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**AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMAN AND NATURE IN  
ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN***

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**Abstract:**

*Anita Desai occupies unique position among Indian Women novelists. She attempted her at writing novels, short stories, children's literature and fiction. She has written more than half a dozen novels. She has employed the genre of novel to shed light on postcolonial issues in India. Her novels depict postcolonial and postmodern issues life oppression of woman in male dominated society, woman's struggle to establish her identity, conflict between tradition and modernity, the psychology of the woman, problems in Indian institution of marriage, love, marriage and sex and above all ecological and environment issues. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* depicts the ambivalent attitude of woman towards nature. Both woman and nature are exploited and oppressed in the male dominated society. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter Raka are not happy in both cultural sphere and natural sphere. The nature has been exploited and oppressed by the society in the name of progress and material development. The present articles attempts to study Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* in the light of above study.*

**Keywords:** *Nature, Culture, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Identity, and Exploitation, etc.*

Ecocriticism is new field of literary criticism. The relationship between nature and human being is at the centre of Ecocriticism. The inter-relationship between human being and non-human being has been the subject matter of literary studies in England and America since 1980s. The theory of ecocriticism reveals the relationship between environment and literature. Both affect one another. Nature has been the source for writing literature since ancient period. But it is in the last four-five decades that the critics attempt to study the relationship between nature and human being. The study of environment in ancient period was limited to wilderness in nature and its effect on human being. But today the study of environment becomes crucial



as environment affects badly to human being. The current issues and the ambivalent relationship between nature and human being has been addressed in literature seriously. Human thoughts, human expressions and human behavior and their effects on environment are studied and addressed by various critics in various ways.

The neglectful and insensible attitude towards the environment poses threat to healthy environment. The human beings attempt to dominate and oppress environment in the name of progress and development. In fact, land provides identity to the people who are known by the name of the place they belong. Many changes have been taken place in environment. Sometimes changes in environment affect human being badly. This ambivalent relationship has been addressed and studied by various critics in various ways. Rosalind Poppleton-Pritchard writes:

Ecocritics examine the way in which literature is able to address the problematic conceptual systems which shape humans' destructive relationship with Nature, and effectively confront the challenges for individuals posed by environmental crisis (Pritchard, 10).

The term ecocriticism has been defined in different ways. However, Schlenz's definition of ecocriticism encompasses the relationship between literature and environment, interconnections between nature and human being:

Ecocriticism ... cannot be productively approached as simply another species of criticism competing for survival in the rarified habitat of academe. Rather, ecocritics should seek to transform academe by bringing it back into dynamic interconnection with world we all live in - inescapably social and material world in which issues of race, class, gender inevitably intersect in complex and multi-faceted way with issues of natural resource exploitation are invariably linked through various competing Ideas of nature. In literary studies, the ecocritic's task should involve articulation and critical examination of these linkages as revealed in and by linguistic and textual practices (Schlenz, 22).

The environment is being invented and new houses were built. The human being attempts to enjoy peace of mind living far away from society in the company of nature including hills and forests. In their attempt to enjoy isolation in the company of nature, they distort and destroy the beauty of nature and become cause of disturbances in nature. The present research article attempts to study Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* in the light of above remarks.

Anita Desai has written more than dozen novels and short story collections. She is known for her delving deep into the psychology of woman. She is first Indian woman novelist who attempts to study the psychology of modern woman in her novels. She is aware of social, political and psychological condition of woman. Her novels portray the image of woman, socio-political situations in India and east-west encounter. She is also aware of environmental issues. She addresses issues of nature, environment and ecology in her novels. Anita Desai



focuses on problems posed by destruction of environment by human being and its effect on both individual and society. The peaceful nature and healthy environment of rural area before the advent of modernism and industrialism in villages is also most important aspects of her novels.

The complex relationship between Women, animal and nature is most important aspect of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. Both nature and women are considered as 'other' and submissive. Both have been exploited and oppressed. Sacrifice is common to both. However, the relationship between women and nature is incongruous. Her *Fire on the Mountain* also depicts the relationship between women and nature in ambivalent way. Anita Desai rethinks and restudies the role of women in ecological issues resulted due to technological and industrial progress and development. Nanda Kaul is the protagonist of the novel whose relations with nature and animals are depicted as ambivalent. She loves nature but her love for nature is different from other. She came to Kasauli hill station in order to enjoy peace of mind. In fact, she had everything at her father and husband's houses. But she was not satisfied in both houses. She was fed up with material comforts at her husband's house and hence chooses to live in Carignano house at Kasauli hill station. But her relationship with nature and environment is not healthy one. She neglects the nature, but at the same time attempts to seeks solace and peace in the company of nature. She does not like to remember her relationship with her husband who was Vice Chancellor of university. She does not like to be interfered her private world in Kasauli. Gurpreet Kaur writes about the relationship between Nanda Kaul and nature:

They straddle the binary in-between, thus showing their ambivalence to both the culture/nature constructs. There is no romantic or celebratory linking of the woman to nature or animals that puts them in inferiorised positions. Within this framework, the question of violence—towards both women and animals—is key (Kaur, 01).

Nanda Kaul does not like nature and animals surrounding her house at Kasauli. She spends most of her time in veranda of the house from where she can watch and enjoy the wild nature:

...she raised her small, shorn head on its very thin and delicate neck and regarded the apricot trees, the veranda, Carignano. She listened to the wind, in the pine and the cicadas all shrilling incessantly in the sun with her unfortunately large and protruding ears, and thought she had never before heard the voice of silence (Anita Desai, 1999, 44).

