

## **An Engagement with Life-Place Entanglements: An Ecocritical Reading of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain***

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### **Abstract**

Through an ecocritical perspective, my paper is a geocritical study of Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by analyzing the literary text's engagement with the natural landscape as its platial setting and the textual representation of nature. My paper analyzes the presencing and representation of the environment and to what effect (and affect) has the place of Carignano (the site at which the story unfolds) been modelled as a life-place for the novel's characters, to critically study the delineation of interdependence between organisms (both human and nonhuman) and their environment. Thus, my paper seeks to emphasize the relationality between the characters and their environment to analyze how the spatial discourse effectively shapes the characters' mindscapes and ecological visions respectively.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, geocriticism, life-place, dwelling, entanglement.

Anita Desai (b. 1937), an Indian writer in English, in her 1977 novel *Fire on the Mountain* (which received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978) delineates the interface between an egocentric and ecocentric way of living through the interaction of its primary characters (Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter Raka) with their environing platial setting. This paper does not offer a mere literal mapping of the platial setting of the site at which the narrative unfolds itself- the house of 'Carignano' which is housed in the hills of Kasauli. Instead, the focus is on reading the novel through the lens of a 'bioregion' which is literally and etymologically understood as a 'life-place' defined by natural elements having an "ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities" (Robert L. Thayer qtd. in

Rangarajan 64). Such a lens facilitates analyzing how the novel's literary cartography employs a dwelling of/for its characters embedded in their environment. This paper's thematic primarily concerns itself with studying if Desai's eco-fiction reiterates the normative perspectives vis-a-vis the cultural, aesthetic, and ideological construction of nature or does it contest normativities and posits instead a different engagement. Thus, an ecocritical textual analysis helps study the interrelation between an understanding (and perception) of nature and its literary representation in terms of how cultural apparatuses and global social structures such as class, sexuality, gender, and nationality seep into narratorial techniques. My paper, therefore, seeks to analyze in Desai's novel the presencing and representation of the environment and to what effect (and affect) has the place of Carignano been modelled as a life-place for the novel's characters, to critically study the delineation of interdependence between organisms (both human and nonhuman) and their environment.

The term 'ecology' was coined in 1866 by the German zoologist and artist Ernst Haeckel studies the relationship between biological organisms and their animate and inanimate environments. Dovetailing ecology with literary criticism marks a fundamental shift in thinking, reading, imagining, and writing of the world from an anthropocentric perspective to an environmental or biocentric way that takes into cognizance the presence in the world of the nonhuman. The term 'ecocriticism' conjoining Greek words 'eco' and 'critic' means 'house judge'. William Howarth in his essay 'Some Principles on Ecocriticism' opines that an ecocritic "judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (69). Ecocriticism which exists at the intersection of literature and environment as a methodology with its "earth-centered approach" (Glotfelty xviii) prompts one to read Desai's

novel (which predominantly entangles the human and the nonhuman worlds) as an analysis of how different characterization enable a critical study of multiple engagements with the notion of nature since “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Ibid., xix). A ‘topopoetic’ (Sten Pultz Moslund) way of reading wherein places occur as a sensuous experience offers an analysis of the palpable interrelations between humans, nonhumans, and the enviroing world wherein characters perform social identities and dwell within spaces produced. Such an approach does not render the platial setting as a passive landscape upon which the story develops. Rather, it brings into action the environment as a participating whole. By dovetailing place with a *subjective* sense of place peculiar to each character, Desai’s text problematizes conceptual homogenized constructions of places as fixed and collapses distinguishability between humans and the environment. John Dewey, an American philosopher in his major work on aesthetics *Art as Experience* (1934) does not solely focus on the expressive object. Instead, he postulates a focus on the experience of art. In Dewey’s view, an aesthetic experience “lies in the relationship between the individual and the environment...Rather than a subject-object relationship...we have instead a process, an interaction...and it is in that joint association that the aesthetic experience lies. Instead of a detachment from the environment, we have a subtle diffusion into it” (Evernden 97). Thus, by visibilizing the permeable nature of environmental associations embedded within the story world of characters that perform such inter-actions, I attempt to read how Desai’s literary text posits the “individual-in-environment, the individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment”(Ibid.). A topopoetic ecocritical approach helps explore inter-relationship between humans, nonhumans, and nature. It facilitates working towards an

ontological reading with an environmental imagination that grounds itself in a porous exchange across bodies and surfaces.

