
**AN EXPLORATION OF ECOFEMINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL
'FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN'**

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Article Received: 1 February 2026, Article Revised: 21 February 2026, Published on: 14 March 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.4383>**ABSTRACT**

Renowned Indian-English writer Anita Desai, who was honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, holds a significant position among present-day Indian women authors. Her literary creations often delve into the portrayal of nature in relation to female figures, offering readers the opportunity to uncover unexplored facets of the female perspective. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai adeptly examines the bond between women and their surroundings, promoting ecofeminist ideals to shed light on the interconnected struggles faced by women and the natural world. Simultaneously addressing issues of gender and environment, this essay aims to unravel the complexities of the female characters in the novel against the backdrop of the magnificent Himalayan mountains. It seeks to identify ecofeminist themes within the novel and demonstrate how Desai seamlessly weaves together tales of women and nature, highlighting their shared experiences of subjugation and resilience.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, resilience, marginalization, exploitation, gender roles.**INTRODUCTION**

Ecofeminism, a movement that originated in the late 20th century, integrates principles from both feminism and environmentalism. It delves into the parallel forms of oppression faced by women and the environment, aiming to tackle these issues simultaneously. The movement asserts that these problems stem from patriarchal and capitalist systems.

Ecofeminism originated during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s when women began to challenge the dominant patriarchal norms and question their societal roles. In 1974, French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne is credited with coining the term

“ecofeminism” in her book “Le Féminisme ou la Mort” (Feminism or Death). She argued that the oppression of women and exploitation of nature were interconnected and needed to be addressed for a more just society. The Chipko movement also emerged in 1973, advocating for the protection of forests in the Himalayas. Carolyn Merchant’s book “The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution” (1980) delved into the historical links between women's subjugation and nature's exploitation. Meanwhile, Vandana Shiva's “Staying Alive” (1988) explored how environmental degradation impacts women in developing countries. Other ecofeminists, including Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Ynestra King, Ariel Salleh, Karen Warren, and Val Plumwood also highlight ecology as a feminist issue.

“The idea of seeing the world through ‘women’s eyes’ is about contextualizing nature, connecting self with other, replacing domination with partnership, hierarchy with community, and fragmentation with holism.”—(Warren: 4).

Ecofeminism is rooted in the concepts of ecology, feminism and socialism. According to Greta Gaard, the core belief of ecofeminism is that the same ideology that permits discrimination based on factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability and species also allows for the oppression of nature (Gaard: 1). Similarly, Karen Warren states in her book *Ecological Feminism* that ecofeminism is “cross-cultural” because it recognizes the interconnectedness of all social systems – including racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, imperialism and colonialism – with sexism (Warren: 2). Therefore, ecofeminism aims to reveal the parallel forms of discrimination that reinforce each other and contribute to the degradation of life and destruction of nature.

Anita Desai’s novel *Fire on the Mountain* is a remarkable work of literature that explores the complex connection between women and nature, representing the core principles of ecofeminism. The novel first published in 1977, delves into the intricate lives of its female protagonists amidst the grandeur of the Himalayan mountains. This article will delve into the underlying ecofeminist themes in *Fire on the Mountain*, analyzing how Desai intertwines stories of women and nature to shed light on their shared struggles against exploitation and their resilience.

ANALYSIS

Anita Desai, a well-known Indian-English novelist, holds a unique position among modern female Indian writers. She gained recognition when her celebrated novel *Fire on the Mountain* received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978. Through her literary works, Desai explores the struggle against traditional patriarchal norms that suppress

marginalized individuals from achieving freedom. She skillfully uses nature as a symbol to reveal unexplored perspectives of women in her stories. The title of her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, holds a deep symbolic meaning. It not only depicts the literal occurrence of mountain fires consuming trees and homes, but also represents the intense emotions simmering within restless souls.

Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, centers around three female characters - Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das - whose lives are deeply connected to nature. The novel sheds light on the oppression and victimization faced by both these women and nature itself. It emphasizes that environmental issues are closely linked to women and all living beings. These women are trapped in societal patterns where men represent qualities such as brutality, violence, fear, hate, arrogance and power while women and nature are portrayed as victims in various aspects of life. Through the lens of these three women's experiences, the book delves into the darker side of nature and its connection to the challenges faced by them. It also becomes a poignant commentary on violence against women within a male-dominated system. Nanda Kaul, an elderly great-grandmother, is a victim of her role as a dutiful wife to an unfaithful husband and a mother to numerous children. Raka, her granddaughter, suffers from an abusive father. while Ila Das faces victimization due to her unmarried status and her own idealistic beliefs amidst selfish brothers. B.R. Nagpal states that: The woman protagonists are portrayed as victims of an aberrant urban milieu, patriarchal family structures and bourgeoisie, bureaucratic, imperialistic, colonized, social scenario. It is in this context that the characters are in a state of revolt, despondency, morbidity and are driven to grapple with duality, fragmentation. (Nagpal: 49)

