complete if his wife had made him apricot jam. But she would not. She hated him too much to cook jam for him. The longer their marriage the more she hated him and almost daily she made an attempt to murder him (7).

It is said that his ghost haunts the house "at least his pipe did, for a certain moment of the evening the veranda would be wafted over the rich, ripe odour of invisible tobacco freshly kindled" (8).

Then Carignano is occupied by a long line of maiden ladies and among them Miss Appleby is the first. She has been working as a governess in an aristocratic household in England and comes to India after retirement in order to avoid English climate. Other legends spring up regarding the maidens living in Carignano to serve the interest of the local people. These legends include the story of Miss Lawrence " who had ridden across the Thar desert wearing a linen hat and veil and perhaps fancying it was the Sahara"(8). Two Miss Hughes become the obsessive housekeeper of Carignano with their jam making and China fixing ventures and tries to add a lace of gold to the house by planting a yellow rose creeper to climb the railing of the house.

Every year Nanda Kaul stared at the astonishment, wondering where all this lacy, frilly prettiness came from in her hard stony garden, gale- blown and dour. It crept over the outdoor kitchen... sleeping and sighing all year but for that one month when it was re-born like a sweet, angelic infant in pastel frills and flounces (9).

Miss Jane Shrewsbury comes to live next and becomes the subject of a notorious scandal. Her subsequent death opens up a horizon of "gayest time ever known in Kasauli" (10) with Miss Weaver and Miss Polson who entertain the Tommies to tea parties with their gaudy appearance. Anita Desai abruptly sums up the historical process of transit with ironical touches:

Suddenly it was all over. It was 1947. Maiden ladies were not thought to be safe here anymore. Quickly, quickly, before the fateful declaration of independence, they were packed on to the last boats and shipped back to England... Carignano was up for sale and Nanda Kaul bought it (10).

Anita Desai represents nature not as an object of divine glory but an integral part of everyday life of man:

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 divinity' rather the characters come closer to nature to fulfill their individual purpose (Jena 7).

The ingress of Raka to Carignano, though repellent is looked up by Nanda merely as a responsibility to recuperate her granddaughter. But the name Raka proves to be an utter misnomer to Nanda Kaul. Nanda thinks "Raka meant the Moon, but the child was not round faced, calm or radiant" (43). Rather Raka seems to be "one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precious legs" (43). The gap of communication between Nanda and Raka is unreachable throughout the entire novel. Even to Raka, a disturbed child, Nanda appears to be "the old lady who murmured at her as another pine tree, the gray sari a rock- all components of the bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden" (44).

Raka, a child of silence and solitude, is not attracted "by the nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy, nor by the clubs and parks of the big cities" (Kundu 79). Rather she relates to the murmuring silence and the demented birds that "...beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade and Skeleton kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in grey" (Fire 99).

Raka is left to Carignano and becomes intimate with Ram Lal whom she asks about Jackals and forest fire. Even Nanda comes to envisage that that Raka is the true inheritor of Carignano as she like her makes out the spirit of it.

"She had not been asked to Carignano. Yet here she was fitted in quietly and unobtrusively as an uninvited mouse or cricket" (88).

In her desperation Raka does not feel at home in the midst of neat and orderly setting. Raka seeks to explore "the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her" (99). She also feels a queer fascination to the burnt cottage at the top of the hill and imagines as if herself has been turned into a pine tree in flames.

She raised herself onto the tips of her toes-tall, tall as a pine – stretched out her arms till she felt... She was a light, ablaze (100).

At the outset Raka is drawn to the fire which keeps her "getting out of bed and coming barefoot into the drawing room to look out of the windows and see the fire spread" (73). Raka's concomitance with fire may be interpreted as an aperture to get rid of vehement and disturbed childhood.

Raka does not feel homesick and ingresses through the rugged and barren world of Carignano as if it is her own. As she muddles the serenity of Carignano Nanda presumes her as a “mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry” (44) and “lizard like” (46). After a brief stay at Carignano Raka proves herself that she was no longer “the insect, the grasshopper child, she grew as still as a twig” (79). Though Nanda gradually develops a predilection to her great – granddaughter but the gap is unreachable. Raka comes to Kasauli to explore the hills and bocks of it and gets merged with them for hours. Like Nanda she also wants “to be left alone and pursue her own secret life among the rocks and pines of Kasauli.” (52). Rama Kundu highly argues:

The image of the burnt house “at the top of the hill” (90) used in chapter 18, part – II of the novel, mirrors the wild and unbridled nature of Raka with her irrepressible desire to set the forest on fire and her irresistible attraction towards “ the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli (91) (Kundu 164).

