

An Ecocritical Reading of Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: Feminist Sensibility Conveying Concern for Nature

- Arindam Ghosh

Abstract: In the face of the post-industrial ecological catastrophe it is worthwhile to analyze human culture through a reassessment of the idea of 'nature' as it appears in the writings of different writers who though writing in an urban, sophisticated set up, try to speak for nature; and thereby understand and address the problems of human cohabitation with nature. Anita Desai although writing in an industrial, cosmopolitan setting, engages herself with the basic concerns of the environmentalists and ecologists. She is generally thought to have addressed women's inner cravings for self-identity. *Fire on the Mountain* promotes eco-consciousness by foregrounding the landscape, by interpreting human actions in animal terms, by conveying to us the diverse nature of mountain biosphere, by depicting the ecological food chain of that locale and by describing some spontaneous natural processes; and thus aims at achieving an integral relationship between man and nature. And finally the novel warns us against the man-made damage on nature in the form of excessive population, the Army Billet, The Pasteur institute and its experimental killing of animals.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecology, interdependence, landscape, eco-feminism, sub-consciousness, escape, binaries.

Ecocriticism is the comparatively new and still germinating branch of interdisciplinary literary study. The term 'Ecocriticism', coined by William Rueckert in the 1970s roughly connote the interdependence between man and the physical environment as is evident in literary works; it also explores the awareness about man-made damage on nature and thus addresses the problems of human cohabitation with nature. The Ecocritics take an earth-centred (geo-centric) approach to literary criticism, that is, they attempt to re-study major canonical works from the point of view of nature. Their readings focus on the presentation of the external world and aim to apply certain ecological terms and conceptions, like growth, energy, balance, mutability, circulation etc even to the things outside the natural world. They endow the writers emphasizing and foregrounding nature in their works with special canonical status; naturally the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists have overbearing impact upon their critical orientations. Ecocritics question social norms and preconditions and reconsider them by emphasizing eco-centric values (for their aim is to challenge that nature is actually an anthropomorphic construct, that is, it is culturally manufactured). They celebrate multiplicity and diversity in

nature for environmental essentialism or reductionism¹ is as dangerous as pollution or other environmental threats. The Ecocritics are enthusiastically concerned over certain issues, such as: the role of the physical setting of a literary work, the metaphor of 'land' or 'place'; bearing of scientific ecology with literature itself; and the connection between the natural world and the cultural artifacts of language and literature.²

In the Indian context the varied nature of the landscapes and ecosystem resist any simplified treatment or interpretation. Yet the immense pressure of increasing population and human avarice has disturbed the mutual co-existence and interrelatedness of the human society and the different organisms of the external environment. Therefore, concern for ecology and the respective debates form one of the most discussed topics in contemporary literature. The perception of the impending doom as an environmental catastrophe and the consequent destruction of the planetary life support system is the principle motivating force for the concerned writers. Yet at the initial stages of Indian writing in English we find mimicry of the British Romantic tradition in which nature had been a backdrop or setting or at best 'a space of leisure' in which we entertain our subjective feelings. Landscape and natural world made their prominent appearances on the pages of literary works but the treatment or execution was not informed with acute ecological knowledge, skill or expertise. Tagore's immortal lines – *Dao phire se aranyo, laho e nagar* (give back the forest, take away this city) – significantly awakens us to the reality of man-made damage on nature and objectifies a pining to return to the lap of nature. In the sphere of Indian English fiction Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* promote a sensible paganism in which 'Goddess Kenchamma' (basically a mountain) dictates the life story of the human beings. Man's dependence upon mountains and rivers produces the sense of reverence towards nature. In R.K. Narayan's works 'Malgudi' is imbued with 'the spirit of the place'. The 'soul' of human drama resides in the landscapes and in the setting of nature. Nature comes at the foreground in Amitabh Ghosh's *The Hungry Tides* where nature is shown to be both destroyer and preserver; and threats are revealed to the sea coast and island ecology. However, serious concerns over environmental depletion have been presented by Ruskin Bond. The natural setting of Dehradun and Mussoorie suggests of nature's healing power but at the same time we are made aware of the devastations brought about into that sublime setting by bombing, by destructing forests, by indiscriminate use of chemicals and plastics. He advises man for shunning cruelties towards nature and non-human beings, and appeals for developing a more intimate relationship based on compassion and mutual interdependence. Anita Desai's novels mostly voice women's inner cravings for self-identity – their feelings and frustrations, their aspirations and anguishes. She is the first to introduce the psychological novel in the Indian context: she employs the external landscape to convey interior stages of mind and emotions; hence the predominance of nature images in almost all her

