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Portrayal of Man and Nature in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Anita Desai (born 1937) is a prominent figure among Indian novelists writing in English. She was born in Mussoorie to a Bengali father and a German mother, and this mixed background gave her a wide outlook on life and culture. People often praise her books for their psychological depth, soft language and close attention to the inner world the people she portrays. Some of Her most well-known creations are *Cry, the Peacock*, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting*, and three of her books made the short list for the Booker Prize. *Fire on the Mountain* won the Sahitya Akademi Award, and *The Village by the Sea* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. The bond between man and nature runs quietly but steadily through her work, because nature often mirrors the moods, fears and wishes of her characters. In *The Village by the Sea*, the sea, the monsoon and the land shape the daily life of Lila and Hari, whose family lives by fishing and farming in the coastal village of Thul. The arrival of the fertiliser plant and the pull of Bombay threaten this way of life, and the novel shows how people and nature depend on each other and what is lost when that balance is disturbed. In *Fire on the Mountain*, nature takes a different form. Nanda Kaul looks for silence and solitude among the pines and hills of Kasauli, while her great-granddaughter Raka feels at home in the wild and untamed side of nature. Here the hills, the heat and the final forest fire become signs of loneliness, escape, destruction and the hidden fire inside human beings. This article makes an effort at a critical analysis of Anita Desai's depiction of nature and humanity in a selection of her books, *The Village by the Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain*.

Keywords: Nature, Man, Ecology, Psychology, Migration.

Introduction

Nature has been an important part of literature since the beginning of writing. Rivers and hills and seas and changing seasons appear frequently in stories and poems to express human feelings and fears and hopes. Today environmental problems such as pollution and deforestation and Climate change and rising sea levels receive increasing attention. Consequently, readers have become more interested in how literature presents the connection between people and the natural world. This approach is known as ecocriticism. It does not consider nature merely as a beautiful background but sees it as a living entity that affects human existence. It also examines the consequences of disturbing the balance between humans and nature. This approach is particularly relevant in India where human life has long depended on land and water and agriculture and seasonal changes.

Anita Desai (born 1937) is a prominent Indian novelist who writes in English. She was born in Mussoorie to a Bengali father and a German mother. Her mixed cultural background helped her develop a broader understanding of life and culture. Her Novels are renowned for their psychological depth and gentle language and careful exploration of the inner lives of her characters. Among her most important works are *Cry, the Peacock and Clear Light of Day and In Custody and Fasting, Feasting*. Three of her books made the short list for the Booker Prize. *Fire on the Mountain* won the Sahitya Akademi Award, and *The Village by the Sea* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. Many readers consider Desai a writer who mainly explores the human mind. However, her novels also contain frequent descriptions of the sea and heat and rain and gardens and hills and dust. Nature in her fiction is rarely presented as a passive background. It reflects the emotions and fears and desires of her characters. At times it also influences their lives and shapes their personalities.

The relationship between humans and nature is a subtle but consistent theme in her works. Her characters rarely speak directly about environmental issues. Instead, nature becomes part of their lives through the weather and landscape and the surroundings in which they live or seek shelter. In some novels nature provides life and a sense of belonging while in others it creates feelings of loneliness and fear or brings destruction. These different representations make her fiction suitable for examining how people coexist with nature and depend on it and sometimes try to escape from or damage it.

The present study examines two of her novels *The Village by the Sea* (1982) *and Fire on the Mountain* (1977). The novels differ in their settings and the ages of

their main characters and the nature of their stories. However, both present human life as closely connected with the natural world. These differences make the novels important for a comparative study. One portrays nature as the foundation of a community's survival while the other presents it as a mirror of a lonely mind.

