



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.828 (SJIF 2022)

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: Nature at Decadence

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686**

DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/03.2022-56498483/IRJHIS2203012>

Abstract:

Nature inspires the men of letters. When they get fed up with the mechanical world, they get inspiration and solace from Nature. The great Indian writers like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markanday, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai have expressed their concern for the deteriorating condition of Nature. Modern man has been exploiting the Nature for the sake of material prosperity by using modern science and technology. The writers express their concern and protests through their characters in their writings.

The paper aims to explore both the violent and caring nature of Nature for the individual who is fed up with the routine and materialistic life. Nature provides true peace and comfort but the man's lust has made Her lose beauty and identity.

Anita Desai's famous novel *Fire on The Mountain* the winner of Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 projects the healing and soothing touch of Nature. On the other hand, it depicts the decadent pictures of Forest and mountain and their causes. The novel portrays the beautiful landscape of Kasauli, Carginano, the tall pine trees, the mountain, apricot trees, forest and the surroundings which provide better prospect of living to Nanda Kaul, the woman protagonist of the novel. It shows the affinity of a woman with Nature. The novelist's concern for the decadent picture of calm and beautiful forest calls upon the readers and intellectuals to ponder over it.

Keywords: Nature, exploitation, industrialization, mountain, loneliness.

Introduction:

Great men of letters have depicted Nature as a mother providing care, wealth, peace, comfort and rest and at the same time the realities of harshness, cruelty and decadence of Nature in their writings. Today academia shows deep concern for their environment and advocates for an eco-friendly world. Their attitudes and analysis are referred as eco-criticism. The term 'Eco Criticism' is defined in *The Ecocriticism Reader* 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,

Marxist criticism brings an awareness modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glottfelty, XIX)

The ecocritics ponder over ecological problems like environmental crisis, pollution, deforestation and human recklessness towards Nature. They try to solve the ecological problems because they are “Features of our society, arising out of our dealings with nature” (Gerrad 6). The literary artists have taken the responsibility of establishing a sustainable environment which requires a healthy relationship between man and his environment.

“The business of literature is to work upon consciousness”. (Bate 23). The great Indian writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markanday, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Anita Desai have raised their voice about decadent environment and the miserable living condition of present time. The great movements like Chipko Movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan raised the issue of saving environment and great women social activities like Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, C.K. Janu and Medha Patkar have echoed the voice of many for the cause of environment.

Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, the winner of Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 projects the novelist’s concern for decaying conditions of natural surroundings of Kasauli and carginano. When the novel opens Nanda Kaul, the woman protagonist of the novel is depicted as a lonely woman living in Carginano which is far from the madding crowd. She prefers a secluded life at Carginano as an alternative to painful and suffocated life. She does not want to be disturbed by anybody and even the postman’s arrival to deliver the letter is an unwelcome interference. “She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (3).

Life in the midst of Nature provides solace from the modern rat race life. Nanda Kaul gets satisfaction, peace of mind and coherence in her life after leaving the monotonous routine life as the wife of Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University. As the wife of Vice-Chancellor, “its crowding had shifted her” (31). She believes that she has performed her duty as a wife and mother of several children. She feels that she has been bored with her tedious day today life for which she decides to “be left to the pines and cicadas alone”(3). She wants to discharge the materialistic life and wishes to be relived of it. “I’ve discharged all my duties”(33). She is even afraid of thinking of the reality of materialistic life and hesitates to open her daughter’s letter. She feels disappointed thinking of her daughter’s helplessness and her granddaughter’s arrival. She considers her living at the hill side as time of her rest.

Nanda Kaul gets enraptured at the beauty of carginano where “hills melted into sky, sky into snows, snows into air”(30). She feels the cuckoo calling her softly and musically. She waits for the “First cool stir of breeze in the late afternoon to relieve her” (24). She even feels “whiteness,

freshness and coolness” on stepping “the crisp grass of the lawn”(27). She finds growth and perfection with Nature. When she watches garden, she feels it “getting perfection through natural process”(33). All the beautiful surroundings make her take telephone call as ominous.

Nature is a great healer in this novel. Nanda is preoccupied with imaginary landscape of natural beauty which brings her solace and happiness from the world of troubles, difficulties and heaviness of daily life. Her granddaughter Raka comes to kasauli to recover from illness and she discovers Nature as better option to medicine. It reminds great romantic poet William Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Tables Turned’. The poet describes Nature having “a world of ready wealth” (L.17) and “bless spontaneous wisdom bathed by health and cheerfulness” (Lines 18-20).

The depiction of characters like Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das in this novel suggest that human lives and activities are related to living Nature. Nanda is contented with her life in the midst of Nature. “Everything she wanted was here at Carginano in Kasauli . Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house”(3). She has great desire to mingle with Nature and to be free from mundane worries. She has become old but still fancies “she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake”(4).

