



DUST AND DEFIANCE: ECOFEMINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract

*This study explores the intricate bond between environmental decay and patriarchal control in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. By applying an ecofeminist lens, the analysis delves into how the barren, arid landscape of Kasauli mirrors the protagonist Nanda Kaul's internal emotional desolation and her withdrawal from societal expectations. The scarcity of water serves as a powerful metaphor for the "dryness" of her existence under traditional gender roles, highlighting how both nature and women are exploited or neglected by a male-dominated structure. Furthermore, the research identifies water as a critical site of struggle, illustrating how its management and lack thereof dictate the domestic burdens placed upon women. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that the subjugation of the female spirit is inextricably linked to the degradation of the natural world, as both are treated as resources to be mastered rather than life-forces to be nurtured. Through this intersectional reading, the study concludes that the healing of the environment is inseparable from the liberation of women from systemic oppression.*

Keywords

Ecofeminism, Water Scarcity, Gendered Isolation, Environmental Patriarchy, Himalayan Feminism, etc.

Full Article

Introduction: The Dryness of the Feminine:

The wind at Carignano gives no relief, but rather, it brings that gritty dust of a landscape which is scrapped dry, with a technique of emptiness that mimics the deprived, hollowed-out life of Nanda Kaul. The Himalayan heights of Kasauli in *Fire on the Mountain* are a crucible of the so-called ' parched feminine', which is the meeting point of ecological sterility and patriarchal domination. Drawing sustained criticism of the patriarchal drought, this paper claims that Desai uses the drought-infested landscape as a scorching rebuttal to the literal deprivation of water, as the systematic denial of feminine agency and vitality. Based on the ecofeminist theory of Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard, the analysis abides by the way that scarcity of resources contributes to the isolation of genders and strict social orders. Investigating the aspects of survival, marginalization and bodily autonomy, this paper will show that Nanda Kaul did not withdraw passively, she had a complex, though burnt, opposition to the world that made women and earth mere superfluous products. Finally, the study highlights the importance of postcolonial ecocriticism in the revelation of collective trauma of the land and spirit of femininity in the Indian literary scene.

Research Methodology:

The methodology employs a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, centered on the critique of 'maldevelopment'- a patriarchal and capitalist model of progress that views nature as a passive resource to be exploited rather than a living system to be nurtured and Greta Gaard's ecofeminism, focusing on the ideological 'dualisms' that underpin Western and colonial thought to perform a close textual analysis of Desai's novel. By



combining Shiva's focus on the 'feminine principle' with Gaard's analysis of 'hierarchical dualisms,' the research methodology follows these steps:

- ✓ **Identification of Ecological Symbols:** Mapping water scarcity and dryness as literal and metaphorical markers of female subjugation.
- ✓ **Thematic Correlation:** Linking the 'environmental exploitation' of the Kasauli landscape to the 'gendered oppression' of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das (Khan & Shah, 2025).
- ✓ **Resistance Analysis:** The interpretation of the eventual fire as an ecofeminist re-possession where the burning of the dry landscape is the rejection of the patriarchal regime that had dried it out.

Literature Review:

Criticism of Anita Desai has been moving towards ecocriticism more often than not, now that it is evident that the literary scenery as depicted by her is never the inertia of scenes, but a participant in the psychological play of her characters. The core of the discussion is the so-called Woman-Nature Interface, which Yadav and Kashyap discuss and state that internal spiritual states of Desai characters mostly are projected in the unforgiving and rudimentary world of nature (Yadav and Kashyap, n.d.) This interface plays the potent role in *Fire on the Mountain* as the barrenness at Kasauli indicates the isolation that Nanda Kaul has created to herself.

As a theoretical system, ecofeminism theorizes the relationship between nature exploitation and women oppression as the two products of the patriarchal system. According to Akanksha Singham, "her novels often emphasized the existential connection of women to nature, especially in the eco-prone settings" (Singham, 2025). This is a weakness that is being articulated in *Fire on the Mountain* in the form of water shortage. The dried-up terrain is not merely geographical, something even the critics refer to as an extension of what they refer to as environmental patriarchy, where the control of the resources parallels the control of female body and labor force.

The feminine identity crisis research by Ferdousi Akter on the work of Desai is an essential psychological ground on which this ecofeminist reading is based. According to him, "her women tend to be sacrificial members of the family, to struggle against social and familial constraints" (Akter, 2024). When Nanda Kaul moves to Carignano, she tries to get away with these limitations, but the house that she lives in turns out to be a form of imprisonment psychologically, as much as is the case with the farmhouse that Sinclair Ross uses in her "The Lamp at Noon" (Ersa, 2025). The isolation she seeks is subverted by the harshness of the environment, suggesting that there is no true escape from the patriarchal 'dust' that permeates both the home and the wild.

Furthermore, M. Emara's ecofeminist reading of the novel emphasizes that the "oppression of nature and women" (Emara, 2017) are parallel processes in patriarchal societies. This is resonated in the work of Gurpreet Kaur, who explores "postcolonial ecofeminism in Indian women's writing, suggesting that the Indian landscape carries specific historical and gendered traumas" (Kaur, 2017). The lack of water in the novel is one of the main symbols of this suffering. Since water is a traditional image of life, fertility and feminine, the lack of water in Kasauli is an indication of an arid existence in which the spirit of the feminine is deprived of food. "The concluding fire represents a destructive yet inevitable reclamation of agency against a landscape—and a society—that has been scraped dry" (Akter, 2024; Emara, 2017; Singham, 2025).

