



Research Article

Volume-06|Issue-12|2025

Re-Evaluating Human-Nature Relationship: Transcorporeality and the Agency of Nature in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Article History

Received: 12.11.2025

Accepted: 19.12.2025

Published: 27.12.2025

Citation

Dash, S. & Jena, N. (2025). Re-Evaluating Human-Nature Relationship: Transcorporeality and the Agency of Nature in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature*, 6(12), 18-21.

Abstract: The binary opposition between the human and the natural world is the consequence of an anthropocentric epistemic system. Such idea positions nature as a mechanical system available for exploitation. However, there is a need to understand how the environment structures human consciousness. This paper explores the interface between human psychology and ecological reality in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. Drawing upon Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," it argues that human understanding of nature as a pristine entity is a fallacious proposition. Nature as a biotic community has its own agency independent of human interpretation. Its external expansion reshapes the inner self and the psyche; its grotesque makes human realize their limit before the vastness of nature. Thus, nature exists not to be exploited, but to be present as the most complex organic system.

Keywords: Human-nature Relationships, Transcorporeality, anthropocentrism, ecology, human reality and material ethics etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Western philosophy has viewed human as categorically oppositional to nature and both share a very rigid boundary. In contrast to this idea Stacy Alaimo's concept of "transcorporeality" acknowledges that nature is not an external element, it is very much present within human, composing the very substance of human bodies. It influences human psyche, shapes the perceptions and creates consciousness. It shifts the whole philosophy that places human above nature in the hierarchical structure. It puts the very conception of human-nature interconnections in question and disproves the assumptions that nature is merely the object to the human subject, a passive victim of human actions. Nature has agency, it is a potent and independent force that acts upon us just as human acts upon it (Merchant 127). Alaimo argues that "the human is always the very stuff of the messy, uncertain, and often unpredictable material world" (Alaimo 11). So the human being is not the master of the landscape. As Alaimo notes, acknowledging this "denies the human subject the sovereign, disembodied credentials of the potent gaze" (Alaimo 24). In Alaimo's views transcorporeality as a recognition that "the human is always intermeshed" with the trans-human world. It suggests that the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment" (Alaimo 2). Alaimo's transcorporeality suggests that human bodies carry the experiences of material world. The reaction of the material world gets registered in the biological body and the biological body that archives the painful experiences of the world finds the material world as the repository of

peace and pleasant experiences. We carry the legacy of plastics, heavy metals, and carbon emissions in our cells and bloodstreams. This is not a metaphor. It is a material reality. As Nancy Tuana notes, the boundaries between the human body and the world are "viscous porosity" (Tuana 194). This porosity means that ethical responsibility cannot be externalized. If the environment is very much present within us, harming the environment can be a form of creating harm to the self.

Nature as a source of material conditioning

Again in reductionist philosophy nature is considered as mere material resources which can be used and exploited for human welfare. The material conditions of nature influence the phenomena that shape human history. In environmental politics nature is viewed as the victimized entity that needs preservation through the protection of its rights (Shiva 39). Such views present nature as an object which is inert and devoid of its own agency. Its values and rights are determined by human approach to it. But material ecology argues that the material world of nature has generative power, it impacts on the mind and matter (Bennett 6). The natural phenomenon cannot be viewed as a reaction to human action, but a systemic expression of the force that shows human being as the most meager element of the natural world. In other words, the smallest beings of nature or the chemical compounds of the atmosphere exert phenomenal impact on human being's mind and body. These non-human entities change the course of human lives and histories (Plumwood 29). They act as the subject in the narrative of existence or

life. It is true that such agency cannot be denied by any philosophical approach. Human does not simply protect nature, they make interaction and negotiation with it. So the relationship between humans and the non-human world is not a monologic process but a dialogic one.

