

NATURE AS A HEALER IN ANITA DESAI'S *THE FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is considered worldwide as a social, political and philosophical movement which is concerned with the oppression of women and exploitation of the nature as interconnected phenomenon. Both women and nature are treated equally by the patriarchal society. The moral values of women are altered to fulfil the demands of men who treat them as their 'objects'. The ecological crises and the crises of women are based on the logic of domination and it can be ended through the union of the women movement and the ecological movement. It demonstrates itself as a theory, as a movement and as a philosophy. As a theory Ecofeminism connects the oppression of women and all adjuvant group and the exploitation of nature in one analytical view. Although as a movement rejecting all previously dominant ideologies it aims at to bring social justice, and as a philosophy it liberates all the subordinate classes erasing all the kind of dualistic notions. What this paper contemplates to highlight is to appraise Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* from the perspective of eco-feminism.

Anita Desai is one of among a few Indian writers in English in the postcolonial era. She constructs nature in her fictional works by using interweaving legends, experience, myth and cultural history. In some of her works, the setting show a pen picture of physical environment and human interactions with it, especially the feminine characters. In the writings of Anita Desai's we find that the inner world of the female character is revealed. She goes deeper into the psychological probing of the female characters so as to unravel their world.

Fire on the Mountain exposes various forms of exploitation of both woman and nature. As regards the victimization of women, the narrative represents a discourse on violence that centers on the lives of the three women who are victims, either physically or mentally, of the patriarchal system. Nanda Kaul, a widowed great grandmother, is a victim of her role as a dutiful wife to an unfaithful husband and as a mother of many children. Raka, her exclusive, withdrawn great grandchild, is the victim of an abusive father. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, unmarried and the victim of her selfish brothers and her

own reformist idealism. The novel portrays the darker of shades of nature and the contemporary conjunction of the darker appearance of the women concerned. Thus this novel makes it clear that ecological issues are connected to women and nature. Desai's three protagonist who are trapped in male society in which man symbolizes cruelty, domination, and power while women and nature of victim of them. B.R Nagpal states that:

The woman protagonist are portrayed as victims of an aberrant urban milieu, patriarchal family structures and bourgeoisie, bureaucratic, imperialistic, colonialized, social scenario. It is in this contest that the characters are in a state of revolt, despondency, morbidity and are driven to grapple with duality, fragmentation (49).

Nanda Kaul's life is a life of retirement and renunciation. After her hectic life in the midst of her family, she retires from her earlier life and comes to Kasauli in search of loneliness. The novelist presents Nanda Kaul as a person who also suffers from melancholia as she has detached herself from human society. Earlier she had been fulfilling the demands of the family and now she wanted complete silence. The novelist adopts different symbols and metaphors to highlight the inner world of Nanda. Desai uses some symbols of nature to explain the mental state of Nanda's life. There is the mention of some old ageing trees that are seen to be withering away, just like Nanda Kaul's withering life.

Two other characters which get prominence in the novel are Raka and Ila Das. Raka symbolizes an altogether different aspect of Desai's characterization. Desai's writings are remarkable because she has dealt extensively with the feminine psyche of female of various age groups. In the present novel, Desai explore the inner psyche of Raka, a girl who is very young. She is the result of a distressing family situation. It is the traumatic childhood experience that had such a dehumanizing effect on Raka's mind that she becomes indifferent to any childish games and there was nothing childlike in her character. It is significant that several animal images have been used in relation to her. Her refusal to play with toys which is so natural with normal children very well describes her psyche.

This novel tells the story of Nanda Kaul who after her husband's death, she go back to a cottage situated at Carignano in Kasauli there she create a space of her own. Nanda loves Carignano for its bareness. In the beginning of the novel the author brings out the nature's bareness with that of the bareness of Nanda Kaul's heart which shows her loneliness. It is only bareness of Kasauli that attracts Nanda.

What teased and satisfied her so, at Carignano, was its bareness. This was the chief virtue of all Kasauli of course its starkness. It had rocks, it had pines. It had light and air. In every direction there was a sweeping view to the north, of the mountains, to the south, of the plains. Occasionally an eagle swam through this clear unobstructed mass of light and air. That was all (4).

The place Carignano, she had chosen was to the ridge of the mountain isolated and unfrequented with reflects her isolated life. She wished to be harmonized with nature and become a part of nature. She was at time curtained by pine trees as if she was nothing but a part of trees. Forsaking the company of man, she had come to be identified with the nature, with pine trees and the mountain and the wind. Both the landscape Carignano and her life reveal the exploitation of human society and thus become isolated. Both Nanda Kaul and garden of Carignano are the victims of bareness. Nanda Kaul considering heavenly with the garden and says,

Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age of withering away and elimination, at a state of elegant perfection... she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radiantly single life.(33, 34)

This clearly showcases the soul attachment of Nanda Kaul and Nature. The traditional perspective of Indian culture is, the women should be always inferior to men. Social values, religion and education are used to oppress the female through creating strong patriarchal norms. Indian women have no right to raise the voice and they have no opportunity to raise their problem in all the literary works and even in society women is portrayed second below the man.

