

## ***Fire on the Mountain: An Ecoconsciousness Reading***

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### **Abstract**

*Since time unknown everything is thought of from anthropocentric point of view and at the cost of environment. The presence of nature in literature is as old as our culture. Human beings dominating and exploiting everything in nature and ecology puts them at the centre and the rest excluding humans at the periphery. The effect of this long lasted tradition is the present day problem of ecocrisis and the efforts from all branches and disciplines of knowledge are being made to right the wrong. So the present research paper on behalf of humanity aims to study, interpret and analyze ecoconsciousness as it is reflected in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai. A three part novel set at Kasauli underlines the nature-human interaction through the character of Nanda Kaul, who establishes a strong bond of relationship with nature and environment by identifying herself with it. The three characters named Nanda Kaul, her great grand-daughter Raka and her friend Ila Das and their experiences of life are recorded with the natural background of Kasauli. The characters respond to the everyday happening and their inner consciousness is unlocked with its representation in outer objects and things from nature. Leaving behind the chaos and commotion of busy city world Nanda, the protagonist, seeks refuge in the mountain of Kasauli to spend her last remaining years in the close company of pines with which she identifies herself. Resorting to calm and quiet nature has healing effects. The novel deals with*

*the struggles of the human soul against the ecological background. So the paper tries to raise the ecological consciousness of mass people that enables them to pause and think over the ecocrisis and take social and political action.*

**Key words:** ecoconsciousness, nature, awareness, environment, ecosensitive, ecology, ecological consciousness, exploration, exploitation, plants and animals, nature-human relationship.

### **Introduction**

Today the entire universe is alerted by the ecocrisis. Every now and then we fear that some natural calamity might occur somewhere. Human beings limitless exploration of nature and its resources has led to this dangerous critical ecological situation. Awakened by the looming large ecocrisis now he is attempting to find the solution, take the measurements and retain the nature and ecology for future generation. Every discipline and branch of knowledge is doing its best to redress the problem. Humanity, with its squirrel's share, tries to raise consciousness of nature and ecology.

### **Ecocriticism**

The ecocriticism was begun in the USA in the late 1980s and Green Studies in UK in the early 1990s. Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*(1973) and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) contain many of the concerns of ecocriticism before the term itself existed. As literary criticism is analysis and appreciation of literary texts, ecocriticism deals with the nature-human relationship and centers its interest on Earth while studying literary texts. Cheryll Glotfelty's simple definition of it clearly underlines this. She defines ecocriticism as:

*Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of the texts, ecocriticism takes*

*an earth centered approach to literary studies* (Glotfelty, 1996: XVIII).

She takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. Ecocriticism is an awareness and conscious-raising phenomenon about the environment and nature. Being a multidisciplinary approach it has connections and cross-connections with other disciplines and plays a vital role in spreading awareness and consciousness about nature and ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary theory and ecological philosophy provides a reliable framework to analyze cultural and literary texts which are directly or indirectly related with ecological concerns and contexts. In fact this kind of attempt negotiates between literature and ecology to find the ways in which nature-human relationship develops and exists. The movements like Ecology, The Environment Justice Movement, Earth First!, Deep Ecology, Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism are solely intended to find the ways of keeping the human being's thoughtless, reckless and anti nature activities in check. The ecologists spot the self destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our paradoxical attitude towards nature. AnUS critic William Rueckert in his famous essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism* (1978) says that ecocriticism means application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (Rueckert 107). He applies the terms and concepts of ecology and analyzes the literary texts. Rueckert with the vision states that ecology, which is all pervading, has relevance not only to the present, but also to the future of the whole universe. And the knowledge of the past has to be used in the present to direct the future. Its role is to discover the ways in which nature is neglected, exploited, silenced and marginalized.

