

## SURVIVAL OF WOMEN: AN ECOFEMINIST VIEW IN ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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**Abstract:** In 1975 Rosemary Radford Ruether says in her book *New Woman, New Earth* that women must not find any liberation for them and for the ecological crisis where basic model of relationships is based on domination. Through the union of the basic demands of women's movement and ecological movement a sustainable society can be developed. Ecofeminism works as a theory, as a movement and as a philosophy. The theory of ecofeminism deals with the domination over women and exploitation of nature in an one analytical view. While as a movement rejecting all previously dominant ideologies aims at to bring social justice, as a philosophy it liberates all the subordinated classes erasing all kinds of dualistic notions. The title *Fire on the Mountain* carries a double sense of alienation and union, two opposing factors, essential to bring justice as a whole. What this research paper intends to highlight is to analyse Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* from the viewpoint of ecofeminism. Anita Desai's attempt to write such kind of novel easily connects her to this term drawing out a connection between women and nature, various kinds of social domination over women and exploitation of nature and finally through the death of Nanda Kaul and Illa Das and through the sudden forest fire the novelist aims at the establishment of a new society free from male domination through Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. Thus challenging dominant strategies of the patriarchal society, Anita Desai empowers the women by their own strategies of survival.

**Introduction:** In 1975 Rosemary Radford Ruether says in her book *New Woman, New Earth: Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationship continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society.* (Quoted in Karen Warren) Ruether truly grasps that the ecological crisis and the crisis 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 where demands should come in union from both crises. From this view point in 1974 the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne introduces the term ecofeminism in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* where she links feminism with ecology. Ecofeminists believe that the male dominant society brings a division between nature and culture which is responsible for all kinds of social domination. It manifests itself as a theory, as a movement and as a philosophy. As a theory Ecofeminism connects the oppression of women and all subordinate groups and the exploitation of nature in one analytical view. While as a movement rejecting all previously dominant ideologies it aims at to bring social justice, as a philosophy it liberates all the subordinated classes erasing all kinds of dualistic notions. What this article intends to highlight is to examine Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* from the perspective of ecofeminism. The title *Fire on the Mountain* carries a double sense of alienation and union, two opposing factors, essential to bring justice as a whole. Nanda

Kaul's alienation from her family and society and same time her union with nature, Illa Das's alienation from family and job and union with nature through her social work in the village, Raka's alienation from her parents and discovery of the reality of nature through intimate union with nature. While fire symbolises destruction of the self identity of women and nature, mountain symbolises emotional detachment of the characters and their instant trying for seeking self identity. As nature is losing her beauty and identity by natural degradation, human and animals are also losing their identity by degradation of human nature. What ecofeminists think is that "trees, water, animals, toxics and nature language are feminist issues" since, through the awareness of them, the position and struggle of women are realized (Karen Warren 4). Actually identity crisis and alienation grow from the domination of the patriarchal power. Anita Desai's attempt to write such kind of novel which shows a strong connection between women and nature, easily binds her to the term ecofeminism. Throughout the novel nature plays an important role where on one hand, nature's connection with women and on the other hand, man's separation from nature and degradation of nature from human action are depicted. In this respect Val Plumwood states "... both the dominant tradition of men as reason and women as nature, and the more recent conflicting one of men as forceful and wild and women as tamed and domestic, have had the effect of confirming masculine power" (Feminism and the Mastery of Nature 20). What Anita Desai wants to mean here that alienation of human beings from nature not only brings natural destruction but destruction of human

nature and human life also. Desai reconciles frequent fire on the mountain due to ecological change and suppressed fire in Nanda Kaul's heart in order to the domination of the patriarchal society. In the beginning of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* Anita Desai brings together nature's barrenness with that of the barrenness of Nanda Kaul's heart which expects nothing without loneliness. Even to her friend Illa Das she says rigidly, "I never cared for music myself. It makes me fidget. I greatly prefer silence"(FM 130). Nanda Kaul's loneliness is not just a desolate state but after a long spending heavy dutiful services in family it is a state of leisure which Karen M. Fox thinks "an important segment of women's lives for connecting with nature and reaffirming themselves and their relationships with nature" (*Ecofeminism: Women, culture ,nature* 155). It is only barrenness of Kasauli that attracts Nanda Kaul. "What pleased and satisfied her so, at Carignano, was its barrenness" (Anita Desai 4). Even she wants no more picture of a child. She does not want any kind of new addition , rather she wants the presence of " a pergola of roses, a marble faun or a fountain"(34).