Nanda Kaul's relationship with nature is ambivalent. She neither dislikes nature nor appreciates it. She has shown least attachment to nature. In fact, Nanda Kaul came to Kasauli hill station after the death of her husband only because she did not like the extramarital relationship between her husband and Sanskrit teacher in the university. The fact is that she is forced to live a life of isolation. She wanted to forget her husband's illegal relationship with another woman. Her relationship with her husband was not happy one as the novelist has given description of her relationship with her husband at the end of the novel:



... Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen – he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life (Anita Desai, 1999, 158).

Raka has been presented as great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. She differs from Nanda Kaul in her relationship with nature. She loves nature and likes to wander in the nature. She has been very sympathetic towards nature and environment. She is quite contrast to Nanda Kaul. She loves nature and its wilderness. She likes to wander in the forest. She is not afraid of wild animals. She is very curious to experience the company of wild animals in the forest. She is happy in the wild and animalistic nature. Nanda Kaul is jealous as well as admirer of Raka for her

hurtling away, grabbing at rocks and tufts of bleached grass, scrambling up the almost sheer face of the hill, doubled up with her knees often just under her chin, then stretched out as far as they would go, then suddenly popping up on to a higher ledge. Unseeing, she almost ran into a goat, then a kid, then a whole herd that came springing down, leapt over her back and flew like birds, ...IN no time at all, it seemed, the child had reached the top of the hill and stood bracing herself against the wind as it tried to lift her and blow her away (Anita Desai, 1999, 66).

Raka is very sympathetic towards animals and birds in the forests and around the hill station. She forbids Ram Lal to set forest on fire because she thinks of the animals and birds living in the forest. She is very sensitive about the forest and nature. She loves to explore “the new brave world”. She chooses Kasauli to enjoy the company of nature. That is why she wanders alone in nature. She like Monkey point on the Kasauli hill station. When she reaches to the top of the hill and saw Monkey point, she felt “she was higher than the eagles, higher than Kasauli and Sanawar and all other hills” (Anita Desai 1999, 61-62). From the top of the hill, she has seen five rivers of Punjab, Chandigarh lake looking like a silver brooch and Sanawar, and other hills. Climbing top of the hill is best experience for her. Raka has been presented as lover of nature. She likes to explore her surroundings. She is pained to see the distress of animals and birds. She hates to abuse animals. When Ram Lal narrates what happens at Pasteur Institute on the top of the hill, she becomes sad. Ram Lal narrates:

It is where doctors make serum for injections. ...Once 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. ...Oh, they are always boiling serum there (Desai, 1999, 44).

Raka is not fascinated towards the beauty of nature but towards the barrenness of hills and forest. She admits, “The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. ...It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her” (Desai 1999, 90-91).



She likes to see the jackals. Though Ram Lal, the cook in the house of Nanda Kaul, forbids Raka not to wander alone in forest during darkness, she secretly wanders in ravines. She is not happy dance party in the club. She is terrified when she sees

... the skull and crossbones in white upon his chest. He had a scythe tucked under his arm and it glinted and shot off bolts of lights when he raised it and chopped off the woman's bucket head. Under her disheveled hair her pink throat opened wide and she laughed in bubbles of blood....(Desai, 1999, 71).

The novel ends with Raka's setting forest on fire. When she learns about the hard treatment given to her relative like Ila Das and subsequent death of Ila Das, she becomes very angry. The horrific death of Ila Das reminds Raka the harsh relationship between her father and mother. Her father used to beat her mother and abuses her very badly. Raka has changed completely after listening the rape and murder of Ila Das. She sets forests on fire.

While the fire is evidently her revenge against the adult world, Raka also symbolically destroys the local space which was the scene of the violence, failure and death of females before her. In the destructive agency, the collective silence of women is finally articulated through her (Gurpreet Kaur, 6).

On the one had Raka has been disturbed by the forest fire. When she was walking with her great grandmother in the verandah of Carignano, she sees forest on fire. She thinks of the pine trees and animals and birds living in the forest. Raka is restless. She thinks of fire brigade to put off the fire in the forest. But Ram Lal informed her that it was not useful as there were scarcity of water during June: "There isn't a drop of water in the Simla Hills, in June." (Anita Desai 1999, 887). Raka could not sleep throughout the night due to forest fire.

On the other hand, Raka's sets forest on fire as she was disturbed by the rape and eventual murder of Ila Das. Her senses stopped to think about human being and animals and birds living in the forests. She was disgusted with the worldly things.

In short, Anita Desai has depicted Nanda Kaul and Raka's ambivalent relationship with nature and animals. Anita Desai depicts horrific result of setting forest on fire and lack of water and scarcity of water during the summer days when forest on hill sets on fire. The killing and working on dead bodies of animals at Pasteur Institute is also horrific and terrible one. Though the intention of the author is not to create awareness about the importance of forests and hills in Himalayas in the lives of human being, some ecocritical aspects are seen scattered all over the novel. By re-reading and re-interpreting Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the woman's ambivalent relationship with nature and animals is evident. Raka cannot be seen to be romantically aligned with the nature and natural sphere. The notion of violence has been key while human's exploration of nature.



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