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Women and Nature in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: An Ecofeminist Analysis

Abstract: In modern societies, there are countless ways to view nature or environment. In modern-days, industrial practices move human beings away from the nature, so it becomes important to consider the ways in which we connect to our surrounding nature. People from all over the world are suffering from the results of the projects, which progress in today's industrial society. The way to such type of thinking is offered by the theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism deals with concepts such as deep ecology, ecopoetics and ecofeminism. Ecofeminism encourages our interconnectedness with nature. It also addresses the subjugation of women and marginalised people. The recognition of social and environmental injustice is presented by categorizing women and subjugated people with the environment. The social and

environmental issues, which are not separate, are the central tenets of Ecofeminism. So, the mistreatment of women, people of color and environment stem from the same place. Anita Desai is one of the India's foremost writers. There are varieties of ways to analyse and to look at Anita Desai's works. Anita Desai portrays something universal and greater by using ordinary and everyday activities. Her novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), won the National Academy of Letters Award in 1977, and The Sahitya Academy Award in 1978. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* depicts the darker aspects of women as well as the darker shades of nature. It also concerned with the parallel victimization and domination of women and nature.

Keywords- Ecofeminism, Environment, Domination, Nature, Destruction, Women.

The theory developed by ecofeminist is nature based. The theory of ecofeminism interrelates the dominations of nature and women by combining the social justice concerns of women with the environmental sustainability concerns. The theory came from the belief that earth is our mother and without her, life is not possible on this planet. Women are known by the name of Goddess, because of her birth system and her identification with Goddess, due to the creations of the whole universe. Such type of cultural roots has an influence on writer's characterization, feminine themes and nature.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* prefers to highlight the themes of exploitation of women and destruction of nature and the interrelation of feminism with the environment. The ecofeminist study of selected novel draws attention to the issues of gender, caste, class and race and also reflects the aspect of the relationship of women have with the environment and explores the material crisis of women and environment. While Anita Desai writes about the specific and private life of women, raises the social issues and the society of that particular county. Anita Desai, an earlier feminist writer has written about the situation of women and environment.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain*, published in 1977, is based on the life of three women characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The novel is divided in three parts. The first part of *Fire on the Mountain* provides the geographical setting to the arrival of Raka. The second part of the novel represents the lack of interaction between Nanda Kaul and Raka. The final part of the novel concerns with the visit of Ila Das. Ila Das arrives at Carignano after being physically abused by a group of boys. These three characters of Anita Desai's novel are describing the three different stages of life and their response to life. In *Fire on the Mountain*, women suffer as girl child as well as married women. *Fire on the Mountain* is a novel by Anita Desai,

presenting the dark shades of nature as well as dealing with the darker aspects of women life. *Fire on the Mountain* shows the condition of an educated women and her slavery in the free and educated family as well as the use and destruction of natural objects in the present times.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* won Sahitya Academy Award, was set in the landscape of Kasauli. *Fire on the Mountain* depicts the sufferings of the central female characters of the novel along with the damage of Kasauli hills and also the destruction of nature by a forest fire. The novel unfolds the story of an old lady, Nanda Kaul, who lived in the colonial house, on hills. The loneliness of Nanda Kaul's life is similar to the barren hills of Kasauli. The starkness and bareness of Carignano please Nanda Kaul most and is exactly to her liking and expectations.

Raka is Nanda's granddaughter. She feels happy in the lap of nature and her mind is filled with little adventures like to look for barriers, snakes and jackals in the hills. Nanda and Raka both are similar to each other in many aspects, but there is a big difference between them that the solitary of Nanda Kaul is self-imposed and Raka get this by her birth. Nanda tries to enter in the child world, but she fails, because the child doesn't want anyone in her life. Nanda tries to reveal her life, in the form of stories. But the child neglects all this. The third character of the novel is Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. The death of Ila Das and her violence is related to a forest fire.