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life---as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief----and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (Anita Desai 3) Anita Desai exploring her view demonstrates her thought regarding the similar condition possessed by Nanda Kaul and the garden of Carignano. Both Nanda Kaul as well as the garden of Carignano are the victims of barrenness. Nanda Kaul reconciling herself with the garden says, "Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply, by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection..." ( *Fire on the Mountain* 33). Anita Desai clearly shows how Nanda Kaul's inner spirit is attached with nature from where Nanda Kaul not only gets solace but in times of disturbance she feels nature's movement with her. The crucial point of Anita Desai's fiction is Carignano in Kasauli where Nanda Kaul looks at gender identities which separate woman from man, from her viewpoint of being a vice-chancellor's wife whose instant attention, duties and responsibilities are reduced to ridiculous social identity while the daughters of the lecturers and professors mock at her. She thought of that hubbub and of how she had managed and how everyone had said, pretending to think she couldn't hear but really wanting her to, ' Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? Really Vice Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does , '... (Desai 19)

In spite of well aware of Nanda Kaul's dislike of anybody's appearance in her secluded life her daughter Asha forces her to keep Raka with her. This obligation again brings out uncertainty in Nanda Kaul's heart which fears to be dominated again, to be attached with domestic duty again and to be suffered again. "Would Raka's coming mean the opening of that old, troublesome ledger again?" (32) She cries out to be released from all her obligations. Nanda Kaul tries her best to escape from the oppressive memories of the past and so secludes herself in a barren area. Anita Desai demonstrates the trauma Nanda Kaul suffers as a Vice Chancellor's wife, who is not loved by her husband who carries an extra-marital affair with another woman but still dominates her to be an ideal wife who finally suffering from identity crisis pushed herself to the isolated region. " Mr Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests"(FM 20). Women are identified through the identity of men, not possessing autonomous identity. "She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other" (Quoted in *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* 52). Nanda Kaul's obligation to remain alone and not to allow any responsibility upon her victimizes Raka who is not greeted affectionately by Nanda Kaul. From the first meeting with Nanda Kaul a sense of alienation grows in her mind which always separates Raka from her great -grand mother. Hence, during their time of embracing each other's lack of easiness parts them: Each felt how bony, angular and unaccommodating the other was and they quickly separated....To Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry.(FM 44) Ruthanne Kurth Schai states in her essay "*Ecofeminism and Children*" that feminist issues also include children issues related to oppression as feminism challenges to end all oppression. Anita Desai illustrates how at the back of the melodious tone of *The Bridge of the River Kwai* and the vile actions of the doctors towards the animals affect Raka's past. She recalls how her drunken father beats up her mother with hammers and harshly abuses her. Raka becoming shrink in fear under her bedcovers feels the flow of warm urine. She watches her mother who laying down on the floor and shutting out her eyes weeps. Raka becomes psychologically dominated through these oppressions over her mother. Ruthanne Kurth Schai opines that the social repression of children is never talked about privately or publicly. Because it is believed that children lives are vindicated in terms of security, care and support. But in reality the lives of children are being dominated in different ways. Barrie Thorne says : Both feminist and traditional knowledge remain

deeply and unreflectively centered around the experiences of adults. Our understanding of children tend to be filtered through adult perspectives and interests... their full lives, experiences, and agency obscured by adult standpoints. (Quoted in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* 194)