Jonathan Bate, the first British eco-critic sees ecocriticism as a double stranded approach. He states that the first approach explores human attitudes towards nature; and the second looks for the relationship between nature and man depicted in various literary texts. The earth centered approach and ecological awareness of ecocriticism is perfectly emphasized by Ian Marshall of the Pennsylvania State University, Altoona. He defines

ecocriticism succinctly as “It’s a literary criticism informed by ecological awareness.” Chris Baldick’s definition is comprehensive one because he not only defines ecocriticism and goes further to rediscover and reinterpret the nature writing, but calls it a redefined research area emerged in 1980s 1990s. In his *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* he defines ecocriticism as “A new subfield of literary and cultural enquiry . . . Ecocriticism is not a method of analysis or interpretation but a redefined area of research and rediscovery” (Baldick 101). Thomas K. Dean of the University of Iowa says “Ecocriticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories) that is in the some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world”(www.asle.org). There are number of equivalents to ecocriticism such as eco-poetics, ecological literature, eco-literature, environmental literature, environmental literary criticism, green studies, green literature, green cultural studies, nature writing so on and so forth. As a literary field of study, it seeks to relate and correlate humans to non-human environment. Ecocriticism an eclectic approach agrees with other branches, that these environmental concerns must be addressed and redressed. Though ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach and it draws from other critical branches and theories, it differs from them in that all of them consider earth as a social sphere, but ecocriticism perceives it as an ecosphere.

### **Ecoconsciousness**

Ecocriticism is born out of ecoconsciousness. It is concern for nature and ecology that has prompted humans to think over the exploration and exploitation of it. Ecological consciousness enables to forget ego consciousness and see the earth not as a social sphere but as an ecosphere. The term ecoconsciousness is coined by fusing two words. The prefix eco in ecoconsciousness is a derived and contracted form of ecology, and the noun consciousness, denotes one’s awareness and state responsiveness to ones surrounding. In simple words it is a state of wakefulness and knowing what is happening around. Consciousness is a state of ones being aware of external objects or something within oneself. The origin of modern concept of consciousness can be traced in John Locke’s *An Essay*

*Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) where he defines consciousness as “the perception of what passes in a man’s own mind” (Locke 9). Antonio Damasio defines consciousness as “an organism’s awareness of its own self and its surrounding” (Damasio 50). Thomas Hobbes’ in Chapter VII of his *Leviathan* (1904) puts that “Where two or more men, know of one and the same fact, they are said to be conscious of it to one another: which is as much as to know it together.”

The compound word ecoconsciousness denotes state of environmental awareness. Showing concern for the nature, ecology, environment, its issues and condition is ecoconsciousness. Online Merriam Webster dictionary defines ecoconsciousness as “marked by or showing concern for the environment.” The core of all these definitions is, showing concern, being aware, being conscious, caring and pursuing the environmental issues. Perceiving and knowing what is happening in surrounding nature and physical environment is called ecoconsciousness.

### ***Fire on the Mountain***

Published in 1977 and set at Kasauli *Fire on the Mountain*, a three part novel underlines the nature-human interactions through the character of Nanda Kaul, who establishes a strong bond of relationship with nature and environment by identifying herself with it. The three characters named Nanda Kaul, her great grand-daughter Raka and her friend Ila Das and their experiences of life are recorded with the natural background of Kasauli. The characters respond to the everyday happenings and their inner consciousness is unlocked with its representation in outer objects and things from nature. Leaving behind the chaos and commotion of busy city world Nanda, the protagonist, seeks refuge in the mountain of Kasauli to spend her last remaining years in the close company of pines with which she identifies herself. The novel deals with the struggle of human soul against the ecological background.

Nature and ecology has various aspects and dimensions and the novel deals with these at different levels. So interpreting this under three broad categories enriches our

understanding and consciousness of nature and ecology. The first is Environmental Conditions and Surroundings second one is Natural Resources and Environmental Issues and the last one is Plants and Animals.

### **1) Environmental Conditions and Surroundings**

The first category Environmental Conditions and Surroundings contains different seasons of the year, atmosphere, climate, landscape, seascape, scenic beauty, physical features of the place etc. The title of the novel at once draws our attention to the calamity in nature and in our life. The three parts of the novel which are named as Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Raka comes to Carignano and Ila Dasleaves Carignano emphasize the importance of 'place' the fourth category with the triad of race, class and gender in literary analysis. The place of beautiful mountain of a famous tourist place Kasauli, where Carignano the secluded and isolated bungalow on the hillside stands, acquires great significance in the novel. The setting place of the novel denotes the interrelationship between the three characters and their surrounding physical environment. The novel with its theme nature-human interactions confirms Lawrence Buell's claim that there cannot be 'is' without 'where'. The opening scene of the novel at Carignano describes Nanda living in peace on the mountain. She had done her duty, served her husband and children. Now, to lead a peaceful life she comes to the isolated bungalow in a hilly town of Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh and she finds pleasure in the natural surroundings. Her consciousness of nature and environment enables her to enjoy the beautiful nature and avoid the company of human beings. In the secluded and calm atmosphere she is so engrossed that the entry of anything else is an intrusion in her private peaceful life.