novels. Ursula K. Heise observes in “Science and Ecocriticism” that Ecocriticism “investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or authentic genres and tropes, and what assumptions about Nature underlie genres that may not address the trope directly” (qtd. in Shayamala). Keeping that in mind we can easily understand Desai's diverse nature images – botanical, zoological, meteorological, landscapes serve to represent human condition and their existential crisis (shayamala). In *Cry, The Peacock* the external landscape and nature images effectively bring forth the psychic complexities of the inner life of the protagonist. Her existential problems are interpreted through the dominant image of the peacock in the jungle; Maya herself becomes the peacock; her insanity, her distorted world poignantly appropriate the assumptions and depictions of the natural phenomenon. Amidst her alienation, rejection, confinement, nature offers a temporary relief from mounting tensions. *Voices in the City* captures the anguish of the siblings, who had spent their childhood in hill station, after they are displaced into the city of Calcutta. Monisha's claustrophobic existence has been repeatedly addressed in terms of an encaged bird (here, we are reminded of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) who wants to get free. She commits a crime against nature by committing suicide and then voices the plight of man who has been separated from nature. In *Clear Light of Day* historical memory continues to overbear the personal consciousness of the characters; yet human actions are depicted in terms of animal images.

In the present article my attempt will be to focus on *Fire on the Mountain* which occasionally reaches 'lyrical heights' and thus explores the limitations of the human beings; their emotional dilemma and helplessness and even sadder plight of women folks; the increasing population and the terrorized nature (under technological pressure); culture's corrupting effects which form a binary opposition with nature; and above all the meditative seclusion into nature and the desire to get fused into nature's vital elements – these issues and motives are at the heart of ecocritical considerations. The novel delineates the painful reality of the life of three women characters – Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das in order to, as Bidulata Chowdhury comments, show the 'skillful dramatization of the experiences of certain women embroiled by the crossway of life” (qtd. in Shayamala). K.R.S. Iyengar offers beautiful observations on the novel:

These three, although physically near to one another, live in their separate loneliness making but feeble and vain attempts to establish bridgeheads of understanding... The central chapters (that) describe Raka's self-finding through the exploration of the ... Nanda's and Ila's viperous sense of loneliness and alienation... which is meant to show up the futility of living... (744)

The basic story is that Nanda Kaul retires to Kasauli, a hill station in her old age to lead a life of peaceful seclusion. But her idyllic isolation has been interfered with the arrival of her great-granddaughter Raka and the more disturbing reunion with her childhood friend Ila Das who

ultimately becomes a victim of male violence. Nanda herself dies of shock. However, the distressing stature of women characters have been somewhat revived through Raka's overtly self-sufficient lifestyle and through her symbolic act of setting the mountain on fire. In the novel Desai deftly explores nature images for examining human relationships, for externalizing sub-consciousness feelings and above all, for heightening the 'interdependence' between man and nature. As I have stated earlier the setting or 'locale' of a literary work has an important role to play in its Ecocritical reading. Alison Byerly observes in the article "The Uses of Landscape": "The aesthetic view of the wilderness . . . has taught us to value nature, but the criterion for evaluation is the quality of aesthetic experience a landscape provides (52). Naturally, the mountainous region of Kasauli is worth exploring both as a geographic and as a psychological space (psycho-cartography). The mountain, 'a real empirical space' (Kundu 150) has been made to objectify Nanda's act of self-assertion and resistance and her attempt of creating 'a room of one's own'. It offers her a scope of 'Threavian escape' into nature and thus dodges the structured socio-moral ideologies. The physical presence of the mountain is vivid and varied – with its sights, sounds, smells and diverse weather conditions; its flora and fauna. Yet this idyllic space has been tampered with disharmonious cruelty and violence. This ambiguous duality is confirmed in its stark remoteness and bare isolation. This mountain has not been endowed with features that may make it like Eden (for example, there is no river, no beautiful scenery, neither any infinite expanse emblematic of human aspiration); only 'hills melted into sky, sky into snows, snows into air' (FM 30). The mountain almost becomes her, with 'the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children' (19). The author hardly attempts to romanticize that solitary landscape. Instead, she invested it with such epithets that might have a repelling effect: for, the mountain becomes 'an ugly animal writhing in heat'; 'a square dragon'; 'the central dagger'. Amid this austere presence the author has artistically embedded her eco-consciousness by depicting the ecological threats that are slowly gobbling up the alternative space (for Nanda): "the chimneys piercing the white sky, lashed about with black whips of smoke"; then the 'Pasteur Institute' killing animals ruthlessly in the name of experimentation and 'empty the bones and ashes of dead animals down into the ravine' (49); then the mountain inscape is crowded with 'too many tourists'; even more poignantly "the army's everywhere What is that peculiar instrument on top? Frightening. Like an atomic reactor. Or some such scientific monstrosity" (63). The excessive human population with their boisterous ways of living forces us to allude to the Eliotian wasteland: 'There is not even silence in the mountains'; and the mountain refuses to remain 'heaven-haven'. Yet the mountain landscape does not cease to be a solace and consolation to the human beings: there are various references when the human characters aspire to fuse with nature or to imitate the 'animal-run' (Ted Hughes's terms). In the mountain ecosphere pine, cicada, eagles reverberate. Besides 'thorny raspberries', 'chestnut tree', 'dense