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* depicts the enthralling journey of Nanda Kaul, who, following her husband's death, chooses to retire to a charming cottage in the mountains of Carignano located in the scenic region of Kasauli. She finds great contentment and fulfillment in the beauty of her surroundings. As she states, "Everything she desired was present here in Carignano, in Kasauli. This quiet home on the mountain ridge." Initially, Nanda's move to the former British hill-station of Kasauli is portrayed as a voluntary decision made to spend her old age in peace and solitude. However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that her self-imposed exile is not entirely by choice but rather a result of her desire to escape from her duties as a wife and mother – an act of retribution for a lifetime of duty and obligation (Desai: 30). Additionally, Nanda's husband's long-standing affair with his mathematics teacher, Miss David, is revealed, further pushing her towards this seclusion. Through this revelation, she comes to understand the insincerity and hypocrisy present in her

married life where she is valued solely for her role as a hostess at her husband's parties rather than as a wife. Desai describes Nanda's Trauma in the following words: "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" (Desai: 29-30).

The way Nanda lives highlights the concept of women's lives being influenced and restricted by male-dominated influences. Women are anticipated to embody the qualities of loyalty, submissiveness, and traditional responsibility. Their opinions and expressions are often suppressed. A woman is consistently depicted as inferior to a man. Addressing this issue, Indian critic and feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her book 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' writes: "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can Speak...The subaltern cannot speak" (Desai: 103).

Throughout the novel, Nanda is deeply connected to nature, finding comfort and appreciation in the beauty of Kasauli and its mountains. However, she also struggles with feeling disconnected from nature and her own sense of self, a common theme among women in society. As the story progresses, Nanda faces difficult realities, particularly through the tragedy of her friend Ila Das. This leads her to seek a reconnection with nature, representing her desire to reconcile with her true identity and reflecting the ecofeminist belief in harmony between women and the environment. Her retreat to the mountains symbolizes her longing to rediscover herself and assert her independence, aligning with the ecofeminist goal of women reconnecting with their true selves and their relationship with nature.

Nanda's journey reflects the challenges faced by women seeking to escape the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. Her character illustrates the intricate link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Nanda's understanding that her exile stems not from personal choice but from societal expectations emphasizes the norms that have long curtailed women's freedom and agency.

Raka, the intriguing great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain*, exemplifies the intricate relationships between women and their environment. Her bond with nature, along with her actions throughout the novel, highlights the subtle interactions among women, their surroundings, and the dynamics of power. Raka arrives at Carignano due to her mother Tara's ongoing nervous breakdown, which arises from a troubled marriage. Neglected and impacted by her father's indifference, Raka experiences severe emotional trauma, as illustrated by the "harsh, filthy abuse that made Rakacower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright...and her mother lay down on the floor

and shut her eyes and wept” (Desai: 71-72). This family cruelty deeply affects her development. Lacking the joys of a lively childhood, Raka decides to seek isolation and solitude at her great-grandmother’s home.

“If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of a vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct: she does not arrive at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice, she was born to it simply” (Desai: 48).

Anita Desai depicts Raka as a character with feral and savage characteristics. Throughout the story, Raka’s actions and movements are often portrayed in a manner that reflects her wild nature. She scours the forest for food, “crawling on all fours up the hill” (Desai: 73), and bends down to lick the scratches and wounds on her arms and legs, much like an animal (Desai: 50). Raka’s untamed and animalistic tendencies lead her towards the rugged and uncontrolled landscape of Kasauli, rather than the “secure, comfortable, civilized world to which she had no ties” (Desai: 91).

Raka’s strong relationship with the natural world, specifically her connection to the environment at her beloved spot, Monkey Point, reflects the core principles of ecofeminism – the importance of women reconnecting with nature. By forming a bond with animals like monkeys, Raka demonstrates her innate harmony with nature, which stands in stark contrast to the detachment often felt by women in male-dominated societies. Her interactions with these animals symbolize a sense of purity and simplicity, echoing the shared vulnerability of women and the environment. It also serves as a source of solace and companionship in a world filled with harsh realities.

While Raka’s connection with animals is a symbol of her innocence, but her actions of setting fire to the forest surrounding Carignano reveal a darker side to her character. “Look, Nani, I have set the forest on Fire. Look, Nani—look—the forest is on fire” (Desai: 145). This act of arson is a form of violence that disrupts the peacefulness of the environment, highlighting the destructive forces at play in both women and nature. It reflects the ecofeminist belief that violence against women and nature are intertwined and that innocence can give way to destruction. According to R.A. Singh, “Raka embodies a more bold and aggressive form of feminism” (Singh: 103). Additionally, Rogobete suggests that “Raka’s fascination with decay and destruction is evident in her use of fire as a metaphor for inner turmoil, desperate search for self-assertion, and independence” (Rogobete: 97).