*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*(Desai, “*Fire*” 3).

The sight of postman saddens her and disturbs her composure. The calmness and quietness on the mountain offers her calmness of mind. In the introduction of the novel M. G.Vassanji comments that “Anita Desai, one assumes, delights in such scenes of nature”(Introduction xi). Interested in the depiction of struggles of human soul rather than the large movements of history Desai plunges in the solitude of dignified elderly woman and opens her heart. Nanda’s great-grandchild affected by typhoid and who has become very weak is sent by Asha and her daughter Tara to her at Kasauli to restore her health and to save her from the heat and humidity of Mumbai. “She is very weak and the heat and humidity of Bombay will do her no good. Everyone who sees her says she should go to the hills to recuperate” (Desai, “*Fire*”17). Raka’s weakness and the solution to it is same as the weakness of Sita’s father in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita’s father is also advised to go to live in the company of nature to recover from the weakness she had got from his long kept fast for the cause of freedom of India. Mr. Dalwala, a rich Parsiman offered him a house on magical Manori island with the saying “A place for you to rest and recuperate” (Desai, “*Where Shall*” 58). These two cases bear testimony that nature has healing powers. The scene of hilltop and secluded greenery is a source of joy to relieve Nanda’s boredom and loneliness.

Nanda prefers the company of pines and trees and does not want anyone to disturb her life at the natural setting of Kasauli. Her displeasure at the news of her great-grandchild’s arrival is described as “She could no more picture a child-a new, additional child-in this perfected and natural setting than she could a pergola of roses, a marble faun or fountain. She wished for none of these. On the contrary, the thought of them sickened as a box of sweets might sicken” (Desai, “*Fire*”34). Raka is different from Nanda’s children and grandchildren, for she disappears suddenly and silently into the rocks, forest and mountain and pursues her own secrets of life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. Nanda had enjoyed the natural beauty and surrounding environment of Jammu-Kashmir in her childhood. She had gone

there when the orchards were in their autumn colours and had passed through the forests of maples, walnut, chestnuts, sycamores, pine and birch, on the rocks below and the ice above. She felt like travelling in paradise. But Raka, who is interested in the outside reality of natural surrounding anyhow, manages to slip off to the hillside than listen to great-grand mothers talking.

## **2) Natural Resources and Environmental Issues**

The second category Natural Resources and Environmental Issues covers all natural resources like air, water, wind, soil, land, mountain and its opulence, scarcity, defamation, exploitation and pollution. Nanda, the protagonist, has done her duty all her life. She has looked after everyone and like nature she always cared others neglecting her own needs. This sameness makes her compare herself with pine trees and she wants to be one, no less no more. Even though she has looked after everyone in the family and had given everything she had, she is not allowed to lead a peaceful and secluded life at Carignano. Like nature she is explored, exploited and sought after for every need.

The natural and beautiful surrounding of Himalaya is being polluted and defaced by the factories and its bayoneting chimneys. Raka feels shocked to see the factories dominate the landscape like dragon. She notices the incongruity between the pleasant natural landscape and the factories that stand there posing oppressive threat to the nature and its resources. The vivid and visual picture she creates with help of words displays her consciousness of the surrounding environment being polluted by the piercing chimneys of Pasteur Institute.

*She shaded her eyes to look up at the swords of the Pasteur Institute chimneys piercing the white sky, lashed about with black whips of smoke. Raka sniffed the air and smelt cinders, smelt serum boiling, smelt chloroform and spirit, smelt the smell of dogs' brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs' guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white (Desai, "Fire"54).*



In the name of development and scientific experiment the Pasteur Institute is polluting the surrounding environment. The institute is doing experiments and producing vaccines for the dog bite, but in the process of doing so it is emanating the toxic gases and destroying the heavenly beauty and purity of nature. The pollutants and writhing smokes discharged by chimneys pollute the air and the pollutants discharged by sewage pollute the water. Fresh air and pure water which are essential and fundamental things to all the living things and animals are being polluted even in the tourist places, where one feels sure to find it. The progress in science leads to regress in environment. The sun glares out of dust clouds and lights the pines and everything. The universal problem of global warming is a major issue of anxiety all over the world. The cook Ram Lal tells Raka that the forest fires start like this and become cause of great harm to biodiversity.