apricot trees', 'wild zephyranthes', 'damp lilies', vultures, 'a thick yellow snake', 'a bright hoopoe', a pair of bulbuls, butterflies, langurs, jackals appropriately form the diverse and incongruous biosphere of that mountain region. And time and again they have been employed to interpret human actions and habits. William Howarth observes that "A future sense of cultural history may be landscape ecology which avoids distinction between natural and disturbed regions and uses a new spatial language to describe land by shape" (qtd. in Shayamala). Keeping that in mind we might say that Desai's meaningful treatment of the mountain landscape does not incite any romantic imagination but explores the possibility of harmonizing human culture and the landscape, with its varied forms of life.

The central character, Nanda Kaul meditates to spend her remaining life at Carignano. Her urge for privacy amidst mountainous silence speaks of her desire for Wordsworthian seclusion into pristine nature. In the novel there are numerous references when she expresses strong wish for getting organic fusion with the elements of nature. She may not display excessive love for nature that might be called to be bordering on pantheism but often her internal longings betray "Deep Ecological" concerns which yearns for a lesser human population for the flowering of non-human life (Garrard 21). The very first line of the novel marks her attempt of creating bond and fellowship with nature: "Nanda Kaul paused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly . . . (FM 3); then follows the more overt line – "she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less" (4). This deeper connection suggested here may initiate a new credo in man/nature relationship. Now, Carignano itself may suggest of a claustrophobic space of aloofness and detachment, yet we may think that her total self-absorption in 'on the ridge of the mountain' is like that of the ancient Vedic monastic traditions en route *Mahaprasthanam*. S. Indira comments: "Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life" (qtd. in Shayamala): the starkness and barrenness of the land becomes the objective correlative of Nanda's solitary existence and as she forces to shut off human presence, her internal 'Defense Mechanism'³ propels her to imitate that eagle. This is her assertion of freedom:

An eagle swept over it . . . in repose in control. She had wished it occur to her, to imitate that eagle – gliding, with eyes closed. (FR 21)

In fact, there are several other occasions when she feels or is supposed by others as performing like a non-human being; when she watches the white hen dragging out the worm, 'she felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation' (23) [here, we may also observe that the novelist is also commenting on the mountain ecological energy transfer]; to Raka the old lady is 'another pine tree, the grey sari a rock – all components of the barrenness and stillness of the Carignano garden' (44); thus through her [although her garden (man-made garden) may suggest of human artifice