Desai tried to prove the plight of women in the patriarchal society through the character of Nanda Kaul. She undergoes psychic pressure such as confusion, dilemma, strain and worries due to the impact of various situations. These forces are nothing but problems that a woman has to face in her life: male domination, the evils of patriarchal social setup, inequality between male and female, male chauvinism, neglect by children, overburden of household duties, dissatisfaction in marriage and the like,

There had been too many guests coming and going, tongas and rickshaws piled up under the eucalyptus trees and the bougainvilleas, their drivers asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made

up, often in not very private corners of the hall or veranda, so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother in law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after.(32)

Nanda feels like only to realize that it is difficult for her to keep her past out of her mind. Somewhere in her unconscious she has become an epitome of devotion, duty and sacrifice by attending to so many guests, looking after so many children and serving her husband efficiently. In her husband's home she was the home maker. She was the center of a bustling joint family. She was acting so many roles simultaneously. She had grabbed the roles of a hostess, wife, mother, tailor, and queen.

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamoring about her (19).

Nanda was fed up with the monotonous and the endless chores in the life of a housewife. But she never receives emotional and mental sustenance from her husband. Nanda Kaul's life has two sides- the public and the private. The former is characterized by the role of an ideal mother, a housewife, an organizer of parties and the centre of her husband's social life. The latter is life of silence, memory and feelings. Women don't have her own identity, they are known through their husband's identity. Nanda Kaul suffers as a vice chancellors wife who is not loved by her husband and one who have an extra- marital affair with Miss. Davidson.

Looking down at her knuckles, two rows of yellow bones on the railing, she thought of her sons and daughters, of her confinements, some in great discomfort at home and others at the small filthy missionary run hospital in the bazaar, and the different nurses and doctors who had wanted to help her but never could, and the slovenly, neurotic ayahs she had had to have because there was such a deal of washing and ironing to do and Mr.Kaulhad wanted her always in silk, at the head of the loving rosewood table in the dining room, entertaining his guests (20).

She was dutiful wife attending to the needs of her husband and the children. But the relationship between the husband and wife was unhappy. Although her busy schedule lacked warmth and understanding, she

carried on because of her obligation to her husband and children. His extra marital affair with Miss David was one of the reasons for their unhappy bonding of married life. Emotional deprivation is at the root of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. Her husband did not love her as a wife and treated her as a tool needed for the efficient running of his household. Her husband's frequent visits to Miss David troubled her which could have been the reason for her disillusionment. She had been a silent victim undergoing the pain, stress even after knowing the illegal relationship. She had been under a complete control in the hands of her husband.

Nanda is betrayed in marital relationship and for this reason she believes that all the love and sacrifices made by her are not valued, it is a waste and she is used. Her husband has children with her to keep her engaged while he himself enjoys with his mistress. Nanda appears as a victim, who envelopes herself with a feigned indifference solely to protect from being hurt any further. The author has clearly sketched the traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul. The life of Nanda Kaul represents Indian women on a whole who live their life for their children, husband, family and the society. Therefore their wishes, desires, talents are buried deeply in the hearts of the women. Nanda Kaul allows herself to be a victim or a silent observer of his hero archetype was a moment when she watched her husband stealthily this remain a confidential triumph in her mind. She does not try to make it public it is very easy for Nanda to expose the hypocrisy of her husband and be triumphant and powerful like or more like a man. But she never longs for power.

Lights of, silence, then the throwing open of the car door, and her husband had come out. He had been to drop some of the guests home no, she corrected herself with asperity, one of the guests home she watched him go up to veranda steps, puffing at his cigar, and smelt the rich tobacco... she had to watched him cross the veranda, go into the drawing room, and waited till the light there went out and another came on the bedroom that had been only a small dressing room till she had had his bed put there (28).