The title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is symbolic, which describes the destruction of nature. In the text two main female characters Nanda Kaul and Raka, both present the significance of the title, with their behavior and nature. Mountains are related to Nanda Kaul and the wild nature of Raka is described through fire. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* explores full of natural imagery. In the starting of the novel, the beautiful nature imagery is presented, where all female characters get happiness and came out from tensions and difficulties of life.

Ecofeminist theory has been emerged from the combination of ecological consciousness and feminist consciousness. Ecofeminism is a distinguished theory, which describes the certain connection between women and nature. This social and political movement penalized common grounds between environment and feminism. Ecofeminists say that the exploitation of nature or natural resources and the oppression and degradation of women are interconnected. As about ecofeminism, it describes that it is a social movement and practice but it also gives political analyses of connections between environment and

androcentrism (Gaard 9). The novel proposes women's closeness to nature in different ways. Nanda Kaul's appearance is also similar to trees like

“[S]he was gray, tall and thin[...]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)

The important decision of Nanda Kaul to leave her house for a natural and hilly area is the main focusing point in the text, for similarities between women and nature.

“What pleased and satisfied her, here at Carignano, was its barrenness”. (4)

Nanda is also alone. Although she lives in a very big family of children and other members and also including servants, but there was no one who understands her and her feelings. The condition of that natural and hilly place is similar to the condition of Nanda's life. Nanda's life is empty and suppressed. She has no right to make decisions on its own; she was a puppet in the hands of her husband. When she looks at the pine trees, standing alone in front of her house, then she realizes her own alienation and the alienation of trees.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, sufferings of women are explained through nature. The novel shows several similarities between natural animals, birds and women. The crying of animals are somehow symbolised, the crying of women:

...her father, have from 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 lists of abuse- harsh filthy, abuse that made Raka cover under her bed clothes and wet the matter in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering so that she did not know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying. (71-72)

In this novel, the crying of Raka's mother is related to the crying of jackals that shows the similarities between the sufferings of animals and women. The two scenes of cuckoo and eagle, are symbolising the two phases of Nanda's life. Similar to above lines she wants to be

free and the music of cuckoo bird reminds her past life, the days which were full of duties and responsibilities.

Nanda Kaul's selection of isolation symbolises the pain of her heart, which was given to her by her husband. She takes her decision because of mental sufferings and unhappy married life. Her husband has no respect for her; even she is treated as another by her children. She is a mere hostess to the parties which her husband throws. The disrespect in Nanda's married life is same as the disrespect in the modern people for nature, and this disrespect for nature can be seen with the exploitation of Kasauli hills. If male society is doing few good things for woman and nature then they are doing all to fulfill their own needs.

Although Nanda was enjoying the high social status and good economic condition, but she was suffering from the need of privacy and sufficient time for herself. Like Nanda, nature looks happy in gardens and artificial created natural places. But in reality, nature is also suffering like women but she bears all with pleasure. Nanda has no meaning of her life due to her meaningless married life and unsatisfied motherhood. Similarly, the hills of Carignano are full of natural beauty and provide shelter to human beings and animals, but after all that hills do not have their own identity. The condition of Nanda's heart is shown in this way

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the vice-chancellor's wife was the hub of a small but intense world, which had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her. (31)

They had had so many children, they had gone to so many schools at different times of the day, and had so many tutors...all of different ages and sizes and families.(29,30)

She looks very happy and satisfied in her life, but internally she was burning in her frustration and unsatisfied emotions. She was such an alone women, that there was no one in the family with whom she can share her inner voice that what she wants. She is silent but her inner emotions were always in conversation between them. She was dying quietly from inside and nobody knows about her inner sufferings. Her husband has relation with Miss Davison and he invites her in parties at home and spends nights with her. This is unbearable for a wife, but Nanda without saying a single word have smile on her face and performs duties of a wife and no one can measure and realize the anger of women.

The tolerance power of women and nature is similar, that reflects all women characters of the novel. Natural beauty brings happiness on the human face and bears everything with a pleasant appearance. No one can imagine the anger and hate in Nanda's heart, for her husband.

