

An Ecocritical Study of Anita Desai's Novel Fire on the Mountain

By

Kumari Baveja Devi

Department of English and Communication Studies, Eternal University, Baru Sahib,
Himachal Pradesh, India 173101

Email - tegtabobby01@gmail.com

Geeta Sharma

Department of English and Communication Studies, Eternal University, Baru Sahib,
Himachal Pradesh, India 173101

Kulbhushan Kumar

Department of English and Communication Studies, Eternal University, Baru Sahib,
Himachal Pradesh, India 173101

Abstract

Ecocritical analysis of Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai has posed a tremendous threat to human society as well as the mother planet. The extensive overuse of natural resources has left us on the verge of economic failure. The rainforests are being cut down, fossil fuels are rapidly depleting, the seasonal cycle is disrupted, ecological disasters are occurring on a regular basis around the world, and our environment is on the verge of collapse. Ecocriticism is a worldwide growing movement that came into being as a reaction to man's anthropocentric mindset of dominating nature. The present paper tries to analyse the ecocritical ideas as perceived in some chosen world literature as well as Indian writing in English. An environmentally focused study of literature brings about ecological literacy among the readers, who in the process become eco-conscious, thereby taking excellent care of Mother Nature. Environmental concern is one of the key concerns, and ecocriticism has witnessed rapid development throughout its brief stay since its start. It is an interpretive instrument for interpreting nature writing, which is usually connected with environmental critique, animal studies, green cultural studies, ecosophy, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and eco-spiritualism, etc.

Keywords: Nature, Literature, Ecocriticism, Environment, Fire on the Mountain.

Introduction

The modern globe is confronting eco-disasters, and now our ecology is in danger. Just knowledge and technology are not enough to address the worldwide ecological issue. Ecocriticism is one of the younger revisionist movements that has removed the humanities over the past few decades. We should make a shift in our attitude towards nature. Literature does not float above life, so it has a function to perform. Ecologically oriented literature argues for a greater knowledge of nature in its broader relevance because, for a long time, literary critics did not give nature the consideration it deserved. Within the previous three decades, ecocriticism has emerged as a worldwide emergent movement. The word 'eco' derives from the Greek root word 'oikos, which etymologically means household or earth, and 'logy, from 'logos, denotes logical discourse. Together, they refer to criticism of the home and surroundings as they are represented in literature. Ecocriticism, which was synonymous with American nature writings as well as British Romantic literature, has now acquired its impetus with worldwide

eco-literature. Considering the current ecological crisis taking place all over the world, it has shifted its colour from local to global perspectives. Humans have only one earth to live on, and we are on the brink of our imminent demise unless we are attentive to the blue planet. If we wish to hear the melody of the environment, we should modify our anthropocentric vision without any delay. The literature of the globe is replete with ecological viewpoints. The environment is an inherent aspect of human culture and is fundamental in all major canonical literature. An ecological insight may lead them toward numerous new views. Indian philosophy and writing are not exceptions to this. From the ancient to the cyber age, Indian literature is packed with environmental concerns. They make us discover how we may lead a pleasant life in close harmony with nature. These environmental literary works beautifully deal with human nature interrelation and interconnection- the keynote of eco-literature. The common message is to maintain nature in its pristine beauty; let's not damage what we cannot create. The more ecocritical texts will come into focus, the more man will learn to behave with nature in a proper way keeping in touch with the present environmental crisis (Mishra, 2016). Anita Desai, one of the few Indian writers in English in the post-colonial age, builds nature in his fictional works by using intertwining stories, experiences, myths, and cultural history. In some of her paintings, the setting exhibits a picture of the real world and the human connection with it, especially with the feminine figures. Yet, while evaluating the critical outputs of her works, we notice that we have yet to investigate her works from an ecocritical point of view to establish her intrinsic concerns about environmental tragedy and the man-nature interface. An ecocritical analysis of Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" is possible since it emphasises the interaction between people and nature, the effects of human activity on the environment, and the disparity between traditional and modern lifestyles. The work stresses the significance of preserving the environment for future generations and contends that a strong connection to nature is necessary for human well-being. A work as rich and intricate as "Fire on the Mountain" can be evaluated using an ecocritical perspective. Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" can be examined using an ecocritical perspective since it explores issues related to nature, the environment, and how people interact with the natural world. "Fire on the Mountain," by Anita Desai, is a moving depiction of the complicated bond between people and the environment. The tale emphasises the necessity to uphold ancient values and live in harmony with nature through the characters of Nanda and Raka. The work also serves as a warning regarding the perils of contemporary technology and the detrimental effects of human interference with nature. our planet and reflect on how crucial it is to protect it for future generations (Desai, 2012). Anita Desai's novel "Fire on the Mountain" is set in the remote and gorgeous Himalayan village of Kasauli and illustrates the contrast between the beauty of nature and the brutal realities of human life. Nanda Kaul is an elderly widow who lives a solitary existence in a house surrounded by trees and hills. Nanda's intimate connection with nature is visible in her daily routine and her appreciation for the natural world. She often takes long walks in the woods, studies the birds and animals, and admires the changing colors of the sky. Nevertheless, the peace of Nanda's existence is broken when her great-grandson, Raka, arrives to live with her. Raka, who is dependent on television, music, and video games, enters the scene, bringing with him the noise and turmoil of the modern world. Desai emphasises the damaging effects of contemporary technology on the environment and human interactions with nature through the figure of Raka. Moreover, the work also illustrates the battle between traditional and modern values. The ancient way of life is represented by Nanda, who is shown to be intelligent, kind, and in harmony with nature. On the other hand, Raka, who embodies modern values, is presented as uninformed, greedy, and estranged from the natural environment (Abbey, 2011). It is also notable that the title, "Fire on the Mountain," represents the catastrophic power of human interference with nature. The forest fire that erupts towards the end of the story is a metaphor for the destruction caused by human greed and negligence. The fire not only destroys the environment and wildlife but also puts the