The Village by the Sea is set in Thul which is a small coastal village near Bombay. Lila and Hari are two young Children who assume parental responsibilities due to their mother's ill and their father struggles with alcoholism and neglects his family. The family lives by fishing and farming, so the sea, the monsoon and the land decide whether there is food in the house. The sea provides fish but can also take human lives while the rain brings both hope and danger. This intimate connection to the natural world is threatened by the establishment of a fertiliser plant and the growing attraction of Bombay. The city offers opportunities for income and a better life but also separates people from their traditional roots. The novel highlights the dependence between humans and nature and shows What occurs when development disregards this relationship.

Fire on the Mountain presents a different view of nature. The book takes place in the hill station of Kasauli where Nanda Kaul is an old woman who has retreated from her busy family life. She seeks peace and solitude among the pine trees and dry hills. However, her peaceful life is disturbed when her great-granddaughter Raka comes to stay with her. Raka is a quiet and independent child who feels comfortable among the rocks and ravines and wild surroundings. In this novel nature is not presented simply as a source of comfort. It is beautiful but also harsh and dangerous. It reflects the protagonists' dread, loneliness, and suppressed rage. The forest fire at the end symbolises destruction in addition to the suppressed emotions within human beings.

When the two novels are examined together, they reveal different aspects of nature. In *The Village by the Sea,* it is a shared soturce of livelihood and community, and the danger comes from outside, through industry and the lure of the city. In Fire on the Mountain nature is presented as a personal landscape closely connected with loneliness. The threat originates not just from the external environment but also from the emotions within the characters. Neither novel presents nature in a simple or idealised manner. Nature can be gentle at one moment and harsh at another. Both novels imply that people are incapable of completely control the natural world.

Critics have widely discussed Desai's treatment of family and silence and marriage and female identity. However, her representation of nature has received comparatively less attention. Additionally, these two books have rarely been examined together from an ecocritical perspective. The current research attempts to address this gap. It examines the portrayal of land and sea and hills and weather and fire in the novels. It also explores how development disturbs the natural balance and how nature reflects human emotions. Through a close ecocritical reading of both novels the study shows that Desai presents human beings as a component of the natural world as opposed to as superior to it. In this context the present paper attempts a critical investigation of the portrayal of man Considering the environment in the chosen novels of Anita Desai.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how people, interact with their natural environment in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain and The Village by the Sea.
2. To study how the sea, the monsoon and the land decide the livelihood and daily life of the villagers in *The Village by the Sea*.
3. To understand how the arrival of industry, shown through the fertiliser plant, and the pull of the city upset the balance between people and nature in *The Village by the Sea*.
4. To explore how nature mirrors loneliness, fear and hidden feeling through the hills, the heat and the forest fire in *Fire on the Mountain*.
5. To compare the different faces of nature in the two novels and to show that Desai places human beings inside the natural world and not above it.

Relationship between Man and Nature

The interaction between nature and humanity has been an important literary topic for centuries. It also forms a major motif in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea and Fire on the Mountain*. Both novels present human beings as closely linked to, as opposed to distinct from, the natural world. They live inside it, lean on it, fear it and are shaped by it. Desai never lectures about nature. She lets it come through the sea, the rain, the heat, the hills and the fire, and through the way her characters look at them. How a character feels about nature tells us a good deal about that person.

Nature as the Base of Life in *The Village by the Sea*

In *The Village by the Sea*, the bond is close and practical. Thul is a small coastal village where people depend on fishing and farming for their livelihood.

Nature is therefore not merely something to admire but an essential part of their daily survival. The sea provides fish but can also destroy boats and take human lives. The monsoon brings the rainfall needed for agriculture but may also cause storms and fear. Lila and Hari understand the importance of weather and tides and soil in their everyday lives. Hari goes fishing and works on the land to support his family. Their survival depends on their ability to adapt to these natural forces. In the novel nature represents food and livelihood and memories and a sense of belonging. The villagers do not attempt to control nature but learn to live according to its changing conditions. They accept both favourable and difficult seasons and depend on what nature provides. This close relationship makes the village a connected community. Human life and the sea and soil and weather depend on one another. Any change in one affects the others. When the fishing catch is poor or the rainfall is insufficient the entire village suffers. However, when natural conditions are favourable the whole community experiences relief.