[N]or had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen- he had gone only enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss.(158)

She wants to change her silence in any kind of violence. She completely draws herself from the involvement of life, physically and emotionally. Her desire to imitate eagle on the mountain is totally alone. Like "to be a tree, no more, no less, was all that she was prepared to undertake"(4). Nanda became uncommunicative in her life; her silence is filled with the revolution to past life, which does not give time to her for herself. With the death of her husband, she feels free from her duties of wife and mother, but she is not completely free, because of her past, she is living in her past. Solitary is very important and common feature in the female characters of *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda sees all her desires in Raka:

You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka. (64)

The solitary of Nanda's life is similar to the solitary of Kasauli hills. Raka has the gift of silently and certainly disappearing in the hills of the forest. Her ability is similar to natural insects. She is a silent girl; speak very few words throughout the novel. She is happy in her solitude and in the company of nature. Both Nanda and Raka, attracted towards Carignano because it is destroyed and barren place. This is the only place, where she can't listen the sounds of human terror.

The concept of silence is portrayed differently in the novel because the female characters in the *Fire on the Mountain* remain in isolation and want to live in it. They also do not want company of their fellow beings. Nanda, Raka and Ila Das, could not find the way to express their inner feelings, the sufferings and oppression. So, this silence remains with them for whole life. Nanda started telling the stories of her past life to Raka, but Raka neglected all this because she only wants the company of nature. Therefore the common feature between women and nature is silence. Both women and nature bear all kind of suppression and destruction but remain silent.

The writer presents the themes of love, marriage and sex. Anita Desai also depicts the image of unhappy married life of Nanda Kaul, which was not based on love. Marriage is a social function, that everyone has to perform and a social recognition for men women relations. Understanding and love are the basic needs in marriage, and without this married life becomes dry.

Nanda Kaul is living her life without enjoying it because she is just to perform duties. The women are treated as objects not as humans, as similar to nature. Socialist and materialist ecofeminism relates the environmental problems with capital patriarchy, that nature and natural resources or earth are exploited for development and progress. The same condition is narrated in the Fire on the Mountain with black walls, quarters of servants and cookhouse and then Nanda Kaul get that it's all belongs to the factory there.

...looked like a factory, for sharp chimneys thrust out cushions and smoke, black on the milky blue of the afternoon sky. Puzzled [...] to her, it seemed to dominate the landscape- a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked. (46)

This description shows that how humans are destroying landscapes for progress, which is similar to their use of women for sexual pleasure. The Pasteur Institute is build, between the hills. The doctors of this institute have exploited number of pleasant cottages to make the Pasteur Institute. At once these are known for its beauty, but now these are in worse condition. "It had a tennis court but it is used as chicken run now. And the garden house across the road- you can scarcely believe it now, but it once had the most beautiful garden in Kasauli. Now used as an army billet. (63)

Same way the pleasant cottage changed into a Pasteur Institute, Nanda Kaul's life become worse from better. In her father's house she was happy, but after marriage, all have ruined. This socialist or materialist ecofeminism also works on the notion that men are responsible for labor in the market, while women are dominated and they do labor at home that is unpaid. The central female characters of the selected novel, are the good examples of this concept like Nanda Kaul was performing all her duties at home as a wife and as a mother, but her domestic work does not have any value, in front of her husband. She always remains busy in performing such housework, without any rest. There is another example from the Fire on the Mountain, Ila Das. She is working to stop the child marriage, and she tells about her condition to her friend Nanda, in this way

It's so much harder to teach a man anything, Nanda – the women are willing poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them...

I've run into all this trouble over trying to stop child marriage [...] Isn't that what I'm paid for by the government? I go along my way, trying to do my duty... (141)

Ila Das is working as the member of a welfare society, but her hard labor also remains unpaid. She lost her life by performing her duty. She was murdered in the forest way.