lives of the residents in peril. Since "Fire on the Mountain" by Anita Desai addresses issues about human-nature relationships and environmental deterioration, it can be examined through an ecocritical lens. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that studies the representation of nature and the environment in literature and explores the ways in which literature can help environmental awareness and activism (Bonello, 2004; Ghosh, 2013). In "Fire on the Mountain" Desai presents the Himalayan terrain as a site of beauty and wonder but also as a fragile ecosystem that is under threat from human activities such as deforestation and tourism. Nanda Kaul has a strong connection to the environment and finds comfort in the forests and mountains. However, Nanda's idyllic life is disrupted by the arrival of her American grandson, Raka, who is fascinated by the Himalayas and wants to explore them. Raka's curiosity leads him to venture into the forest, where he unintentionally starts a fire that spreads rapidly and destroys a large area of the forest. The damaging effects of human activity on the environment are symbolised by fire. Desai also depicts the tension in the Himalayas between traditional ways of life and modernisation. Raka stands for the contemporary, metropolitan lifestyle that is cut off from nature, whereas Nanda represents the traditional way of life that is strongly ingrained in the local culture and surroundings. Tensions between Nanda and Raka, as well as between the local peasants and adventure-seeking tourists who travel to the Himalayas, are reflections of this conflict. In general, "Fire on the Mountain" might be interpreted as an attack on the damaging effects of human activity on the environment and a claim for a more sustainable and peaceful coexistence between nature and humans. Desai's use of words and images paints an evocative and dramatic picture of the wonder and frailty of the natural world, emphasising the urgent need to safeguard it. An ecocritical perspective, which investigates the connection between literature and the environment, can be used to evaluate Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain*. The protagonist of this novel, Nanda Kaul, a recently bereaved woman, visits the mountain home of her family in Kasauli, India. She learns about how human activity is destroying the natural environment around her and how cultural traditions have an impact on it. Deforestation figures prominently in the novel's environmental issues. For tea plantations and to create room for timber harvesting, the forests around Nanda's house have been removed, which has caused soil erosion and the extinction of some animal species. The fact that Raka, Nanda's son, works in the timber industry further emphasises the conflict between environmental preservation and economic growth. The story also examines how human culture affects the environment. Plant scientist Nanda's spouse was dedicated to protecting the environment, but his understanding and beliefs were not widely accepted. Instead of being an essential component of the ecosystem, the mountains and forests are seen by the local population as resources that can be used for financial advantage. The work also emphasises how modernity, which is associated with environmental devastation, contrasts with traditional Indian culture. Madho, the family's housekeeper, has a strong connection to nature and is aware of the value of preserving environmental balance. Ila, Nanda's Westernized daughter-in-law, however, seems to have lost touch with the natural world since she is more interested in materialism and fashion (Harnish, 1993; Van Horn, 2011; Mishra, 2016).

India's Ecocriticism

India is a country with a diverse range of species. It is blessed with beautiful flora and fauna. The country's diverse physical landscape stretches from the Himalayas. It is not detached from literature and several authors' works on ecocritical texts (Mishra, 2016).

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountains* is an excellent example of ecocritical literature that addresses the issues of animal slaughter, population growth, and human moral decay—all of which pose a threat to the environment and are represented by recurrent forest fires.

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya's depicts Nature as both a destroyer and a preserver of life. The author of this story has demonstrated how industrialization's negative effects ruin the idyllic balance of a peasant's life.

The God of Little Things by Arundhati Roy depicts how humans exploit nature in the name of development and modernization, which is one of the novel's main themes. Here, the author demonstrates her great understanding of the urgent environmental challenges of the day. The writer of this work has spoken up in defence of the environment, which is currently under serious threat from pollution. She explores the tremendous destruction of nature in this novel while also considering what led to its dehumanisation.

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is a potent example of ecocritical literature because it highlights the repressive systems that humans harbour on a social and environmental level. It has been said that the Sundarbans' delta is both a destroyer and a preserver of life. The work accurately portrays the state-sponsored terrorism used to drive out the displaced Bengali refugees who had taken up residence in Marichjhapi.

