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## **Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* – Theme of Alienation and Eco-Critical**

### **Praxis**

**By**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Man lives in close communion with nature and hence every change of mood in Nature affects the mood of man also. Man's relationship with nature has been expressed beautifully in the poems of Wordsworth, Keats, Frost and Shakespeare. In the New Age literary theory Eco-criticism has found a prominent place which examines and explores the bond between nature and man in literature. Classics in Literature like Shakespeare's plays and Romantic Age poetry are being re-read in this context and eco-critical perspective gives a new dimension to the critique. This Paper explores the Indian Writer in English Anita Desai's novel Fire on the Mountain in an eco-critical perspective and examines the way Desai brilliantly manipulates nature imagery in her novel in the depiction of the alienation of her protagonist Nanda Kaul who lives alone in her house Carignano situated on the mountain ridge of Kasauli.*

**Key Words:** *nature, Eco-Criticism, bond, literature, nature imagery, alienation, protagonist*

### **Introduction**

Man lives in close communion with nature is a historical fact. That is why every change of mood in Nature affects the mood of man too. When nature showers prosperity on man in the form of

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fertile fields and abundant harvests man rejoices. Similarly natural calamities like storm, earthquake and tsunami leave man depressed. Man's relationship with nature has been expressed beautifully in the poems of Wordsworth, Keats, Frost and Shakespeare. Shelley's "To a Skylark", Keats' "Ode to Autumn" and Frost's "After Apple-Picking" bring joy and excitement in our minds. The great playwright Shakespeare also has drawn inspiration from nature for conveying his philosophy of life through his plays. In the New Age literary theory Eco-criticism has found a prominent place which examines and explores the bond between nature and man in literature. Classics in Literature like Shakespeare's plays and Romantic Age poetry are being re-read in this context and eco-critical perspective gives a new dimension to the critique. This Paper explores the Indian Writer in English Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* in an eco-critical perspective and examines the way Desai skillfully manipulates nature imagery in her novel in the depiction of the alienation of her protagonist Nanda Kaul who lives alone in her house Carignano situated on the mountain ridge of Kasauli.

**A note on Eco-criticism**

The concept of Eco-criticism deals with exploring the close relationship between man and nature. "The presence of a bond between the human and the non human generally forms the ecocritical basis of a text. Ecocriticism pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it both interprets and represents the natural world" (Shodhganga, Web).

The word "Eco-criticism" first appeared in William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism". In Western Literature Association meeting in 1989 Cheryll Glotfelty who at the time was a graduate student at Cornell, used the term to refer to the diffuse critical field that had been hitherto known as "the study of nature writing." This concept was immediately supported by Glen Love, Professor of English at the University of Oregon in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism." (Michael P. Branch & Sean O'Grady, Boise, Web). Nasrullah Mambroi observes that

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one of the main goals in eco-criticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. (Mambroi, Web)

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) speaks of two waves of eco-criticism. The first wave speaks for nature. This wave upholds the value of nature seeking the cultural distinction between man and nature. "An interesting focus for many eco-critics is the way that wilderness is represented in literature and popular culture. This approach examines the ways in which wilderness is constructed, valued, and engaged." (Eco-centrism, Web) In the old world literature wilderness has been represented as a threat or a place of exile. But in contemporary literature wilderness has been treated as a pastoral type of retreat devoid of the element of fear but viewed as a place of sanctuary.

Dr. Patrick D. Murphy in his book *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis: Theoretical Arguments, Literary Analysis, and Cultural Critique* "utilizes ecocriticism and ecofeminism to develop his concept of transversal practice: an interdisciplinary combination of theory and applied criticism. He begins by explaining the necessity for cutting across disciplinary boundaries of all kinds in order to address the ecological dimensions of culture and literature." (Rowman & Littlefield, Web)

## **Findings and Analysis**

### **Treatment of Nature in Anita Desai's novels**

Anita Desai uses nature imagery in her novels to depict the moods of her protagonists. All her protagonists are nature lovers and they understand nature as an extension of their self. They are conscious of the trees, flowers and animals around them and often Desai uses the moods of nature as symbols to express the moods of her protagonists. Maya in *Cry the Peacock* thinks about the papaya trees with flowers when she craves for the intimacy with her husband. The

