

**ENVIRONMENTAL PREDICAMENTS DEPICTED IN ANITA
DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN***

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Paper Received on 08-07-2025, Accepted on 10-08-2025
Published on 10-08-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.358

Abstract

The environment is the natural world surrounding us, comprising air, water, land, and living organisms. It encompasses the physical and biological surroundings that support life on Earth. The environment is everything around us. Ecology provides insight into the interactions between living and non-living components, as well as the impact of human activities on the natural world, showing the intricate relationships that govern the planet's ecosystems. This paper focuses on the environmental degradation in Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). The novel is set in the mountainous regions of Kasauli. It depicts the ravaged state of nature. The environmental condition of Kasauli is presented through the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das. The interaction of these characters with the environment helps in a better understanding of society. It portrays the dryness and stillness of nature and highlights the key issues of drought, forest fire, and animal slaughter in that region. The 1973 Chipko Movement was a forest conservation movement, that attempted to protect nature and environment. It was founded to highlight the issues of deforestation and commercial exploitation of forests for industrial use. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) addresses the reasons behind the establishment of the Chipko Movement. This paper focuses on the primary reasons for the foundation of the Chipko Movement in this novel and the changes that happened in the society.

Keywords: Environment, Ecology, Nature, Deforestation, Chipko Movement

Introduction:

The environment's biological surroundings are characterized by biodiversity, which encompasses a variety of plant and animal species that inhabit

the environment. The environment plays a crucial role in supporting life, regulating climate, and supplying natural resources like water, food, and minerals. Its components work together to sustain life, with the atmosphere providing oxygen and regulating climate, while freshwater and marine ecosystems support diverse plant and animal life, emphasizing the environment's importance in maintaining the delicate balance of nature.

The Chipko movement, launched in 1973 in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, was a groundbreaking forest conservation initiative. Its primary objective was to safeguard the natural environment and protect the region's ecological balance. The movement originated in Reni village, where rampant deforestation had become a great concern. In a remarkable display of solidarity, the people of the Himalayan villages joined forces to protest against the destruction of their forests.

The term 'Chipko' is derived from the Hindi word for 'hug', symbolizing the villagers' determination to embrace the trees and prevent them from being cut down. The movement's roots date back to 1963, when the villager's requested permission from the forest department to fell 10 ash trees for crafting farming tools. However, their request was denied, and to make matters worse, the department allowed a private company to cut off 300 ash trees from the forest. This decision sparked outrage among the villagers, who staged a protest against the mass felling of trees. Their persistence paid off, as the contractors eventually withdrew, and the movement gained momentum. As news of the protest spread, neighbouring villages began to voice their own grievances against ecological exploitation. The Chipko movement achieved a significant victory in 1980, when the government issued a ban on tree cutting in the Himalayan region for the next 15 years, allowing the environment to recover and regenerate.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) was written by Anita Desai. She is a renowned Indian author, celebrated for her scholarly writing style. Her writing has been widely acclaimed for its depth and insight, bringing her the position as a leading figure in Indian literature. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the city* (1965), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *The Zigzag Way* (2004), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *In Custody* (1984), *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) are some of her famous works.

Fire on the Mountain (1977), is set amidst the Himalayan regions of Kasauli. The narrative revolves around three prominent characters: Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das, whose lives are intricately woven together. Through their stories, Desai explores a range of thought-provoking themes, including environmental degradation, the struggle for survival, and the complex relationships between humans and nature. The novel also delves into the inner struggles of its characters,

exposing the isolation, lack of communication, and marital discords that they face. Furthermore, Desai examines the dynamics of man-woman relationships, shedding light on the societal expectations and personal desires that shape these interactions.

The natural environment plays an important role in the novel, serving as a source of peace and solace for the characters. The mountainous setting provides a strong backdrop for Desai's exploration of human nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of people and their surroundings. As the characters navigate their personal struggles, they find refuge in the tranquillity and beauty of nature, showing the profound impact of the environment on human well-being.