What Nanda Kaul observes that Raka has the gift of vanishing mutely into the hills and the forest. "All she discovered was that the child had a gift for disappearing--suddenly, silently" (FM 50). Raka's oneness with nature makes her conscious of the present environment as "Raka had all the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer, a discoverer" (FM67). Ramlal informs Raka of the destructive effect of forest fire. He also tells her about the house down the hill which is burnt down with two buffalos by forest fire and due to water shortage it becomes impossible to put out the fire. An English Mem lived in that house. After its destruction in forest fire she becomes mad and she is taken to the lunatic asylum. Her hair and eyelashes are burnt off while she tries to save her cat. Again from Nanda Kaul Raka comes to know about another terrible effect of the forest fire, another burnt house, occupied by "an old lady who lived there alone and they say she went mad and was put away" (FM62). Moreover, Nanda Kaul informs her of the pleasant cottage that is captured by the Pasteur Institute. Once it was looked after carefully but "it's used chicken run now" (FM 63). Nanda Kaul tells her about the Garden House which is converted into an Army Billet. Nanda Kaul bitterly expresses her expression while she is telling her about the Army Billet: "Too many tourists, Too much army. How they are ruining this --this quiet place, her breath coming faster and her step fumbling. It really is --- is saddening" (FM 63). Catriona Sandilands states: Women, an oppressed majority, were to look to their own experiences of nurturance, of caring, of connection as a way of beginning an affirmative culture outside the destructive proscriptions of "male-stream" society (The Good Natured Feminist 10). Ecofeminists believe that the separation of man from human mother and the Mother earth, the essence of dependency, is the chief cause of men's revenge, their craving to tame both women and nature in quest of individual power and superiority and the invention of material things. Thus "domination over nature is part of the male separation that occurs within universal patriarchal family forms" (The Good Natured Feminist 23). Val Plumwood also states that the growth of the ecological crisis lies in rationalist culture and the related human/nature dualism. Anita Desai represents Illa Das as the epitome of movement, embodiment of justice. Illa das tries to prevent

marriage of a seven year child of Preet Singh who wants to marry her daughter to a rich land owner. For this very reason Illa Das is brutally raped and murdered by Preet Singh. Here, both Illa Das and Preet Singh's daughter are victimized by the capitalist patriarchal hierarchy. Karen J. Warren suggests, "...all feminists do or must oppose the logic the domination which keeps oppressive conceptual frameworks in place, all feminists must also oppose any isms of domination that are maintained and justified by that logic of domination" (Ecofeminism : Women, Culture, Nature 21). Women always stay in background, while male dominant reality highlights the foreground. For Frye "phallogocentric reality", which constructs foreground, has the freedom, forms and mobility. Foreground starts its events on the basis of daily actions women perform to sustain their background. So it is indispensable to maintain the foreground reality which is in no way attached with background, and "yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background (Feminism and Mastery of Nature 48).

'Nani, Nani,' whispered Raka, shivering and crouching in the lily bed, peeping over the sill. 'Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani- look - the forest is on fire. Look, Nani,-look- the forest is on fire'. (FM 158)

Raka's whispering not only discloses destruction of nature, but destruction of women's identity. Fire becomes the metaphor of oppression, effect of which, nature and women both are burnt and destroyed. The voices of women and voices of nature merging into one represent physical degradation of nature through the frequent fire on the mountain as well as degradation of moral nature of human beings in society. Through the death of Nanda Kaul and Illa Das and through the sudden forest fire the novelist aims at the establishment of a new society free from male domination, through Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. Thus challenging dominant strategies of the patriarchal society, Anita Desai empowers the women by their own strategies of survival. As an ecofeminist Karen Warren provides evidences that "the living conditions of women, people of colour, the poor, and children ...are an ecofeminist issue" (Ecofeminism: Women, Culture Nature 12). Therefore, Fire on the Mountain not only connects feminist issues and ecological issues into one thread in term of the logic of domination but according to ecofeminism it philosophises "...just and compassionate relationships among children and adults, men and women, and humanity and nonhuman nature..." ending all oppressions (Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature 208).

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