The Threat to the Balance

This balance is gradually threatened by the proposed fertiliser plant near the village and the growing attraction of Bombay. Both represent a different attitude towards nature in which land and sea are viewed as sources of profit. The fertiliser plant represents an economic system that treats the natural environment as a resource to be used while the villagers consider it their home. Hari's journey to the city highlights the lack of money and opportunities in the village. Simultaneously, it reveals what city life lacks in terms of a close relationship with land and water and the open sky that gives meaning to village life. Desai does not suggest that change itself is wrong. What she shows is that when development ignores the bond between people and nature, something valuable is lost, and the poorest feel the loss first. The young are enticed to abandon their homeland, the old ways of work grow weak, and the village risks turning into a place people leave instead of a place that holds them. In this way the novel shows how environmental destruction is closely linked to the suffering of the local community.

Nature as Refuge and Mirror in *Fire on the Mountain*

The interaction between people and the natural world in Fire on the Mountain becomes more personal and deeply connected with human emotions. Nanda Kaul has spent much of her life taking care of a large household. In her old age she moves to the hill station of Kasauli in search of peace and solitude. For her the pine trees and quiet hills and empty surroundings provide an escape from family responsibilities and

human relationships. However, the peace she seeks remains incomplete. The heat and dryness and the sense of danger in the landscape disturb her calmness and reflect the isolation and fear she keeps hidden within herself. Nature therefore does not give her complete comfort. It mirrors her loneliness.

Raka, her great-granddaughter, has a different bond with nature. She is a silent, wild child who feels at home among the rocks, the ravines and the untamed parts of the hills. Nanda Kaul uses nature to avoid people, but Raka is drawn to its rough and dangerous side because she feels free and safe there. Through the two of them, Desai shows that nature can be a refuge, a mirror and a source of freedom, depending on who is looking. The same hills represent peaceful isolation for one character and a sense of wild freedom for the other. The forest fire at the conclusion of the novel brings these different meanings together. It represents a real threat in the dry landscape and also symbolises the anger and destruction and hidden desires within human beings. The fire shows that nature is more than just a beautiful scene to be admired from a distance. It is a powerful and unpredictable force that can disturb even the most carefully protected peace.

A Comparative View

When examined together the two novels reveal a common pattern. In *The Village by the Sea*, man and nature are held together by need, and the threat to that bond comes mostly from outside, through industry and the lure of the city. The interaction between people and the natural world in Fire on the Mountain is closely connected with emotions. The Danger results not just from the natural surroundings but also from the human mind. In The Village by the Sea nature is presented as a shared part of community life while in Fire on the Mountain it becomes a personal experience. In both novels nature is neither completely kind nor entirely cruel. It provides comfort and support but can also bring suffering and danger. Human beings cannot have total control over it.

Desai therefore presents the relationship between humans and nature as a living connection that continues to change. People depend on nature for their survival and often see their own emotions reflected in it. Nature also reminds them of the limits of human power. Her novels suggest that living in harmony with the natural world provides strength and a sense of belonging. In contrast separation from nature can lead to loneliness and loss and conflict. These ideas make her novels important for ecocritical research since they demonstrate that the relationship between humans and nature is both a practical necessity and an emotional connection.

Literature Review

- **Sheoran (2022)** He examined Fire on the Mountain as a study of psychological disturbance in Raka, Ila Das, and Nanda Kaul's lives. He observed that Desai uses images of nature to convey her characters' innermost emotions and that the landscape of Kasauli is closely connected with their mental states. According to him Nanda Kaul's desire to become one with the pine trees and her preference for the isolated surroundings of Carignano reflect her want to retreat from civilization and find tranquility. Additionally, the storm in the book reflects her inner emotional struggles. He further explained that nature has two different sides in the novel as it provides comfort but also creates fear. The hills represent Nanda Kaul's emotional hardness while the forest fire symbolises Raka's restless nature. Additionally, he noted that human beings treat nature as a commodity which is reflected in the names scratched on the hills. This study is useful for the present research because it explains how nature reflects human emotions and reveals its harsh qualities in the novel. However, his main focus is on the psychological condition of the female characters while nature is mainly examined as a symbol of their emotions. He does not discuss *The Village by the Sea*, so how the villagers depend on the sea and the land, what the fertiliser plant and the city do to them, and how the two novels compare are still left for the present study.