Nanda Kaul, the wife of a former Vice Chancellor and mother of several children, had always known a hectic family life. Her household was marked by chaos and unrest, leaving her perpetually seeking peace. Following her husband's demise, Nanda sought comfort in the peaceful natural surroundings of Kasauli, where she hoped to spend the rest of her life in tranquillity. Her children, now married and employed, had relocated to other cities, allowing Nanda to finally experience the peace that had eluded her for so long. She cherished her secluded life and guarded it fiercely, unwilling to let anyone disrupt her secluded life.

However, Nanda's solitude was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka. Raka comes to Kasauli to recover from typhoid, her parents had relocated to Geneva, leaving her in Nanda's care. Unlike other children, Raka found solace in nature, spending her days exploring the surrounding woods and returning home in the evenings. Through Raka's adventures, Anita Desai portrays the devastating impact of environmental degradation on the region.

Deprived of parental love and care, Raka had learned to find comfort in the natural world. Her curiosity and thirst for knowledge drove her to explore every nook around Nanda Kaul's home, often seeking answers from Ram Lal, Nanda's cook. As Raka navigated the Kasauli landscape, her experiences revealed the harsh realities of environmental neglect, contrasting greatly with Nanda's quest for peaceful isolation.

"Why is there so much smoke?" she asked, in a somewhat weak voice. 'Oh, they are always boiling serum there---boiling, boiling. They make serum for the whole country'." (48) Raka's explorations in Kasauli provides a glimpse into the environmental exploitation ravaging the region. Her encounters with the Pasteur Institute, situated in the heart of the mountains, serve as a poignant example. Though the institute is involved in the production of life-saving serum for infections, its location in the fragile mountain ecosystem poses a significant threat. The constant boiling of chemicals required for serum production pollutes the air, disrupting the region's atmosphere. Furthermore, the institute's disposal of waste in

nearby areas provokes the environmental degradation, highlighting the alarming disregard for ecological sustainability.

‘Too many tourists. Too much army. How they are ruining this- this quiet place’, Nanda Kaul said bitterly, her breath coming faster and her step fumbling. ‘It really is ---is saddening. One would have liked to keep it as it was, a---a haven. (63)

Through Nanda Kaul's narrative, a vivid portrait of Kasauli's past emerges, revealing a beautiful landscape of Kasauli in the past. Her memory about Kasauli paints a picture of a bygone era, where nature was once in its best phase. However, over the years, the town has undergone a profound transformation, its natural charm giving way to the ravages of time and human neglect. Nanda Kaul seek refuge in Kasauli, hoping to escape the chaos of her past and live a peaceful, secluded life. However, her quest for solitude is constantly disrupted by the influx of tourists and military personnel who flocked to the town. The once-serene atmosphere is now disturbed by the unpleasant human activity, shattering the peacefulness that Nanda craved. Kasauli, formerly a place of safety, is transformed into a bustling hub, its peaceful character lost amidst the crowds.

The town's degradation is not only limited to its atmosphere; the increasing human presence also becomes a threat to the residents' safety. Natural predicaments, such as landslides and soil erosion, have become more frequent, while human activities increase new dangers, putting the lives of locals at risk. The contrast between Kasauli's past and present is important to mention the crucial situation, leaving Nanda to lament the loss of the peaceful sanctuary she had once sought.

“Up on the hill there, Raka, you will see the burnt black shell of a house. It was burnt down in a terrible forest fire one summer when there wasn't a drop of water to fight it with.” (62) The mountain region of Kasauli faced another challenge that is frequent water scarcity. This shortage was particularly dreadful in the face of forest fires, which frequently ravaged the area. The lack of water resources hindered efforts to extinguish these forest fires, leaving the people to face the devastating consequences. Ram Lal poignantly highlighted the seriousness of the situation, recounting instances where houses were consumed by flames, resulting in tragic loss of life. The water scarcity issue increases the risks associated with forest fires, creating an unsafe environment for Kasauli's residents. The scarcity of this essential resource not only threatened the livelihoods of those living in the mountain region but also focus on the struggle for their survival.