The forest fires, natural or artificial, cause great loss to the ecosystem every year. The cook remembers many forest fires, which have taken the lives of many living things and swept away many non-living things. In one such forest fire, he tells, a house was burnt before the fire engine reached there. It had taken the life of two buffaloes and the cowshed was burnt down. Another example he tells of an English memsahib exhibits the lady's concern for the small pet animal. She jumps into fire and gets burned in an attempt to save the cat from fire. "They say all her hair was burnt off, even her eyelashes, when she went into save her cat. The watchman says he can still hear the cat howling in ruins at night" (Desai, "Fire"59). The action of saving the cat shows her thinking cat as her kith and kin that must be saved from coming disaster. The Watchmen bears testimony to the event. All these peoples Raka, Ram Lal, English Women and Watchman are ecoconscious in their own way. One such big forest fire Raka sees keeps her awake for long time in the night and it makes her unable to sleep, because she fears about the houses, birds and animals that will be burnt in this forest fire. The fear that if she falls asleep the fire will come closer and catch her in sleep torments her. Her fear is understandable, for it kills and becomes one of the causes of extinction of many species of birds, insects, plants and animals. Also it is not possible to put out forest fires

without water and enough manpower, so it is necessary to think about and execute the policies at government levels. It is also desirable to get the help from the non government organizations and general public to reduce such kind of tragedy.

Wandering in the forest on the mountain Raka appeases her hunger by eating nuts and berries. This reminds the primitive life of human beings who depended and depend on nature for their living. Once the pleasant cottage and green garden house was so beautiful to live in, but now the doctors of the Pasteur Institute are using and defacing it by taking control of it. In the same manner the garden house, once the most beautiful garden in Kasauli, is now being used as army residence. This undesirable transformation of pleasant cottage and beautiful garden house into the commercial residence reduces its aesthetic value and beauty. Man is encroaching the environment for more and more disregarding its inherent worth and intrinsic value. Scientific instrument like atomic reactor with barbed wire installed on the top of the hill distorts the beauty and peace of hillside. The doctors, the armies and even the tourists ruin the aesthetic beauty of the place.

*Tourists and passers-by often scratched their names into the succulent blades and there they remained- names and dates, incongruous and obtrusive as the barbed wire.*

*'Too many tourists. Too much army. How they are ruining this-this quiet place', Nanda Kaul said bitterly, her breath coming faster and her step fumbling (Desai, "Fire"63).*

It is a saddening picture that the scientists and doctors defile the ecosystem. The tourists, who visit the place out of their love and liking, also do harm to the trees and plants. Carving names, dates, signs, symbols etc. with the sharp tools and weapons on the blades of plants shows human beings natural tendency of possessing, controlling, dominating, distracting and destroying the nature. Nature is always there to fulfill the basic needs of man, but spoiling ones benefactor is against the law of nature. Man is living in ecosphere, where everyone is interdependent on each other. Desai, who is interested in small things, magnifies

the small activities and shows that small thoughtless actions of tourists can inflict big damage to nature. This small activity of the tourists breaks the peace of life and makes hell of heaven. When Nanda came there to free herself from the hustle of city life had found this place as heaven which reminds her G. M. Hopkins poem *Heaven-Haven*. Hopkins, fed up with his busy, stressful life prays in a poem for a day when there will be heaven on earth. The poet expresses the grief and cry of 21<sup>st</sup> century man, who has lost his peace and is in search of it. Like G. M. Hopkins Nanda wants to escape from the life full of responsibilities and worries and in search of peace has come to this hilly town of Kasauli. The 21<sup>st</sup> century man has to take the serious note that the heaven is not possible here with exploration and exploitation of nature, but our actions and attempts of keeping nature and environment intact can create the heaven on earth.

### **3) Plants and Animals**

The third category Plants and Animals is related with diversity, growing, nurturing, neglecting and destructing plants and animals. The house Carignano built by Colonel Mac Dougall goes to the Pastor of the church after his death. The Pastor is a kind man who brings some significant changes nearby the house. He plants three apricot trees and looks after them very well till they bear fruits. Again he buys a birdbath and places it under the trees for the birds. The sight of bulbuls and colourful hoopoes feasting on the apricots and plunging into the water in birdbath yields limitless joy to Pastor.