Nanda’s love of Nature indicates Nature’s power of providing peace, happiness and vigour. It may be related to the lines of William Wordsworth’s poem ‘Tintern Abbey’ as:

To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood

.....
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
in body, and become a living soul (Lines 36-46)

The novelist through her protagonist in this novel criticises man’s carelessness and negligence towards Nature. Many people go to forest as tourists and they never pay attention to its beauty. Nanda expresses her disapproval about it.

‘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. It really is-is saddening.
One would have liked to keep it as it was, a – a heaven, you know’(63).

Industrialisation is gradually devouring the green forest and the forest at Carginano has not escaped from its greedy scrutiny. In the middle of the forest, Raka discovers “the enormous concrete walls of what looked like a factory, for sharp chimneys thrust out of cushions and scarves of smoke, black on the milky blue of the afternoon sky”(46). He wonders how chimneys and smoke of factories are spoiling the beauty of a Himalayan hill station. He has no knowledge of polluted smoke dominating the landscape as “a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked”(46).

Raka, the granddaughter of Nanda Kaul does not appear to be troublesome child as Nanda

Kaul has thought about her earlier. She does not disturb her peaceful living. She enjoys wandering and “the pockets of her dress stained with raspberry juice” (52). Nanda apprehends the behaviour of Raka; “Wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her planned and wilful rejection of the child”(52). She even remains “hungry till dinner, unless she found a bush with ripe berries still popping out of its thorns or bunch of sour oxalis leaves to chew”(61).

Nature is bounteous. Raka has no needs when she is surrounded by the beautiful forest of Carginano and Himalayan hills.

She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine needles of the hillsides, like her own great grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. (52).

Lovers of Nature share equal attitude and love towards natural surroundings. Nanda's character shows the love of Nature. Nanda sees her same love of Nature with her granddaughter Raka. She utters “ You are exactly like me, Raka”(71). The novel echoes Wordsworthian love of Nature. Raka feels Nature as the best teacher of her. She is alarmed at Nanda Kaul's suggestion to go to boarding school at Sanawar. She loves free life and dislikes rules and restrictions in life. She even gets terrified of going to club. She loves to spend her time in the lap of Nature.

Raka was so shocked, she could only shake her head dumbly, hating this craftiness, rejecting outright the very through of school, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience (65).

The novel depicts the violent and cruel aspects of Nature. The forest fire in one summer brunt the old lady alone in her house. It is also narrated that the owners of the land got frightened of the forest fire that they abandoned of the idea of building houses. Raka thinks of hearing “the cries of animals and birds burning in that fire”(83). There is dearth of a drop of rain water which brings out hundreds of flowers like lilies and dahlias. The forest fire is not new in the region. “There's always a forest fire at this time of year” (81). It may burn the whole village and Raka sees it “like a display of fireworks in the distance” (82) and it appears eerie soundlessness. Ila Das in her observation feels the dominance of Forest Fire than the human power and control. She feels, “A Forest Fire is more than even a government welfare officer can tackle” (142).

The beautiful description of the hill is a contrast to the decaying condition of kasauli hill and Carginano. The novelist describes the sunlit hills, the hazy and powdery light. The hills seem “to be covered with a golden fuzz and melted into soft blues and violets in the distance” (30). She views the change of scenic beauty of hills with wonder and appreciation.

The novel further goes on the description of Dal lake, Shikars to the Shalimar or Nishat

garden. The place gets more attraction with ducks “swimming far downstream”, orchards and the availability of lot of almonds, walnuts, pistachios and chilgozanuts. Nanda Kaul remembers how her house was full of animals, a bear and the peacock. The love for animals and birds is considered to be one aspects of ecology as their living is closely related to sustainability of Nature. The concern for sustainable Nature is indirectly pointed out in this novel.

Ila Das represents the voice of struggle and reform. She is not worried about her poverty-stricken life. She works as a social worker in the Himalayan foot hills and does her duty “amongst the peasants, wood cutters, road labour and goat herds” (137). She is realistic in her approach and finds the world full of hurdles. “Isn’t the world full of troubles wherever you look? In my village, out of my village - It’s the same everywhere” (144). She is a brave woman who is not afraid of darkness and anti-social like Preet Singh. She works against child marriage prevalent in the area. She is finally raped and killed like the Nature being ravaged by greedy human lost of exploitation. Raka puts the fire on forest to show the atrocities that cause suffering to women.

The novel reflects the deteriorating scenario of Carignano and patriarchal attitude to Nature. Man loves to exploit Nature for his own sake. The novelist draws the attention of the readers about the degradation of ecological balance. The aesthetic experience drawn from Nature can bring peace and harmony in one’s life. It can put out the fire on mountain as well as fire of violence in human heart and mind. The novel presents ecological wisdom distinctively. It indirectly puts stress on peaceful and coherent living of animate and inanimate things that form the natural eco-system.

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