The position of the 'third world woman' is in between patriarchy and imperialism. Their desires are buried along with them. Their wishes are not revealed to others unless they are brought by these authors who can scan the minds and hearts of the women in different perspective and situations. Anita Desai is the best reader of thoughts of women. She vividly captures the hidden tear in the corner of the eyes of the women and pen of the character which has drawn the tear in the eyes of the women. She plunges in the hearts of protagonist and clearly captures the emotions and sentiments going on in their minds. So she

decides to settle in a calm place as she is released from shackles of endless duties after so many years. Once again she is again called for caring, comforting and communicating with another human. Nanda choose to line rest of her life scheduling herself from society to necessary a deep wound in her heart created by her husband. Their husband does not respect her as a wife. Rather he considers her as a hostess who hosts his guest with smiling face. Anita Desai describes Nanda's trauma as,

The old hose, the full house, of that period he life when she was the Vice- Chancellor's wife was the hub of a small but intense busy world, which had not pleased her. Its crowding and stiffed her... They had so many children, they had gone to so many schools of different times of the day, and had so many tutors – one for mathematics who was harsh and slapped the unruly boys, one for drawing who was lazy and smiled and did nothing, and others equally incompetent and irritating. Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and families (31, 32).

Unfortunately her relationship with her husband was scared and a source of agony throughout her life due to his extra marital relationship with Miss Davidson, a member of the teaching staff. Her husband did not love her as a wife but treated her as a decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. Though she enjoyed the comfort and social status of the wife of a dignitary, but she felt lonely and neglected inside. She was helpless and couldn't revolt to show unhappiness. Emotional deprivation is the root cause of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. Nanda was tied up with the upbringing of her children and couldn't probably provide the required attention demanded by her husband. Possibly things would have been on the brighter side of Mr. Kaul would have not restricted himself to his official and social duties. The traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul is sketched in these lines;

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen- he only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life- long affair with Miss David... and her children were all alien to her nature... she did not live here by choice- she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing (145).

Externally everything appears smooth and pleasant but internally Nanda Kaul burning with frustration and suppressed emotions. Mr. Kaul even invite Miss Davidson for badminton parties, and compels her to stay at night and later secretly moves to her bedroom. In spite of all this, she appears smooth and free from heart- breaking agony. "After the death of her husband she has been so glad when it was over... discharge me. I have discharged all my duties. Discharge" (30). She prefers seclusion not because she favours it but to rest her pain- filled psyche, her stagnated pulses, bits and pieces of identity that she attempts to get in the

shelter of Carignano doubtless need that rock- like exterior to give them a wholesome structure a hopeful destination. “Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?” (17). Probably, Nanda doesn't enjoy her motherhood too, because of the mechanical life devoid of human feelings. She could hardly save any time to show her affection towards her children and as a result of which they were not attached to her.

The brutal death of Nanda's only childhood friend Ila Das makes a hallucination in her mind. The police officer calls Nanda's to identify the body of her friend. Nanda gets shocked by the tragic news and dies. “Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling”(158).

Nanda Kaul wants to lead an isolated life that is one separated from the patriarchal society. In spite of well aware of this her daughter Asha sends Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul, to accompany her great- grand mother. Raka's arrival at Carignano is not pleasant one for Nanda Kaul. She sees Raka's arrival as an unwanted entry into her peaceful retirement life. Raka suffers the indifference of her parents. She recalls her father's attitude towards her mother. Her drunken father beats her mother with hammer and harshly abuses her. Raka shrinks in fear inside the bed sheet and feels the flow of warm urine. Her mother lies down on the floor and weeps her eye. Raka become the victim of this cruelty and her mind becomes psychologically dominated. Raka's a sick girl who loves loneliness instead of any other things. Every child loves to play and enjoy their childhood but Raka is different. At her childhood she decides to go to her great – grand mother's home in search of loneliness. Unhappy childhood life has always been alive in her memory.

It made her nostrils flare and her fingers twitch, but she had to admit that Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine needles of the hillsides, like her own great grand- mother, Raka wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli (52).

She pauses under the pine tree to take in their scented sibilance and curiously listens to the sound of Cicadas merging under the pine needles without having any intention to watch the activities of human beings. She becomes a close listener of nature trying to find out an alternative solace to her pain- trodden

existence. Nanda Kaul believes that nature has a healing power and it prompts her to feel peace. To escape from that pain she longs to live undisturbed. She gets attracted towards Kasauli and wishes to be left alone with nature. She feels the company of the nature will bring peace and harmony in her life.

In spite of her willingness to live a peaceful life, without the intrusion of the past, nature and its movements have taken her to the past which was filled with suffocation and oppression. For instance, Nanda Kaul visualizes a woman which is tormented by a hen which indicates the suppression experienced by her at the hands of the patriarchal society. She longs to be one among the pine trees,

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied 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).

Raka's miserable life experiences made her turn into a hallucinating child. However, we cannot say that Raka is a born recluse. She is a victim of a broken home. She becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. As a result, she turns her back upon human beings and their so-called safe, cozy and civilized world and develops a strong fascination for the ugly, lonely, rugged and desolate aspects of nature. This is portrayed in a party she attends in the club.