Human- nature Relationship

Human concern and interaction with nature is not just about protecting trees, mountain, river etc. or creating manicured forest; it is about bodily integrity with the natural world (Buell 73). This is where the political connotation of transcorporeality emerges. It signifies movement beyond the corporeal boundaries of the being. But for women and the marginal, the boundaries of the body have always been violated by systemic neglect caused by patriarchy. As environmental justice theorist Giovanna Di Chiro points out, the "environment" is not just the wilderness; it is the place where we "live, work, and play" (Di Chiro 301). In Alaimo's understanding of Di Chiro's formulation, it becomes clear that the environment is *who we are*. So, it rejects the idea of 'other' as marginal because the other is already within us. This entails respect for the agency of nature with the acknowledgment that matter is vibrant and active. This argues for a shift from the politics of dominance to a process of co-existence, negotiation and dialogues. In this paper, the argument is made against the social construction of nature as cultural construct. It underscores the idea that the existence and identity of human being is subject to the agency of matter. So the gap between the self and the external world dissolves through the dialogue between the two domains. This paper uses Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* as the case to examine the given arguments. This novel investigates into the ways external landscapes condition the interior world of the protagonist. It presents a critical triangle of relationships between Nanda Kaul, the child Raka, and their relationship with the natural terrain of Kasauli. An ecocritical evaluation reveals the profound dissonance among the three due to the sense of dichotomy between mind and matter or nature and culture. Nanda Kaul as the central character of the novel, seeks the mountains not for their "nature" in the biological sense, but for their emptiness or the absence of domestic duties. In contrast, Raka engages with the landscape's intrinsic wildness, bypassing the aesthetic appreciation of the tourist for a raw, almost feral connection. This paper intends to analyze this interface, arguing that Desai uses the ecological degradation of Kasauli to show the mental scars and to justify the inseparability of nature from humanity. It posits the argument that nature reflects the violence of civilization on the nature and the human body.

Emotional and Spiritual Replenishment

The narrative premise of *Fire on the Mountain* is based on the trope of the departure. Nanda Kaul, the widow of a Vice-Chancellor, is presented initially as a woman seeking "stillness" (Desai 23) which is a metaphor for independence. Having spent a major part of

life supporting the "fluctuating and unpredictable excess" of a busy household, she retires to Carignano to be "left to the pines and the cicadas alone" (3). This resembles a classic example of returning to the lap of nature for emotional and spiritual replenishment. However, the nature of this "love" for the natural world may be questioned. Nanda Kaul's attraction to Carignano is predicated not on its lush green beauty, but on its fragmentation, ruptures and hostility. She is attracted to the "barrenness" of the garden (4). Unlike a gardener who seeks to cultivate life, Nanda Kaul actively resists it. "The loose pebbles of the garden pleased her as much as rich turf might another. She cared not to add another tree to the group of apricots... or the group of three pines at the gate" (32). This is not an indication of the appreciation of nature; it is the expression of an indifference to nature's expanse. Nanda Kaul identifies herself with the stark landscape because it represents the absence of duty and social responsibilities she desperately craves for (33). She views the landscape as a static object to be visually observed from her veranda. She tries to translate the ecosystem of Kasauli into a private location of silence. Her wish to "be a piece of wood" or a "charred tree trunk" (30) suggests her desire to be the part of nature, rather than a worshiper of nature. She does not wish to participate in the phenomena of the ecosystem of Carignano, rather she wishes to calcify within its atmosphere. From transcorporeal point of view Nanda's body is never a fortress or a distant location; it is a membrane through which the natural world flows. In other words, she is not the human subject, separate from the agency of nature. She is the one who tries to locate her agency in the agency of nature. Her desire for independence is a metaphorical extension of nature's independence of the human semiotic systems.

Nanda Kaul's desire for being a recluse through familial disengagement is an attempt of voluntary suspension of her own corporeal being designed through social responsibilities. She views her past as a series of intrusions in forms of children, guests, duties and finds Carignano as a place where she can finally create the boundary for herself. She wants "no one and nothing else" (Desai 3) in her life other than silence and loneliness. But environment continuously intrudes upon her. The landscape enters into her silent zones. The wind is not just weather, the bird's chirrup is not just a sound; it is a physical force that batters the house. The apricots are not just food; they are heavy, dropping with a "thud" that disrupts her peace. Stacy Alaimo argues that "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2). Nanda tries to discard such disturbances. She identifies herself with the barrenness of the landscape because she thinks it reflects her desire for emptiness. But her misconstrue of the landscape makes her think the rocks and pines are static. She fails to see that they are vibrant, agents of nature. She creates a mental border wall between her body and the world. Here, Nanda's desire for peace is legitimate, but the desire for legitimizing her narrow self is absolutely

unethical. She treats the non-human world as the potential ground for her own existential drama. She admires the view, but she doesn't want to be affected by it. This is the classic Western way of viewing nature as an object of the observation, consumption and exploitation rather than a participant in one's bodily reality.