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distress calls from the peacocks match with the distress in Maya and the sigh from the drooping leaves of the trees in her compound becomes the metaphor for the depressed mood of Bim in *Clear Light of Day*. For the protagonist Adit in Desai's *Bye-bye, Blackbird*, the lush green countryside of England intensifies his nostalgia and for Nirode and Monisha in *Voices in the City*, they find it difficult to adapt to the city of Calcutta with its heavy monsoons, overflowing drains and the high level of sounds of traffic and rain which makes a stark contrast to the serene and beautiful surroundings of their hometown, the Himalayan village Kalimpong. In all these characters the distress in Nature seeps into their psyche and unconsciously this becomes an element in causing identity crisis in them. Jasbir Jain appreciates Desai's skill in detailing nature:

The close observation of nature, the minute details about plants and flowers, their botanical names, their variations; the insects, worms, lizards, birds, the animals... The recurring pattern between hills and plains, between urban centres and Darjeeling, Kasauli and Kalimpong also speaks for itself. There is, in her work almost a Joycean fascination with external detail, as if she was looking for in the *terra firma* to enable imagination to take flight. (2-3)

**Nanda Kaul's Alienation in *Fire on the Mountain***

Unlike Maya, Monisha and Nirode who are all in the prime of youth, the protagonist in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) Nanda Kaul is an elderly woman, a great-grandmother who opts for a secluded life in an isolated house, Carignano, situated on the mountain ridge of Kasauli. The novel probes more into her adult life and the trauma she has faced as a wife and a mother, than into her childhood. The novel is divided into three parts – Part I Nanda Kaul at Carignano; Part II Raka comes to Carignano; Part III ILA Das leaves Carignano. Nanda Kaul makes a conscious and brave effort to keep herself distanced from her family members who have disappointed her in many ways. In her interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai comments on *Fire on the Mountain* like this: "I think the one which gave me something closest to satisfaction, in Papers in **11<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Nature, Culture, Language and Literature: Narratives and Critical Practices** can be accessed from

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which I have come closest to what I set out to do, and I don't think I very often do, is *Fire on the Mountain*" (12). In Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* the author treats Kasauli more as a place of retreat than as a place of exile.

Nanda Kaul's house Carignano reflects her mood as it stands aloof on the hilly region of Kasauli, cut off from the rest of the world. Or that is how she wants it to be. She wants to be away from all human contacts as well as from her disturbing past: "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (3).

The book she reads, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, matches her moods, sometimes aggressive and sometimes depressed. One of her favourite scraps in the book, *When a Woman Lives Alone* reflects her mental state:

'When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water plants... I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clear she has scurried about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate is kept tightly shut.' (29)

She wonders whether Carignano "would live up to that epicurean lady's ideas of how things should be" (31). Nanda keeps herself distanced from her family members and the bare garden in her house Carignano becomes the symbol for Nanda's aloofness and alienation. For Nanda the old house and its barren garden is a projection of her own life, a life abandoned by others. The garden of Carignano is also a projection of Nanda's self that is bare and empty.

Nanda likes the house mainly for its isolated status and the plain house painted in white with its uncared garden gives Nanda a crude satisfaction. She does not wish to plant a tree, "Like her the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination..." (33). Observes Dubbe, "The garden is as lonely as its owner" (Dubbe, 30). Kamini Dinesh in her study of the novel has made the observation that "through the description

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of the mountain retreat Anita Desai has translated Nanda's desolation into a physical image" (90).

The house has many parallelisms with Nanda's life. Carignano has a colourful history before Nanda Kaul takes over it. It was a place that breathed life when its previous owners of different temperaments occupied it, and all of it died down to quietness when the last of the British were shipped off, before India's Independence. Nanda also has a similar past. She considers her life in the clamorous atmosphere of her husband's house as the "ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined." (20). Even though she has performed her role as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law dutifully, she remains an alienated self. Her commitment to her family is a mere discharge of duty, a vocation without any emotional involvement: "It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life spring had dried up" (33). She has often felt the urge for withdrawal, for inner space, for inner relaxation: "She had practised this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon: it was an art, not easily acquired" (25).