Raka’s character exemplifies the complex and varied connections that women have with the environment. She encompasses the pure and delicate aspects of both women and nature, but also highlights the capacity for aggression and devastation when pushed to their limits. While

Nanda embodies the conventional beliefs and encounters of older Indian women, Raka represents the bold defiance and ambitions of the younger generation of Indian women.

Another a female protagonist, Ila Das, has a significant impact on the story of the book despite her brief appearance. She serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges women face in a society dominated by men. Her character represents the difficulties and weaknesses that women endure, particularly in the context of Indian society in the 1970s.

Ila Das's character represents the vulnerability and victimization commonly faced by women in a society with male dominance. She becomes a victim of a brutal crime – rape and murder – which serves as a powerful illustration of the violence inflicted upon women. While on her way home, Ila is attacked by unknown men who assault and kill her in the forest. This harsh punishment is enacted by a powerful male figure within the community, who sees Ila as interfering in his affairs. His reaction is cruel, as he fails to recognize that Ila was actually trying to protect his own child from potential harm. His actions demonstrate a lack of foresight and understanding towards his daughter's future, as his patriarchal mindset prevents him from seeing the possible consequences of his decisions.

The violence depicted in the novel mirrors the exploitation of the environment, as both women and nature are victims of oppressive forces. This is exemplified through Ila's character, which shows how patriarchal power dynamics worsen both environmental degradation and the oppression of women. The novel suggests that powerful men play a role in exploiting the environment for their own gain, which ultimately contributes to Ila's vulnerability. As a social reformer, she strives to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage. However, she is aware that her efforts will be met with resistance from a deeply patriarchal society that may reject her initiatives. This is reflected in her statement: "It's much more challenging to teach a man anything...to try and improve their miserable lives through effort, but do you think their men will allow it? No, not at all" (Desai: 129).

Ila Das's voice is permanently silenced through acts of violence, illustrating a larger ecofeminist perspective that highlights the historical marginalization and suppression of women's voices alongside the exploitation of the natural world. Her tragic end emphasizes the critical need to confront the injustices endured by both women and the environment. This situation acts as a rallying cry for empowerment and activism, urging efforts toward gender equality and ecological preservation. Without these actions, women who defy patriarchal standards risk facing sexual humiliation or even death as a consequence. Aroop Saha observes that, "Although the Indian women are surrounded by patriarchal ideology, a change

has occurred in the construction of female subjectivity. Nanda Kaul's sufferings are suppressed and rage is raised in the mind but Ila Das tries to prevent those. Nanda Kaul's experience of suppressed rage and Ila Das' experience of violence, both physical and psychological, show an elevation to construct a female subject" (Saha: 238).

By portraying the unfortunate destiny of Ila and her relationship with Nanda, Desai draws attention to the prevalent problems of gender discrimination and abuse towards women, emphasizing the novel's wider concepts of ecofeminism and the interdependence of women's existence with nature. Through Ila's journey and interactions in the story, Desai offers valuable insights into the broader themes of women's challenges, exploitation, and strength in relation to their surroundings.

In Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the presence of the Himalayan Mountains carries a symbolic significance for both women and nature, representing their strength and resilience. Nanda's journey into the mountains mirrors her own inner strength and serves as a metaphor for the larger ecofeminist movement's focus on restoring balance between women and the environment. The enduring nature of the mountains serves as a symbol of strength and resilience, reflecting the enduring spirit of women who have long faced exploitation and hardship. However, like women's bodies and labor, the mountains have also been exploited for their resources, highlighting the parallel between this exploitation and the ecofeminist perspective on women's exploitation throughout history.

CONCLUSION

In 'Fire on the Mountain', Anita Desai explores the deep ecofeminist ideas. By examining characters like Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das and their connections with nature, one can uncover the intricate links between the struggles of women and the exploitation of the environment. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of ongoing fights for gender equality and environmental protection. Nanda's journey in the Himalayas reflects the wider ecofeminist objective of reconnecting women with their inherent bond with nature. Raka's character represents the complex interplay between innocence and aggression, highlighting women's potential for empowerment and resistance. Meanwhile, Ila Das's tragic fate exposes the harsh realities faced by both women and the environment in a patriarchal society. The book delves into various themes such as motherhood, femininity, loneliness, death, exile, violence, patriarchal control, environmental exploitation, and women's confinement to marginalized roles contrasted with male brutality, dominance, and aggression.

In fact, Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* serves as a symbol of literature's lasting ability to bring attention to the intertwined battles faced by women and nature. It prompts readers to contemplate the importance of women reclaiming their independence, rebelling against societal expectations, and safeguarding the environment from exploitation.

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