- **Sharma and Kumar (2023)** They examined Fire on the Mountain from an ecocritical perspective and connected the novel Growing worries regarding environmental destruction and the conviction that people are superior to nature. They observed that Desai presents the Himalayan landscape of Kasauli as a place of natural beauty as well as a fragile ecosystem threatened by human activities. According to them the novel highlights the conflict between traditional ways of life that maintain harmony with nature and contemporary ways of living that have evolved into disconnected from it. They also interpreted the forest fire as a symbol of environmental damage caused by human greed and carelessness. Their study suggested that Desai's use of imagery and symbolism emphasises the necessity of a more sustainable human-nature connection. It also briefly discusses loneliness and ecological imbalance. This study is relevant to the present research because it examines the Human-nature relationships in Fire on the Mountain as an

ecological concern rather than merely A mirror of human emotions. However, the study focuses only on one novel.

- **Majhi (2024)** examined the link Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain explores the relationship between women and nature from an ecofeminist reading of Nanda Kaul. According to her Nanda Kaul becomes tired of her household responsibilities and chooses to live among the lonely rocks and pine trees of Kasauli. The landscape reflects her inner emptiness and desire for isolation. In contrast Raka is naturally withdrawn and finds her own private world among the same rocks and pine trees. Majhi observed that Desai uses plants and animals and descriptions of the landscape to establish a close relationship between humans and nature. In this way Nanda Kaul represents the mountain while Raka symbolises wild nature and fire. She also interpreted the forest fire as a symbol of ecological imbalance caused by human exploitation of nature. She further connected the violation of Ila Das with the violation of the earth. This study is useful for the present research because it explains how nature reflects human emotions and how the forest fire carries symbolic meaning in Fire on the Mountain. However, her approach is mainly ecofeminist and focuses on women's loneliness and marginalisation. She does not examine *The Village by the Sea*, so the livelihood of the villagers, the effect of the fertiliser plant and the city, and a comparison of the two novels are still open for the present study**.**

- **Ashwinvarsha and Rajaram (2025)** highlighted the environmental problems shown in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and tied the novel to the worries that led to the Chipko Movement. They observed that Kasauli is presented as an environmentally damaged landscape where tourism and military activities disturb the peaceful atmosphere of the hill station. Additionally, they noted that smoke from the Pasteur Institute and the disposal of waste pollute the air and the ravine. According to them water scarcity and landslides and soil erosion and frequent forest fires threaten the safety of local residents. They further explained that Raka develops a close connection with the damaged landscape because its destruction reflects her own inner struggles. The forest fire also symbolises the emotional conflict within Nanda Kaul. They concluded that Desai warns readers about the harmful effects of human negligence and greed while emphasising the need to maintain harmony with nature. This study is particularly useful for the

present research because it examines environmental degradation and the connection between humans and nature in Fire on the Mountain as important ecological concerns. However, the study is limited to a single novel and one hill region. *The Village by the Sea* is not discussed, so how the villagers depend on the sea and the land, what the fertiliser plant and the city do to them, and how the two novels compare are still left for the present study.