Nanda had gone through the trauma of her husband's infidelity for years. Her self-esteem does not allow her to beg for his love and she watches his every movement from a distance. She cherishes one personal moment of victory in her life when, years ago, she had watched her husband entering their bedroom after dropping the 'one' guest, herself standing in the garden among the shadows of the night, unnoticed by him: "That was one time she had been alone: a moment of private triumph, cold and proud" (28).

Abraham Maslow's theory Hierarchy of needs speaks about the need for love, belongingness and self-pride which emerges in a person after the safety need is satisfied and the thwarting of these needs can cause negative effect in one's personality (62-3). In Nanda's life, these needs are thwarted by her husband's life-long affair with his colleague, that makes her ponder over the meaninglessness of her existence and so she withdraws herself from the world and longs for seclusion. Erikson says that the lack or loss of accrued ego integration could result

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in disgust and despair. Nanda Kaul is a victim of disintegrated ego which makes her turn away from life.

### **Eco-Critical Praxis in the novel**

Desai uses the five elements of nature viz. earth, air, fire, water and sky (space) skillfully and aesthetically in the novel as symbols. Since Desai has lived in Kasauli, as told to Srivastava in her interview, she is very familiar with the flora and fauna of the region. The alienated self of Nanda notices only such aspects in the flora and fauna of Kasauli that matches her desolation. Thus in her distressed state Nanda wants to be “a charred tree trunk which cannot harbour irritation, a broken pillar of marble in the desert which cannot show annoyance or a lizard on a stone wall to imitate death” (24). Her death-wish later becomes a reality when the novel ends. She finds her own image in the mutilated worm, “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” (23). Nanda’s love for space reflects in her longing to imitate the eagle’s flight, just glide through life, eyes closed, wings spread, in perfect control (21). Her longing to liberate herself from all bondage is the call of her inner self, the pathetic cry to free herself from all painful thoughts of her past. Her anguish makes her see moonlight a symbol of funeral and she draws her own parallel in the agitated flight of the lapwing she has seen in her garden (28).

Desai poetically depicts Nanda’s tenderness for aesthetics in nature, “She went to the window and looked out on the flushed ravine, the molten plains, the sky filled with a soft tawny light in which the sun floated like a lighted balloon, making the pine needles glisten like silk, like floss” (29).

This tenderness for nature is later extended to her great-granddaughter Raka. Even though Nanda is not happy about Raka’s arrival initially, as time passes her presence brings a change in her life. Raka’s arrival once again kindles the embers of love in Nanda Kaul. Nanda

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manipulates nature's wilderness to capture Raka's heart when she accompanies her on long walks knowing well the child's great exploring spirit, her capacity to detach herself from others which Nanda thinks, is an extension of her own self. She weaves beautiful stories about her glorious past to draw the child to her and she makes herself believe these stories of the illusory world. Finally the shock of the brutal rape and murder of her long time friend Ila Das leaves her completely devastated and Nanda cannot survive the shock.

When Raka announces about her setting fire on the mountain forest with great excitement, Nanda Kaul doesn't hear it. Desai exploits the element of fire for its purpose as purgatory, annihilating and finally liberating. It clears her of all the lies that she has been living on, thus helping her to know the true nature of her life and Nanda undergoes expiation of her sin of lying to herself. Nanda's restless spirit traverses through the ups and downs, gliding and soaring like an eagle, to eternity through her death to its final liberation.

### **Conclusion**

In her interview with Ramesh.K. Srivastava, Desai makes clear her purpose when asked whether Nanda cherishes alienation for its own sake: "Not for its own sake, but because it is imperative for her. Only in such a state can her illusions survive intact" (223). Nanda's alienation in Carignano is self-opted, and it can be viewed as a brave attempt on her part to retain her self-pride and also a vain attempt to run away from her disturbing past.

### **Author's Biography**

Dr. Vimala Chandrasekharan works as Assistant Professor & Head of the Department of BA English in Guru Nanak College (Autonomous), Velachery, Chennai – 600 042. She has presented and published several Papers at various National and International Seminars. She obtained her Ph D from the University of Madras and her Ph D Thesis was based on the Psychological Study of the Indian Writer in English Anita Desai's Novels. She is interested in Creative writing, Music and Theatre. Her areas of interest include Shakespeare studies, Indian Writing in English and American Literature.

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