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Exploring the Affinity between Women and Nature: A Study of Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

The paper examines the evolving trends in Indian literature written in English, particularly highlighting Anita Desai's contributions. Over its seventy-year history, Indian English literature has reached significant milestones and it is now recognized as a major world literature. A new wave of writers, including Anita Desai, Chaman Nahal, Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi, Dina Mehta, Salman Rushdie, Shobha De, Sashi Deshpande, and Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy, has emerged. This paper focuses on the recent trend of ecofeminism in Indian literature and Anita Desai's portrayal of female characters within this context. A thorough analysis of Anita Desai's novels reveals their connection to her personal experiences and contemporary reality. This study concentrates on Desai's life, her interest in ecofeminism, and the impact of social, economic, political, and cultural issues of her contemporary time on her work.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Marginalization, Loneliness, Isolation, Woman, Nature, Recluse, Environmental, Ecology.

Introduction

Feminism aims not only to understand the world but to transform it for the benefit of women. Simone de Beauvoir believes that women's perception of themselves as inferior to men stems from recognizing that "the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled

it, and still dominate it today are men.” While the biological differences between men and women are acknowledged by women, the idea of female inferiority is generally rejected by women, especially feminists.

Anita Desai primarily addresses the plight of women suffering under a patriarchal society, depicting them as subjects of the male gaze in a masochistic culture where they assume roles such as wives, daughters, mothers, artists, or writers. Her characters often experience alienation from the world, society, their families, parents, and even themselves, set against a backdrop of cultural and social transformation.

Anita Desai is recognized as one of the most influential contemporary Indian novelists writing in English, acclaimed both in India and internationally. Born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, a hill station near Dehradun in northern India, she was raised amidst Western literature and music. Her father, D.N. Mazumdar, was Bengali, and her mother, Toni Nime, a German who met Mazumdar in Germany before immigrating to India in the 1920s. Desai, one of four children with two sisters and a brother, initially spoke German, her parents' language, while communicating with friends and neighbours in Hindi.

Desai's notable works include her debut novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), followed by *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Her children's fiction includes *The Peacock Garden* (1974), *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976), and *The Village by the Sea* (1982). She has also published two short story collections: *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000). Additional notable works include *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1987), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *The Zigzag Way* (2004).

Anita Desai has also been a guiding star for many emerging writers, including her daughter Kiran Desai, whose debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1997) was well-received. Kiran's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, became a classic and won the Booker Prize.

Since the dawn of civilization, nature has been a fundamental source of livelihood and income. However, the exploitation of nature and misuse of natural resources have led to their

degradation, posing global threats. As time progresses, these resources are further affected by population growth, pollution, and human greed. Contemporary writers, including Anita Desai, address the global concerns of environmental degradation. Desai's characters, often from affluent backgrounds like Nanda Kaul, the wife of a Vice-Chancellor, grapple with psychological or spiritual issues rather than social or economic ones, exploring themes such as conformity, rebellion, attachment, and detachment. Madhusudan Prasad comments on this novel:

In fact, this novel deals, in the main, with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resulted anger and agony in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul, who presents an unforgettable, pathetic portrait of old age. (Prasad 125)

Nanda Kaul

Nanda Kaul had long anticipated enjoying the peace and beauty of the secluded Kasauli. The arrival of Raka threatens her self-imposed isolation. She wanted to be alone with nature, but her solitude is disrupted by the presence of her great granddaughter Raka who was a peculiar child. Nanda Kaul desires only to be left alone to live her life amidst the rocks and pines of Kasauli, finding joy only in her solitary ascents. Her isolation is self-imposed, driven by discontent with her previous domestic life. The symbolic end comes when the mountain is set on fire.

In modern and traditional Indian families, elderly women are often marginalized. Anita Desai centers her novel on Nanda Kaul, an elderly woman who chooses a desolate place and identifies with the barrenness and starkness of the landscape. Desai adeptly describes human emotions concerning their actions and surroundings, particularly in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Nature enthusiasts will be captivated by the first chapter, where the author vividly depicts Kasauli, where Nanda Kaul spends her best years. The narrative intertwines her character with nature, reflecting her mental state. A close reading of Desai's novels, especially *Fire on the Mountain* reveals a connection between nature and women, highlighting the importance of nature. In the post-colonial era, Desai is among the few Indian authors in English who incorporate nature into their works, capturing the essence of the surroundings, places, and social values.

Lacking attention and affection from her husband and family, Nanda Kaul desires only to be left alone among the rocks and pines of Kasauli. However, she cannot completely escape her

past. Desai portrays Nanda Kaul as a wife, mother, and grandmother who dedicated her life to her family, fulfilling household duties while neglecting her desires and losing her identity. This is seen as usual in the Indian context. The opening of *Fire on the Mountain* describes Nanda Kaul's geographical and psychological setting, followed by the arrival of her great granddaughter, Raka. The second part deals with their interaction and subsequent lack thereof. Despite the generation gap, they exhibit similar behaviours.