- **Shrivastava (2026)** looked into the themes of nature and loneliness in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* from eco-critical and feminist points of view. She pointed out that nature in a backdrop, since it works as a symbol that reflects the inner state of the characters. In her reading, the hills of Kasauli stand for silence and emotional distance, the forests stand for Raka's freedom from the limits of society, and the birds and insects add to the feeling of loneliness and weakness. She also stressed that the forest fire stands for hidden anger, destruction and resistance, and that the novel shows a clash between natural harmony and human civilization. Her main interest, however, is in loneliness, feminine identity and patriarchy, and nature is treated mostly as a representation of feeling. She does not discuss *The Village by the Sea*, so how the villagers depend on the sea and the land, what the fertilizer plant and the city do to them, and how the two novels compare are still left for the present study.

Research Methodology

The present paper is based on a critical study of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain*, and the Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, research articles, reliable websites, magazines and newspapers. The study follows a qualitative, analytical and comparative method, using close reading of the two novels within an ecocritical framework. The objective of the study is to talk about the portrayal of man and the natural world in the chosen novels of Anita Desai.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined how nature and humans are portrayed. in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain*, and it finds that her fiction puts human beings inside the natural world and not above it. Desai wrote before ecocriticism became a recognised field, but both novels already show a steady concern for the bond between people and the places they live in. Nature in her work

is never a plain background. It gives and takes, comforts and threatens, and it shapes what her characters feel, fear and become.

In *The Village by the Sea*, nature is the base of a community's life. Thul is a coastal village where the ocean, the monsoon and the land decide whether there is food in the house, and Lila and Hari learn to live by their rhythms. The villagers do not attempt to control nature. Instead, they adapt to its changing conditions and accept both favourable and difficult seasons while depending on what it provides. This balance is threatened by the proposed fertiliser plant and the growing attraction of Bombay. These forces treat land and sea as resources for profit and encourage young people to depart from their customary origins. Hari's journey to the city highlights the lack of money and employment opportunities in the village. At the same time, it reveals the absence of a close connection with land and water and open spaces in city life. The novel clearly shows that when development ignores the human-nature connection poor are the first to suffer.

The interaction between people and the natural world in Fire on the Mountain becomes more personal and emotional. After spending much of her life fulfilling household responsibilities Nanda Kaul withdraws to Kasauli in search of peace and solitude among the pine trees and quiet hills. However, the heat and dryness and sense of danger in the surroundings disturb her peace and reflect her hidden feelings of emptiness and fear. Her great-granddaughter Raka is attracted to the rocks and ravines and wild surroundings of the hills where she experiences freedom and safety. Thus, the same landscape represents peaceful isolation for Nanda Kaul and wild freedom for Raka. The forest fire at the end of the novel brings these different meanings together. It represents a real threat in the dry landscape while also symbolising the anger and destruction and suppressed emotions within human beings.

When examined together the two novels present different aspects of nature. In *The Village by the Sea*, nature is shared by the whole community, and the threat comes mostly from outside, through industry and the lure of the city. In *Fire on the Mountain*, nature is private and personal, and the danger comes as much from the human mind as from the land. In both books Desai avoids a sweet or sentimental picture of nature, and she suggests that human beings are never fully its masters.

The literature review shows that earlier critics have studied *Fire on the Mountain* mostly through ecofeminism, loneliness, psychological realism and symbolism, and a few of them, such as Ashwinvarsha and Rajaram (2025) and Devi,

Sharma and Kumar (2023), have read it as an environmental text. These studies are useful, but they stay with one novel and one hill region, and *The Village by the Sea* is hardly discussed from this angle. This study has tried to fill that gap by reading the two novels together, one showing nature as the base of survival and the other as a reflection of the lonely mind.

Desai's work matters even today, when pollution, industry, drying hills, forest fires and the drift from villages to cities are still being debated in India and elsewhere. Her novels remind readers that a life in balance with nature gives power and a feeling of belonging, while a life cut off from it brings loneliness, loss and conflict. Her fiction deserves wider attention as a sensitive voice of ecological awareness in Indian English literature, and it leaves room for further study of her other novels, such as *Cry, the Peacock* and *Clear Light of Day*, from the same angle.

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