Nature, a force of destruction, is suggested by the images of death and destruction. The Pasteur Institute becomes a symbol of coercion where the doctors make serum for injections for dog bites. Killing the mad dog they use them for tests. Again, the forest fire turns out catastrophic to the quiet and undisturbed lives of the people on the hillside. To follow Kundu,

Through the image of prey and predator Desai depicts the violence in nature. The hoopoe catching the ‘moths’ in the mid-air and ragging worms out of earth and fighting with the bulbuls are a few instances of such images (Kundu 166).

Another epoch-making example of deleterious nature can be traced in the sudden arrival of a dust storm, yellow and fierce, that engulfs kasauli. “The Sun lighting them up in a great conflagration – splendid bonfire that burned in the heart of the yellow clouds. The whole world was livid, inflamed” (58). Raka becomes astounded at the sight and enquires Ram Lal whether it would set the hills on fire. In reply Ram Lal answers: “this is how the forest fire do start. I can’t tell you how many forest fire we see each year in Kasauli.....you can see how many trees are burnt and house too” (58). Kundu rightly continues:

She has a mysterious urge to see fire on the mountain. Her desire for destruction is symbolic of the burning rage within herself.....The deprivation of loving care has created disturbance in her subconscious mind making her emotionally blank....(Kundu 93).

Anthropogenic images which are very recurrent throughout the novel can be vividly found in the activities of the tourists who coming to the hill station, often “scratched their names into their succulent blades and there they remained – names and dates, incongruous and objectives as the barbed wire” (63). Garden House, one of the most beautiful gardens in Kasauli, is now used as an army billet. Nature is used only for human requirements.

“Ila Das leaves Carignano “forms the Part III of *Fire on the Mountain* probably with its underlying significance of Ila’s departure from Carignano which becomes a replica of the

mundane world. Ila Das, an odd and hideous woman, becomes a target of banter by the school boys.

Like langurs, the boys swung about her, long armed, careless, insulting (117).

Ila, though a tragic victim of the patriarch a society, is firm rooted to eradicate maladies of society. She calls up the incident when Maya Devi's son dies of tetanus. For the deep rooted superstition the people of Kasauli refrain from doctors having their belief still in the local priest.

The acts of violence pervading in the natural world finds its culmination in the rare subsequent murder of Ila Das by Preet Singh and his gang. The figure of Preet Singh emerging from the rocks is a ghastly sight against the backdrop of hillside.

Just then a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock.....It had her by the throat. She struggled, choking....till it becomes a shout, a shout that the villagers would hear, the red dog would hear, a shout for help (155).

The tragic death of Ila shatters the make-believe world of Nanda. She is informed by the Police to identify her dead body. Raka on the other hand set 'the forest on fire' (159). Raka sees Nanda "on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling" (159).

It is the death of Ila Das that sets fire to Nanda's dream world of Kasauli. As far as Raka's emotion is concerned Rama Kundu opines:

The fire that Raka sets to the forest is expressive of her resolve to destroy Nanda kaul's world of make – believe. It is not merely an act of violence as Francine E Krishna says, but also " an act of purification as if she might burn away the lies and deceit of Nanda's portrayal of her childhood as well as the violence of her own" (Krishna F, Indian Literature 169) (Kundu 168).

Anita Desai, an ever luminous star in the horizon of Indian English fiction, brilliantly exposes the under-lying human emotion through natural images. To follow Kundu:

There is always an interaction between the human and the non-human world as much of the imagery this novel deal with the animate non-human features of Nature and the landscape like animals, birds and insects. These images are not static rather they change according to the change within the characters (Kundu 168).

MG Vassanji opines

Anita Desia's novels do not deal with the large movement of history but with the struggle of the human soul; not with the exuberance, the contradictions, the fascination of India, its thrillingness and rawness that so easily fascinate the non-Indian reader;...

(Introduction xiii)

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