Nature provides life and comfort to human beings, but her service has no value in this materialistic world. Animals are used to test new medicines and they are used free of cost. In the Kasauli hills, plants and trees grows naturally. But the doctors destroy nature to make their institute for research and army to make their military camps in Fire on the Mountain.

Liberal feminism expresses the oppression of women, because of the lack of equal rights and also promotes individual freedom and equal rights (Warren). Liberalism aims at equal opportunities. Nanda Kaul was not free to take decisions in her life. Her life was not her own life because she does everything according to her husband. But on the other side, her husband has all the rights to enjoy his life. This can be seen from her husband's extramarital affair. In all her married life Nanda said nothing but internally she want freedom from all this and this is the main reason to leave her house and family, to go far Kasauli hills.

Nature is also like a slave in the hands of humans. They do and use nature according to their needs. Storms in Kasauli hills symbolise that nature wants freedom. Fire, in the Kasauli hills destroys everything. Nature is performing all this, to show her anger against her destruction in this industrial world.

In this contemporary society, men are exploiting women as well as nature for their own selfish motives. Men are using both nature and women as objects in this commercial market. Human beings obliterate this natural place, for their own purpose. Ecofeminism is an important theory to explore the women- nature mistreatment. An old lady's house was burnt in fire, and she went mad. A very beautiful garden of Kasauli was destroyed, now used for military court.

Once there was a fire in the mountain, burnt the whole houses with two buffaloes in it. This is the destruction of nature as well as animals. An English lady was burnt, to save her cat,

in the house from fire. “It was a beautiful cottage. An English Men 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 in to save the cat” (59). Nanda was very unpleasant with the behavior of tourist and army towards this place. People like this place because of its heavenly beauty, but now that is on its danger level.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul was very upset and sad, with the changing image of these beautiful lonely hills. When she came here, the image was different of her surroundings, but now it changed, it filled with tourists and army. “One would like to keep as it was a heaven, you know” (63). The pine trees are standing alone and by watching them she feels equality between them. The women characters and the images of nature are presenting the sufferings of each other. The dryness and loneliness of the hills are described through the character of Nanda Kaul. Her lonely house in the hills, symbolize isolation in Nanda Kaul’s life and barren nature

“Everything which she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house.”(1)

Nanda decided to live in Kasauli, on hill station because she performed all her duties. She wants “be left to the pine and cicadas alone. She hoped she would not stop” (3). All this was self-chosen because she wants to detach herself from the other associations of life, of a wife.

The rape and murder of Ila Das in the forest is the example of dualism in the text. The darkness of the forest arises a conscious in mind about the dualism of male domination over both nature and women:

“...a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock, that last rock between her and hamlet, and sprang soundlessly at her. She staged under its weight with a gasp that ripped through her chest. It had her by the throat. She struggled, choking, trying to stretch and stretch and stretch that gasp till it becomes a shout that the villagers would here, the red dog would here, a shout for help..... as she saw, in the cold shadow, that it was Pressings, his lips lifted back from his teeth, his eyes blazing down at her in rage. (155)

Anita Desai analyses the activities of those people who are now on these hills and came from urban areas. All the three female characters, in the story, are from city life. Nanda and Ila Das, have spent a long time of her life, in developed areas with new technological equipment. In other words, they have seen the modern culture. The child female character of the novel, Raka, had spent a very little in of her life in Delhi. But she dislikes it and rejects it. When Ram Lal, asked her to go to a club and advised her to play with babies:

They come in the evening with their ayahs. They play on the swings and play bridge and tennis. Then they have lemonade and Vimto in the garden. That is what you should do; he told her, severely. (57)

These all she observed in Delhi from outside. But people can enjoy such thing with money. Raka never tries to enter the club, because of the lack of ticket (57). But here in this hilly area, everything is free of cost, no need of a ticket. But the fire in the forest destroys all this. And with the increasing crowd of tourists and army, these beautiful places are also becoming the source to get money.