(culturally constructed) as contrasted with the wild forests] the author artistically comments about a deeper realization of nature and of an unconscious participation into the process of nature. D. Maya asserts that “in the evocation of images that transcribed the human conditions and in the poignant fictionalization of the human predicament, Anita Desai's skill is incomparable” (qtd. in Shayamala). And in that Raka becomes her essential medium for the exploration of various images and thus comment on various ecological processes. The sickly girl and her actions have been recurrently interpreted in animal terms: to Nanda, the girl is 'like one of those dark crickets... or a mosquito... on thin precarious legs' (FM 43), 'a pet insect'; 'her resemblance to an insect', her intense desire to 'fly, fly off the hilltop ... like the eagles that circled slowly' (61); then Nanda's observations – “Raka no more needed, or wanted, a house than a jackal did, or a cicada” (103); and again she is a 'bird fallen from a nest fallen from a tree'; her roaming about 'as if she were a thousand black mosquitoes' (49); after her experience at the night club, 'she was no long the insect, the grasshopper child. She grew as still as a twig' (79) – all these point to the ecological sensibility of the author in employing nature imagery for exploring human conditions. Moreover, Raka herself has an intuitive inclination towards nature. At her very arrival she is listening to winds and cicadas, noticing the flight of the hoopoes, showing interest in the insects. Later we find that she has the tendency of vanishing into nature: suddenly she emerges from the rocks holding onto 'fistfuls of hairy ferns'; rubbing her back to 'the crusted back of a tree'; again 'scrambling up a stony hillside, grasping at tufts of grass or bushes of Spanish broom . . . stopping to strip a thorny bush of its few berries or to examine an insect under a leaf' (FM 50). The high and vast expansion of the mountain region has widened Raka's mind and left her to participate into the spontaneous activities and vital flow of energies into nature. Through her the novelist tries to develop an alternative dimension in man/nature relationship (here, we are reminded of Wordsworth's depiction of the boyhood into wild nature in *The Prelude*). Often it is thought that the grey mountain symbolizes Nanda Kaul while the fire is symbolic of Raka. In fact, with her spontaneous, instinctive and effortless ways she stands as the epitome of wild nature itself. However, the boldest reference that might significantly contribute to promote eco-consciousness is that of Raka craving for berries, pine nuts etc for slaking hunger. At the same time this makes her part of the forest ecology and also that the artificially cooked and processed foods are rendered insufficient in respect to natural resources. Finally we cannot miss another vital point which would be environmentally fruitful, that is, often we find that Raka feels like a caged animal with 'collar and chain' (Dog's slavishness). Ecocriticism protests against this hypocritical anthropocentric human criminality of displacing species from its ecological 'niche'.

Even Ila Das has been endowed with animal characteristics: her voice is that of 'suddenly awakened geese', her ridiculous appearance is almost like a monkey. However, her helpless ways as a woman and the

consequent rape reminds us of Mother Nature being tortured and ravaged by human agents. Eco-feminism, a parallel movement asserts that certain male-centric dualisms like Humanity/Nature, Man/Woman and Reason/Emotion etc are at the root of the subjugation of women and the source of anti-nature beliefs; it criticizes the mutual subordination of women and nature through patriarchy and technological progress. Here Ila Das's exploitation and the resultant agony become the cry of the whole nature. From an early age she had to carry the burden of her family; she started working for the benevolence of people; yet while preventing the 'unnatural' act of child marriage she falls the victim to physical exploitation by the same logic that enabled man to perceive nature as resource for his own use (and thus appropriate the nature of domination and subordination). The same is true about Nanda Kaul for throughout her life she feels as humiliated and as insignificant as Ila Das; she had earlier identified herself with the mutilated worm. The three women here leaving aside their past sufferings (in a sense Raka too had witnessed patriarchal violence in the form of his father), are trying to create a mutual space and to reconstruct the mountainous landscape as an emphatic assertion of feminine sensibility. Mary Conde here offers important commentary: "Indian women writers inscribe Indian landscape with moral criticism, sadness, entrapment – or simply dreariness" (qtd. in Kundu 61). In the *Fire on the Mountain* Carignano thus becomes an emblem of the desire of women to live without inhibitions and restrictions; which gets ultimately violated by 'a black shape'. Mary Daly expresses her views in *Gyn/Ecology* that "patriarchy appears to be everywhere. Even outer space and the future have been colonized" (qtd. in Kundu 165). In the light of the above argument we can make out that the women writers are actually constructing worlds of isolation (an alternative space) for escaping the patriarchal domination (Kundu 165).⁴

Carrying on the refrain of the above paragraph we'll consider the recurrent reference to the symbolic forest fire. Forest fire is an unpredictable natural phenomenon which brings about devastation and destruction; this reminds us about the creative-destructive traits of the natural world (which is one of the post-pastoral⁵ aspects pointed out by Terry Gifford). Human efforts are too feeble to resist it (which is evident in the 'charred house' on the mountain top). Amid the many references off previous forest fires when the actual fire does occur it fascinates Raka so much that we can intuitively know about her final act of setting the forest on fire. She is attracted by the burnt black house and vicariously imagines herself to be a tree up in flames. Unlike the other female characters, it is Raka who finally enacts some self-assertion. Nanda in vain searches for calm and peace of mind; Ila's quest is fraught with struggle and humiliation; while Raka achieves complete oneness with nature and commits the deed of ecstatic exultation: 'Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire' (FM 159). This emphatic action challenges hypocritical norms and preconditions of human society and inspires awe

at the very natural process (though here incited it). Keith Sagar in his book *Literature and the Crime against Nature* offers us invaluable insights:

ecology needs imagination, and imagination's most articulate expression, literature ...The literary imagination connects all the severed halves – inner and outer, self and other, male and female, life and death, man and nature. (qtd. in Gifford 143).