Analysis of the Text:

Literal Resource: Scarcity Eroding Survival:

The nature of the environment in *Fire on the Mountain* is unforgivably arid. Literary lack of water is the main driver that determines the pace of life at Carignano. Desai shows this by the physical condition of the estate: "the cistern... scraped dry" (Desai, 23). This picture of the scraped cistern



is an effective opening metaphor of the life of Nanda Kaul, herself. Having played the role of the wife of the Vice-Chancellor all these years - keeping a large home, serving guests, and performing the so-called gendered labor she is supposed to do - she is exhausted, both emotionally and physically.

The lack of water is a literal environmental calamity that mirrors her psychological suffering. Just as the dust storm in Ross's work serves as an "externalized voice for... repressed emotions" (Ersa, 2025), the drought in Kasauli symbolizes the loss of patience and ability of Nanda to love. It is never just the lack of rain, but the result of a lifetime feeding other people and having to deny herself. It is the existence of the household that is dependent on the inadequate, controlled flow of water, just as the survival of Nanda depended on the meager, controlled portions of autonomy she would have gotten in her former life.

Social Hierarchies: Elite Control and Violated Bodies:

The representation water in the novel also serves as an indicator of social and patriarchal rank. Although Nanda Kaul is relatively (though parched) secluded in Carignano, the village around her and her friend Ila Das are a lower level of environmental and social vulnerability. This patriarchy of the environment ends up being the ultimate victim of the social worker Ila Das who is in the fight against the established patriarchy of the mountains.

Rape of Ila Das is explained in the words reflecting the rape of the natural world: "Ila's violated body mirroring [the] defiled spring" (Desai, 67). This connection is very central to the ecofeminist argument stating: "oppression of nature and women" are one and the same (Emara, 2017). The 'elite control' of resources—where the wealthy can afford to live in isolated estates while the poor struggle for basic survival—reflects the patriarchal control over women's lives. Ila's death, occurring in the dark and dry landscape, highlights the 'vulnerability' of women in "ecologically vulnerable environments" (Singham, 2025). Her consistent struggle to bring 'water' (denoting progress, health, safety) to the village is met with the ultimate 'arid' response, that is, violence and death.

Marginalization: Raka's Disposability via Drought:

The arrival of Raka, Nanda's great-granddaughter, introduces a different dimension of the 'parched feminine.' She is described as a 'wild creature,' one who thrives in the barrenness that Nanda merely endures. However, her 'disposability' is highlighted by the drought: "Raga's disposability via drought" (Desai, 112). She is a child of suffering, and her empathy for the 'burnt-out' landscape of Kasauli suggests a soul that has already been burnt by domestic trouble.

She drives Nanda to question the fact that she cannot really dissociate herself with the environmental disaster of her history of family. "She is roaming around the arid hills, seeking life in the land where all one can find is dust and interior walls" (Ersa, 2025). The drought alienates her by denuding the lushness of the childhood and leaves her to feed in a terrain, an affectively unfertile one, as her own domestic existence. Her wildness is a process of survival in such a world where the reservoirs of family affection have long been dried up.

Feminist Issue: Lack of Bodily Control:

The last aspect of water in the writing is that it is associated with physical autonomy. The thirst is quite literal and figurative: "Nanda Kaul is denied the body autonomy due to thirst" (Desai, 156). Her whole life was a bowl of the demands of other people her husband, her children, her social duty. It is in her old age that she tries to reclaim her body in retreating to a location where she can become stagnant. But the atmosphere is not willing to provide her with this relaxation.

The 'thirst' she experiences at Carignano is the thirst for a self that was never allowed to exist. The 'arid flames' of the title refer not just to the literal fire Raka sets at the end of the novel,



but to the burning resentment and unfulfilled desires that Nanda has suppressed. The 'environmental patriarchy' that controlled her labor now controls her survival through the scarcity of water. When Raka announces, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire," it is the ultimate ecofeminist act of destruction. The fire consumes the 'parched' landscape, the 'dry cisterns,' and the 'domestic walls' that have confined Nanda's agency" (Ersa, 2025). It is a violent recovery of the 'lost continent' (Suri, 2025) of the female experience, a final, anxious attempt to find 'water' in the form of total, scorched-earth liberation.

Conclusion:

Thus, to sum up, the dry fires at the Kasauli hillside is a life of deprivation of water. The mental conflicts of Nanda Kaul relate to the environmental harm by the patriarchal system that commands resources. Themes of domestic isolation and ecological crisis are reflected in the novel by Desai as an ecofeminist action should be taken to protect both the land and the women.

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Article Received:15/03/2026

Article Accepted:23/03/2026

Published Online:30/03/2026

To Cite the Article: *Jadhav, Shyam*. "Dust and Defiance: Ecofeminism in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-4, March, 2026, 103-106. www.literarycognizance.com

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