Nature:

The term "nature" is used more broadly by the Ecocritics. Ecocriticism is more than just the analysis of how nature is depicted in literature. Nature in this context refers to more than only the beauty of its inhabitants, such as plants and animals. Here, the term "nature" refers to the entire physical environment, both human- and non-human-made. The two are connected, and this link forges the foundation of ecocriticism. A healthy ecosystem exists for the benefit of both humans and the environment so long as there is harmony between living things and inanimate objects. The current ecological conscience feels that it's important to preserve the harmony between people and nature. A perfect ecology is one in which people, birds, animals, and plants all coexist in balance with one another without one dominating or destroying the other (Frederick, 2012; Mishra, 2016).

Anthropocence vs Biosense:

Human nature is fundamentally anthropocentric, placing humans at the top of the food chain (Fig. 1). Man regards himself as being superior to every other organism on Earth since he is the only literary entity. Yet, ecocriticism downplays the value of every environmental object in relation to humanity. Man's terrible mistake in ecology is his anthropocentric rather than biocentric perspective and his will to subjugate, harmonise, domesticate, violate, and exploit every living thing. Anthropocentric thinking argues that people come first and either romanticise or rule their surroundings (Mishra, 2016).

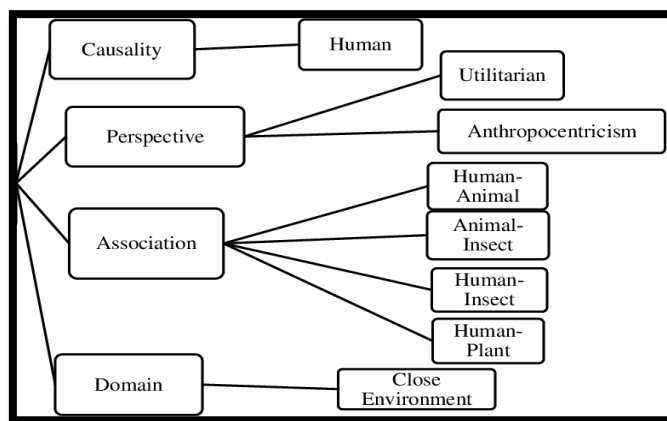


Fig. 1: Figure showing the anthropocentric view.

Sustainable Development:

Sustainable development is promoted by ecocriticism to improve the future of humanity. Each living thing has the right to find a means to survive. Every group on earth has a part to play in maintaining the basic life support system, including plants, animals, women, marginalised people, and tribal groups. Using resources sparingly will protect the future security and safety of future generations. Sustainable development is the most popular strategy for addressing environmental crises (Frederick, 2012; Mishra, 2016).

Conclusion

The natural world, including hills, meadows, rivers, mountains, and landscapes, is depicted in innumerable literary works. Literature, the most popular cultural genre, has never shied away from the central issue of man and his physical environment, and the relationships between humans and other living things. To accomplish a range of desired effects, writers meticulously represent place, surroundings, and overall mood in their literary works. With the fundamental objective of examining a cultural work with respect to its interaction with nature, ecocriticism emerged as a theory. The idea that nature and people are at odds with one another may have arisen out of scientific caution. As science and technology improve, more people are coming to believe that nature is a mechanical system that can be used and exploited to meet their needs. It accelerates the rate of change of the environment's fragile balance. Investigating the early ties between humans and nature in science, philosophy, history, and literature is so crucial for the twenty-first century; perhaps the main objective is to preserve it. Again, there is no denying that humans depend on the environment for both instrumental and intrinsic reasons, and there is much data to support this. People learn that nature is perhaps a good place to look when they are desperate for contentment. The novel insists readers consider their relationship with nature via an ecocritical lens. The study examines issues of alienation, solitude, and ecological imbalance while showcasing the beauty and strength of nature. Desai emphasises the need for a more sustainable way of life and a relationship with nature through her use of imagery and symbolism.

References

- Abbey, Edward. *Fire on the Mountain*. Rosetta Books, 2011.
- Bonello, Sharon. *A study of the treatment of women in three novels by Anita Desai: Cry, the Peacock, where shall we go this summer? and Fire on the mountain*. BS thesis. University of Malta, 2004.
- Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. Random House India, 2012.
- Ghosh, Arindam. "An Ecocritical Reading of Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: Feminist Sensibility Conveying Concern for Nature." *Labyrinth: An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies* 4.1 (2013).
- Harnish, Christopher. "Fire on the Mountain." *Exile* 40.2 (1993): 15.
- Mishra, Sandip Kumar. "Ecocriticism: A study of environmental issues in literature." *BRICS Journal of Educational Research* 6.4 (2016): 168-170.
- Suresh, Frederick. "Contemporary Contemplation on Ecoliterature, Authorpress." (2012).
- Van Horn, Gavin. "Fire on the Mountain: Ecology Gets its Narrative Totem." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5.4 (2011).