The novel explores the theme of marginalization, loneliness, and isolation in Nanda Kaul's life. A great-grandmother, she has renounced her world and come to Kasauli to spend her remaining days in peace. Her love for nature brought her to the desolate Carignano, reflecting her past suffering. Male domination has historically shaped familial relations in India, implying sacrifices from women but not men. Nanda Kaul's bitter experiences lead her to seek freedom from life's shackles, wishing to breathe freely and move like a free bird. At this stage, she is likely experiencing menopause, a phase requiring special care and affection, often overlooked in Indian culture. Feeling isolated in a crowded house, she desires freedom from forced relationships and monotonous motherhood, seeking her own identity. As a woman, she was expected to nurture others. As the wife of the Vice-Chancellor of Panjab University, she was always busy with household and societal duties. Like Virginia Woolf's character Clarissa Dalloway, her life was filled with social obligations. Her distress as a busy wife is evident:

“The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice Chancellor's wife and at the hub of small but intense busy world, has not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her...too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's duty, to her mother in law's bedroom, to veranda that was the gathering place for all... Too many meals, Too many dishes, on the table, too much to wash up after...”(Desai 29-30)

Nanda Kaul and her husband lack an affectionate relationship. Although she is a dutiful wife and mother, their marriage is unhappy. She submissively tolerates her husband's long-term affair with Miss David, a mathematics mistress whom he loved but never married due to her being Christian. Nanda endures this betrayal and suffers silently. Her husband's lack of affection and warmth contributes to their unhappy marriage and her trauma. He views her more as an excellent hostess for his numerous parties, often attended by more women than men, rather than as a partner.

Treated like a decorative piece or a household machine, she becomes neglected and inwardly lonely, leading her life to feel purposeless and meaningless. Seema Raizada comments on her trauma, stating that Nanda, like many of Desai's characters, suffers from loneliness and unfulfilling relationships. Nanda creates a world of her own, with the desolate landscape reflecting the emptiness of her life. She likely suffers from a disorder characterized by the presence of family and friends. Probably Nanda suffered from *nimiety* (disorder) – unpredictable excess of the presence of family members and friends.

Nanda Kaul rebels against her forced relationships by freeing herself from the confinement of her married life. She immerses herself in nature, identifying with the trees, mountains, and wind. However, fate has another challenge for her in old age: the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka. Nanda had chosen a peaceful life, but now she is called upon to nurture, care for a child once again. The news of Raka's arrival disturbs her. Both Nanda and Raka have retreated from the outside world, much like the isolated Carignano. Raka, affected by her father's violence towards her mother, their unhappy and unhealthy relationship, and inadequate parental care, seeks isolation and solitude. Her mother sends her to Carignano, hoping that nature will aid her recovery from typhoid more effectively than medicine. Many still believe that nature can provide solutions in any situation, and Raka comes to Kasauli to find peace and harmony, hoping to heal from typhoid by living close to nature.

On the other hand, Nanda Kaul does not have positive attitude on her arrival.

“Nanda is a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation; Raka is a recluse by nature and instinct she had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice—she was born to it, simply...”(Desai 48)

However, to her surprise, Raka prefers solitude and pursues her secret life among the rocks and pines. She cherishes her isolation and does not welcome anyone into her private paradise, living in her own fantasies. Desai has crafted this novel uniquely with symbolic interpretations, blending nature and characters seamlessly. The novel is rich with imagery that interconnects women and nature. Desai skillfully uses zoological and botanical elements, along with colourful descriptions of the landscape and wildlife, to create a mosaic that links humans and nature

meaningfully. Through the depiction of a forest fire, Desai emphasizes the ecological imbalance caused by human exploitation of nature. Using metaphors of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizards, and jackals, she draws attention to how her female characters detest the absurdity of their existence.

In *Fire on the Mountain* Desai symbolizes Nanda Kaul as a mountain or forest, representing her self-esteem, while Raka represents wild nature or fire, highlighting their mental trauma. Raka's arrival turns Nanda's life upside down. The novel also explores the darker sides of nature and the women involved, particularly through the rape and murder of Ila Das, who dedicated her life to serving humanity. This parallels how nature, which serves society, is destroyed and oppressed by men, symbolizing the domination and exploitation of both women and nature.

From an eco-feminist perspective, the violation of women is linked to the violation of the earth. This is evident in the Pasteur Institute, where animals are used for research and their remains discarded carelessly: "They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too many animals. They use them for tests... they empty the bones and ashes of dead animals down into the ravine."(Desai 44).

When Nanda Kaul receives the news of Ila Das's tragic death via a phone call, she is stunned, shocked, and shattered. Unable to believe her friend met such a fate, Nanda is overwhelmed with grief and guilt for not inviting Ila to live with her. The trauma of her friend's rape and death deeply affects Nanda, leading her towards her own demise. The fire symbolizes the mental anguish of both Nanda Kaul and Raka. At this moment, Raka returns home, excitedly announcing that she has set the forest on fire-

"Look nani. I have set the forest on fire. Look Nani look – the forest is on fire."(p.158)

R. S. Sharma opines that "the fire consumes the fictive world of Nanda Kaul and leaves the reader smouldering under the impact of a tragic awareness that she had never anticipated. The only reality of fire symbolizes the funeral pyre- the ultimate consummation. Apparently, Raka is the only survivor of this three woman story and she is identified with the triumphant knowledge."

Conclusion

The fire, representing both constructive and destructive forces, symbolizes the characters of Raka, Nanda Kaul, and Ila Das as vital yet purifying elements. The brutal rape and murder of Ila Das ignite a metaphorical fire in Nanda Kaul's heart. As the fire consumes everything, Nanda Kaul desires to set fire to her own life, seeking a new beginning. Anita Desai, through this profound novel, secures a distinguished position among Indian English women writers. She is acknowledged as one of the most powerful feminist voices in India today. Desai delves into the cherished solitude of a regal, dignified, elderly woman, offering a glimpse into her heart and helping us to "... understand and feel what it is to be a woman, know how a woman thinks and feels and behaves."(Butcher 54).

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