Desai explores the emotional and psychological realms of the characters; and while doing so her imagination links these human conditions with some literal and metaphorical use of nature. In *Fire on the Mountain* she minutely unravels the 'Prufrock-like' (limbo) existential crisis of human characters and their futile attempts of escaping it. Nature is thought to be providing such solace and grace; hence the setting of mountainous region of Kasauli. The novelist deftly foregrounds the hilly region (which is actually the background of the story); interprets human beings in terms of nature images; conveyed to us the diverse nature of mountain biosphere; in parallel depicts the ecological food chain (distinct in the hoopoe pecking at the apricot, or the hen mutilating the worm); describes some spontaneous natural processes (rain inciting host of Zephyranthes); and thus aims at achieving an integral relationship between nature and man. Yet she is not blind to the man-made destruction on it (the 'Garden house' being used as an army billet, the Pasteur institute killing animals in the name of experimentation, even the mention of the private zoo); in fact, she holds these things for the failure in the way of developing any vital kinship with nature (that is why the mountain fails to become a 'Children's Paradise'). And the novel's tragic ending somewhat seems to suggest the finality of death (Ila's brutal murder, Nanda's pathetic demise, even the reference to the grave and the death of Colonel Macdougall's seven children); death is the ultimate natural process, which man despite all efforts cannot but accept. If we judge this under ecological framework we'll find that man through his ruthless insensibility towards nature has made it apathetic to man; and has introduced his own death. Writers like Anita Desai tries to bring men back to their senses.

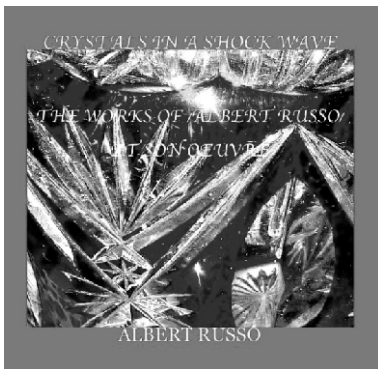
End Notes:

1. This is the tendency to simplify nature by categorizing it under certain species and types. This anthropocentric tendency commits the crime of neglecting the diversity of nature.
2. Most of the Ecocritical theoretical postulates I got from P. Barry's volume cited below.
3. Defense Mechanism helps us to survive by making our emotional state suitable for the moment of crisis or anxiety. Nanda here wants to imitate the eagle as a form of her self defense against emotional breakdown.
4. Rama Kundu in her article "The Ideology of Space in *Fire on the Mountain*" compares this attempt on the part of the women with that of *La ecriture feminine* and surveys many women writers who had tried to create a specific space for the women in their works.
5. Terry Gifford in his book *Pastoral* (Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London:

Routledge, 1999. Print.) treats Ted Hughes's poetry in the light of post-pastoralism, suggesting that post-pastoralism embodies an awe at natural processes, recognition of a creative destructive world, the marriage of the inner to the outer world, of the self to nature.

References :

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.
- Byerly, Alison. "The Uses of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System". *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* ed. by Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm. Athens & London: UO Georgia P, 1996. Print.
- Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. London: Random House Group Limited, 2008. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Gifford, Terry. *Ted Hughes*. London & New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Iyenger, K. R. S. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Pub. Pvt. Ltd., 1985. Print.
- Kundu, Rama. *Anita Desai: Fire on the Mountain*. New Delhi: Atlantic Pub., 2005. Print.
- "The Ideology of Space in *Fire on the Mountain*". *Critical Responses to Anita Desai* (vol. I) ed. by Shubha Tiwari. India: Atlantic Pub., 2001. Print.
- Shyamala, C.G. "Nature and Ecocriticism in *Cry*, *The Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*". www.the-criterion.com/V2/n3/Shyamala.pdf. Web. Accessed on 24.06.12. at 9 am.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. London: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.



List Price: \$59.95

Published: May 26 2012

ISBN/EAN13: 1477532048 / 9781477532041

Page Count: 322

Binding Type: US Trade Paper

Trim Size: 8.5" x 11"

Language: English

Color: Full Color

Published by: Createspace

Crystals in a shock wave

The works of /Albert Russo/ et son oeuvre

The works of Albert Russo of the past 40 years, in both English and French, reviewed and commented in these two languages, with essays and photos by the author.