Once seeing an eagle gliding on currents of air with its outspread great muscular wings Nanda had wished to be like eagle in control doing nothing with outspread wings, but she could not. An eagle is symbolic of her wish to be free from her daily chores of house. The phone call of her school and college friend Ila Das makes her unhappy. Nanda talking over phone stares out of window where “She watched 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” (Desai, “*Fire*”23). Nanda who loves secluded life away from human company thinks the arrival of Raka and visit of her friend Ila Das at Carignano as intrusion in

her calm and peaceful life. Her situation is represented by the worm dragged by the large hen. Inside the house the flies buzzed outside the cicadas and in her mind the ring of phone reminding IlaDas' forthcoming visit. Every now and then Nanda's own hapless condition is reflected in surrounding nature. Raka's aversion at the sight of saunter boy with the gun used for hunting shows her ecological concern. The boy has killed a pheasant, kept it dangling from his hand and is carrying as his possession. This sight that averts Raka makes her go away. This type of hunting has endangered many species of birds and animals. These birds and animals too have their own life and man has no right to kill them, rather it is his ethical duty to conserve and protect them and their habitats. Raka's concern about the birds is in contrast to saunter boys hunting. She understands their feeling and habits. Her opinion "If we don't go away, they won't be able to feed their babies"(Desai, "Fire"72) shows her concern for the birds. The hoopoes feed their young babies with mouthfuls, but the presence of human beings disturbs them. The birds fear that they may drive them away, so they wait for the humans to disappear from the scene, to feed their young ones.

The archers of Tibet are famous for their skill in hunting musk deers for money. "... for musk deer whose musk is sold to traders for silver. Can you believe it, agents come all the way from Paris in search of musk for their perfumeries, and have bought as much as a million ounces of silver worth at a time"(Desai, "Fire"92). The beautiful deers, one of the essential living animals in ecosphere, are hunted and killed for material gains by selfish human beings. The innocent animal is reduced to commercial object and its worth is considered in economic value. But the Deep Ecology states that all living things and beings have the same importance and their own intrinsic value irrespective of their usefulness for man. Every living thing and animal has its own birthright to live, but human beings with their highly developed brains use other animals for their own benefits. A musk deer is hunted for the musk in its body, for musk is aromatic, fragrance emitting substance, which is used in perfumeries. It is expensive and costly thing, which attracts the agents and illegal traders even from foreign and distant

land. Hunting musk deer for extracting musk from its body is against the law of nature and puts them in endangered species.

Nanda has born and raised many children, seen and taken care of many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and neighbour's children. So she finds it difficult to identify one from another, to remember when which one is born and where which one lived, but the special incident of lilies after the rain every year is the only one thing that she remembers in connection with Raka's mother. So the image of lilies after the rain makes Nanda conscious of her particular daughter. Her particular daughter is identified with the lilies which bring out the memory of person associated with it. As a child Nanda has lived in Kashmir, where the richness of plants and trees has provided her with plum, almond, walnut, pistachios and chilgoza nuts. Her mother had dried and stored these dry fruits and nuts as a treasure and fortune for future. A perfect plan and its execution at the right time make human life bearable. So man has to take the lesson from this and save this nature fortune and hand it over to the future generation. Like Nanda's mother it is our responsibility in the present time to take care of nature and retain it for future.

### **Conclusion**

In short the ecologically informed novel *Fire on the Mountain* details the story of Nanda, the protagonist in her relationship with other human beings and against the backdrop of nature. The title and the three parts of novel set at the same place spotlight the importance of place in human life. Nanda's seeking refuge in the mountainside bungalow after retiring from the life of a dutiful wife and her calm, quiet and peaceful life disturbed by her great-grandchild Raka and her friend Ila Das are thematically interweaved with the natural background of Kasauli. In two contrasting situations of her busy life in university campus in city and her calm and quiet life at the mountainside Kasauli the protagonist becomes aware and understands her life. So the aforesaid discussion, analysis and interpretation enable to say that the *Fire on the Mountain* is a deeply ecologically aware novel which is a great example of ecoconscious reading.

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