Cultural ecofeminism says that female culture is related to the female body, flesh, natural process, emotions, feelings and private life. While male culture has the power of mind, culture, reason, economics and public life. These are according to natural constraints on what human beings can do; man can fight, exploit nature and mold both nature and women. Trees are also sufferings because of cultural norms that give the second position to nature. There are mind-body, men- women and nature-culture dualism. The superiority of culture over nature led the destruction of nature. This similar violence is faced by Raka's mother in the Fire on the Mountain.

The sufferings of animals in the Fire on the Mountain, reflects the vegetarian thoughts in the text, that how animals are used for scientific use and to test new medicines. The novel of Anita Desai reflects:

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)

These few lines in the text indicate the sufferings and ill-treatment of animals by humans, for progress and research. Vegetarian ecofeminism has the view that animals should be free. In Fire on the Mountain, the character of Raka and Nanda are compared with animals

in many places. Raka has various activities, like animals. Vegetarians and ecofeminist sympathies with animals and women in the way that women who are the survivors of rape and domestic violence should feel like a piece of meat. The condition of women in the novel is similar to the piece of meat.

Spiritual ecofeminism insists on the view that, women should run away from Christianity and churches and goes to the lap of nature; they should practice earth-based spiritualities. It compares the role of women in biological production and their role of an archetypal (Tong 269). The selected novel draws an analogy between the women's biological childbirth system and earth as life giver. Women are just used to give birth to children and to take care of them. Giving birth and giving life are two common things in nature and women. This also reflects in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda gave birth to her children but still, she is alone. On the other hand, nature gave life to Nanda and her granddaughter Raka. Colonel MacDougall came here with his wife and a child because his wife and child were sufferings in the military cantonment. It is described in the novel in this way

His wife who could not bear the heat in the military cantonment. And hope to save her ominously pale children by taking them to the mountain in the summer.
(6)

And this is similar in the case of Raka

Poor little Raka looks like a ghost and hasn't quite got over her typhoid yet. She is very weak and the heat and humidity of Bombay will do her no good. Everyone who sees her says she should go to the hills to recuperate. (17)

So, the ecofeminist analysis of *Fire on the Mountain* brings in front that nature and women both are in the hands of man as objects. Although these both nature and women are on the inferior position in the patriarchal society, but the ecofeminist analysis focuses on the point that from the point of birth-giving, women and nature should have a superior position in the society.

The basic concepts of deep ecology are seen in the selected novel like the well-being of both human and non-human have equal value. In the *Fire on the Mountain*, the life of people who live on the hills depends on the condition of nonhuman nature. But the fire on the hills due to some wrong human actions, burns many houses and animals in the forest. Every human being has value on this earth. Women and nature have its own value in themselves. Human has

no right to exploit these values for their selfish motives. The concept of deep ecology completely depicts the problems that how humans are destroying nature. So, the two selected novels have images of natural destruction in it.

Fire on the Mountain, reflect anthropocentrism and androcentrism. Anthropocentrism is human-centered and describes the human superiority over nature while androcentrism through light on male superiority over female. The complete story of selected text represents these two terms. In the Fire on the Mountain, humans are shown superior to nature. 'Nanda Kaul to Carignano' this part of the novel, gives the image of human beings superiority. Human beings are treating nature, natural resources and animals according to their needs. Central characters of text Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are representing the androcentric theme in novels. Every part of the Fire on the Mountain reflects the oppression of male over female. Women in every society or in every culture are used as objects and have no equal rights to men. All women characters belong to Indian society. In this society women have the second position.

In conclusion, it can be said that ecofeminism is a movement which finds that exploitation of nature and oppression of women are interlinked with masculine attitude. Fire on the Mountain portrays the obliteration of hills with fire and the gradual devastation in the ecosystem of Kasauli hills. The female characters of the novel carry the inner life as well as the outer life and their response to the life has been exemplified with natural images. In the dualistic life of three women characters, man shows violence, selfishness and dominance. Anita Desai's novel Fire on the Mountain unfolds the issues like femininity, isolation, death, rape, patriarchal domination of women and nature along with the civilization and nature, free will and oppression, domesticity and wilderness.