There she recalls her own home, her father come from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse- harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover under bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright (64).

Violence and using abuse words are seen in patriarchal society. Man has access to economic and social resources this made them to show power on women. In this society women are dependent on man, so they are being suppressed. Violence is a means used to suppress women and they consider violence is their strength and power.

Anita Desai's characters have strange childhood, and their experiences and interactions during this formative period when combined with their congenital hypersensitivity contribute towards their inability to establish and maintain harmonious inter-personal relationship in later life. Commenting upon her solitary and introspective character's childhood, she observes that the experiences of childhood are the most vivid and lasting ones and show how far the childhood interaction affects and moulds them in the ability to relate themselves with others.

Even she is not so much attached with her great grandmother. Nanda Kaul tries to get company with her great granddaughter by saying false story about Nanda Kaul's father and about her childhood life. The great grandmother and the great granddaughter are suffering from same feeling. So as the story goes on they both get to know each other. In fact Nanda Kaul and Raka are the representation of two generation of the Indian female world. Nanda Kaul represent the old generation and Rake stands for the young generation and rebellious young generation of the Indian female world.

Raka finds refuge in Ramlal, the cook at Carignano, who wonders why she is not like an ordinary child. Ramlal informs about the destructive effect of forest fire to Raka.

I can't tell you how many forest fires we see each year in Kasauli. Some have come up as far as our railing. You can see how many of the trees are burnt, and houses too. One the house down the hill South view, was burnt down to the ground before the fire engine arrived (58).

He also says about the house down the hill which has been burnt down along with two buffalos by the forest 'fire'. Due to water shortage it becomes impossible to put out the fire. "There is a water storage every summer in Kasuali. There was no water to put out the fire and the whole house burn down and the cowshed with two buffaloes in it" (58). An English man lived in that house after its destruction in forest fire she becomes mad and she is taken to the lunatic asylum. While trying to save her cat her hair and eyelashes are burnt off.

It was a beautiful cottage. An English Mam lived there. It was burnt down in a forest fire and she went mad and was taken to the lunatic asylum with her arms and legs tied with rope. They say all her hair was burnt off, even her eyelashes, when she went into save her cat (59).

From Nanda Kaul, Raka comes to know about terrible effect of the forest fire, another house burned "down in a terrible forest fire one summer when there wasn't a drop of water to fight it with. An old lady who lived there alone and they say she went mad and was put away" (62). The forest fire is the best example of the cultivation of land which leads to the depletion of natural sources. This is a typical male capitalist ideology and a good example of environmental classism which usually targets the poor people. These indicate the forest fire can destroy anything within a second.

The 'Forest fire' is the best example of a typical male capitalist ideology and environment usually targets the poor people. From this it is proved that poor people are greatly affected by forest fire. "It was burnt down in a terrible forest fire one summer when there wasn't a drop of water to fight it with an

old lady lived there alone and they say she went mad and was put away” (62). Again from Nanda Kaul, Raka gets to know about the garden house which is converted into an Army Billet.

And the Garden House across the road – you can scarcely believe it now, but it once had the most beautiful garden in Kasuali. Now used as an Army Billet. The army’s everywhere... Like an atomic reactor. Or some such scientific monstrosity. And so much barbed wire around (63).

The Army Billet indicates the exploitation of nature by the modern technology. This proves that the patriarchal society will use modern technology to change a beautiful wild area for an army camp for their economic purpose. The exploitation of Kasuali landscape is parallel to exploitation of Ila Das. Both are exploited by the patriarchal society for their selfish purpose. “D’you see that pleasant college there? The doctors of the Pasteur Institute have taken it over, several of them. A pity, it used to be so beautifully kept at one time, and look at it now”(62). Normally one would associate it with humane studies, yet it stresses the abuse and exploitation of animals for purposes of research. “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” (48). This shows, human beings exploiting the non-human species for their purpose. They are not considering them as a living being. It is a good example of environmental speciesism which targets animals as Lori Gruen speculates that reducing animals to mere objects devoid of feelings, “is a common consequence of the scientific mindset by which those engaged in experimentation distance themselves from their subjects” (66). Later when Raka sees the 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 dog’s brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cage packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white (54).

Such an institute is a strong representation of male’s destructive scientific domination. Thus it has been shown that women’s oppression and the exploitation of nature are two dimensions of many forms of injustice both women and nature are victimization of men cruelty. Eco feminist believe that the separation of man from nature and mother earth the main reason for the exploitation of mother earth and nature. They are craving to oppress both women and nature by using their individual power.

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