Raka is a "recluse by nature, by instinct" (100). She had rejected the institutional structures of "schools, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience" (65). However, she does not try to find divinity in the flowers, rather she is drawn to nature's grotesque, chaos and the hidden. She explores the ravine where the "scientific monstrosity" of the Pasteur Institute dumps its waste (82). She knows the Kasauli that "neither summer visitors nor upright citizens of the town ever knew" (69). It is important to mention that Raka does not "admire" nature; she investigates it. NeeruTondon observes that Raka "scrutinizes each and every object of nature with a keen intensity of a scientist" (176). Yet, this description might limit Raka's agency. She is less a scientist than a creature who recognizes her association in the hills. Nanda Kaul eventually realizes this distinction: "It belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka was capable of understanding Carignano" (88). Raka's connection to the land disrupts the human/nature binary because she refuses to civilize the landscape or herself. She is the "mosquito," the "gnat," a primal force of nature that cannot be domesticated and regulated.

Nanda Kaul's denial of transcorporeality marks the beginning of Raka's embrace of the chaos. Raka is a "nature child," yet devoid of romantic love for nature. She does not dance in tune with the nature. She is, what Jane Bennett says, an example of "vital materialism." She creates no distinction between herself and the dirt, the worms, or the charred grass. Desai writes that Raka "ignored [Nanda] so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless" (Desai 47). Raka is not interested in the human social world. She is interested in the ravine, the forest fire and the terrain of the mountain. She moves through the landscape like a creature that belongs to it, sniffing and touching. She is porous. She lets the environment in. Again, Raka's closeness for the "burnt house" remains on the hillside suggests that she understands the agency of nature in a way Nanda refuses to. Raka knows that nature is destructive. It isn't a manicured garden; it is an uncontrollable wild force that burns everything down. Through her allignment with this force, Raka possesses the wild power that Nanda has failed to accumulate. Nanda tries to hold herself together; Raka lets herself come apart voluntarily into the landscape. This makes Raka a terrifying figure to Nanda. It is not because Raka is erroneous, but because Raka's entanglement with the mountain is not accepted by Nanda. And from this entanglement she is trying to escape.

In the climax of the novel, Raka sets the forest on fire. It is a moment of madness. From the tangent of material agency, Jane Bennett argues that matter has "thing-power," They have the ability to produce effects (Bennett 6). The dry grass, the wind, the heat of fire are not the passive elements waiting for the agents to be functional. They are the elements having capacity to act. Raka is the catalyst and medium for whom the fire spreads, but the agency belongs to the fire itself, is independent of the presence of anyone. When Raka says, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire" (Desai 145), she is not claiming the imposition of her power over nature; rather she is participating in a process that contributes to the destructive cycle of nature. Throughout the novel, Nanda has composed a past narrative to show the truth of her disappointing life. The fire, a material reality, burns through these fabrications. The fire is a violent reassertion of the material world and it shows that the "outside" that she tried to keep out rushes in to her psyche. The novel compels us to accept that human beings are biological entities subject to violence, decay, changes and death. We cannot simply come out of the ecosystem or the socio-political structures that govern human systems.

CONCLUSION

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai rejects the Wordsworthian views of nature as aesthetic expanse or the romantic promises that nature never betrays the heart that loves and worships her. Instead, she posits that nature is an independent entity that resists human attempts to consume it as beautiful scenic object. The nature is terrifying, that shatters human perceptions. The burning of the mountain is not the end of nature, but the end of the human illusion of control. By engaging with the physical reality of Kasauli, Desai shows the environmental cost of modern life. The novel stands as a sophisticated ecological warning through the image of fire that the ecological damage not only destroys nature but also the human life. It is the phenomenon that destroys the boundaries between the culture "inside" and the wild "outside". As a bleak ecofeminist text, it dismantles the fantasy that we can retreat from the world. Nanda Kaul's attempt to seal herself off fails because the human body is trans-corporeal; it is functioning within the substance of the world. Here, nature is grotesque, yet it is inescapable. We are not observers of the fire on the mountain, we are the agents carrying fire because nature continues to permeate in the corporeal body of the human and other beings.

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