“‘It's a forest fire’, Nanda Kaul breathed out at last. ‘A big fire, it seems. Oh, there's always a forest fire at this time of year’.” (81) Throughout the novel, the threat of forest fires grows large, serving as a constant reminder of the fragile balance between human activity and nature. The people are aware of the dangers of fire, being at utmost caution in their daily lives to prevent its spread. A single

moment of carelessness, they know, can have dangerous consequences, igniting a great fire that can disturb the delicate ecosystem of Kasauli. The novel repeatedly highlights the risk of forest fires, emphasizing the need for caution in handling fire. A careless spark can quickly escalate into a disaster, showing the importance of responsible behaviour in preserving the natural surroundings of Kasauli.

“The scene of devastation and failure drew her, inspired her.” (99) Raka being affected by personal turmoil, finds solace in the beauty of Kasauli's devastated landscape. Drawn to the parallels between her own disturbed life and the battered natural surroundings, she discovers a sense of kinship with the environment. Having wandered through various places, Raka feels alive in Kasauli, where the broken state of nature connects deeply with her own inner turmoil. The irony is that while others might see Kasauli's decay as an obstruction, Raka finds inspiration in its imperfections. The town's worn, broken condition is similar to her own emotional state, promoting a connection between Raka and the landscape. In this unlikely shelter, she discovers a sense of belonging. Her own helplessness is reflected in the fragile, yet resilient, beauty of Kasauli. Raka, struggling with personal turmoil, finds solace in Kasauli's landscape.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) being set in the Himalayan region, sheds light on the motivations behind the Chipko movement of the 1970s. The story's central plot, revolving around a devastating forest fire, mirrors the movement's core objective: protecting the forest from rampant deforestation. By exploring themes of environmental degradation, and ecological exploitation, the novel provides a great understanding of the socio-environmental issues that led to the establishment of the Chipko movement.

Anita Desai's novel sheds light on the sad condition of the Himalayan mountainous regions, portraying the impact of human actions on the natural world. Through her narrative, she highlights the alarming degradation of the environment, mirroring the concerns that sparked the Chipko Movement. This movement is initiated with the aim of protecting the forests and environment from exploitation, showing the urgent need for proper development and conservation.

Desai's work masterfully weaves together various themes, including deforestation, the decline of flora and fauna, water scarcity, and the exploitation of natural resources. The novel also poignantly explores the disconnection between humans and nature, illustrating the consequences of neglecting this delicate balance. The peaceful landscape of Kasauli serves as a powerful backdrop for Desai's cautionary tale, warning the devastating effects of human neglect and environmental degradation.

In Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), ecology takes center stage. The protagonist Nanda Kaul escapes urban chaos by seeking refuge in the Kasauli mountain region. The breathtaking landscape provides a striking contrast to the turmoil within Nanda's life. The devastating forest fires that sweep through the mountains serve as a powerful symbol for Nanda's inner struggles. Through this poignant narrative, Desai highlights the consequences of disrupting the delicate harmony between human existence and the natural world.

Desai shows the well-being of human lives is deeply connected to the health of the environment. However, human greed harms the ecosystem, disrupting the delicate balance of nature. This destruction reflects the inner turmoil of the protagonist, revealing a strong link between human emotions and the natural world. The forest's transformation from serene to chaotic mirrors the protagonist's inner turmoil. This contrast highlights the deep connection between human emotions and the natural world. The imagery emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature.

Raka's love for nature highlights the protagonist's disconnection from the environment. Her exploration around Kasauli shows the importance of living in balance with nature. Desai uses Raka to advocate for a more sustainable coexistence between humans and the natural world. Desai critiques humanity's separation from nature, promoting a deeper understanding of the human-nature relationship. This novel portrays the difficult state of nature and serves as a reminder of the urgent need for environmental balance and sustainable coexistence.

Literature has served as a powerful mirror to societal transformations. Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, illustrates this phenomenon by shedding light on the factors that sparked the Chipko Movement. This movement, which emphasized the importance of environmental conservation, went on to inspire a wave of similar initiatives, including the Appiko Movement and Beej Bachao Andholan. These movements, all united by a common goal of protecting forests and trees, demonstrate the profound impact of literary works like *Fire on the Mountain* in raising awareness about environmental issues and social change.

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