*Fire on the Mountain* primarily deals with the alienating experiences of its protagonist Nanda Kaul, which are an outcome of her living a secluded life, earlier as a neglected working wife and now due to a solitary existence in the hills of Kasauli. Yearning for quietude, she experiences unsettlement as a result of the visits by her great-granddaughter Raka and later, her friend Ila Das. Nanda Kaul occupies the house as its sole caretaker and obliquely emerges as a ‘kritos’, someone who is “an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order, no boots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original decor” (Howarth 69). Nanda Kaul's conception of a house in order is designed in terms of hollowness and conscious inactivity. The narrator describes her movement and frame of mind in images of meticulous precision gearing towards inaction. Having “paced the house, proprietorially, feeling the feel of each stone in the paving with bare feet” (36) and seen “as another pine tree, the grey sari a rock – all components of the bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden” (44), Nanda Kaul “revelled in its [when the house was new to her] bareness, its emptiness” (36) and decidedly maintained that “[w]hatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (11). Thus, as a conceptual house, housing the ability to mould, mirror, and reflect characters’ negotiations with the world, the house is the site at which the narrative unfolds itself.

Interestingly, imprinting an image of a map before (/at) the beginning of the novel creates the ground for the novel’s preoccupation with tracing the literal landscape of Carignano’s development — as a site, as a place of dwelling, and in mapping the mindscapes of characters associated with Carignano. The literary text begins with a black and white map of a house amidst the trees of Kasauli, sketched and signed as ‘Kasauli 70’. If Carignano is the site at which the

novel's plot unfolds itself, it also plays a significant role in shaping the text's narrative. As a cultural repository of colonial history (built and christened as 'Carignano' in 1843 by its first occupants- a British officer Colonel Macdougall and his wife, Alice) and as a site of a habitation, the narrative does not disassociate the house from its environmental moorings. Nature is constantly seen and felt to presence itself as an autonomous physical-material entity. The house melts into the environing nature and the environing nature forms the contours of the house for Nanda Kaul. She sees it in terms of how "the north side the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall, the sun glared, scoured and sharp" (12). The map starts with a nodal point that flows towards the house at the bottom, lined by trees all around. It also resembles a tear-drop and inversely, it looks like an action caught in stillness- of being sucked into the nodal point of beginning itself. Throughout the course of the novel, Kasauli constantly provides a place for the characters to dwell in an environmentally-close relationship. Though it is important to point out that the characters do not engage with Kasauli as a site of dwelling in a manner that is ecologically-minded, species-oriented, and/or espouses a practice of biocentric values. Kasauli is positioned in the novel in a way that their engagement with the place is more in terms of what Robert L. Thayer defines as a 'spiritual hypothesis' wherein the bioregion "offer[s] a deepened sense of personal meaning, belonging, and fulfilment in life" (71 qtd. in Rangarajan 70). Moreover, inscribing the map as 'Kasauli 70' can also be read as an attempt by the novelist to locate Kasauli as performing the role of an author function, wherein it stands in for illustrating the ecocritical discourse that inheres in the novel's thematic.

The house's relevance to the narrative's development is reflected in each of the titles of the novel's tripartite section (Part I: Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Part II: Raka comes to Carignano and Part III: Ila Das leaves Carignano). While the characters either stay or come and go,

Carignano stays put. Entrenched roots of the house's historicity surface as every changing occupant (Colonel, followed by a barrage of maiden ladies of English descent and finally the native Nanda Kaul) infuses energies into the house that are deeply entwined with their ways of living. The novel's primary concern revolves around the events that occur in Nanda Kaul's life as she lives her life of 'voluntary' seclusion at Carignano. The geographical locatedness of Carignano nestled amidst natural elements that thrive by themselves in the hills of Kasauli lends to it an aura of completeness when read in conjunction with the protagonist Nanda Kaul's deep-seated desire that

[e]verything 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. (11)

Thus, the novel's first page effectively delineates the novel's overarching concerns in terms of an interface in the interaction between nature and culture through the figure of the human and the presencing of nonhuman lifeworlds. It also brings to light the precarious balance between an ecocritical engagement in terms of realist negotiations with nature and the "self-reflexive linguistic functions" (Joseph Carroll as cited in Love 565) premised upon poststructuralist logocentric constructions of nature.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, human life and its sense of place are deeply anchored in its local geographical moorings. Desai's fiction allows one to read Carignano not as a static place but as a place-in-motion made up of its dynamic environing lifeworld which constitutes natural, human, nonhuman, and more-than-human elements. Desai's eco-fiction presences nature not only in terms of either being heard, seen, or felt by a human presence. Nature is also represented as a

lifeworld unto itself as “[a]ll the pine trees on the knoll shivered and cast their glistening needles in a hushed shower. The cicadas crept under the roasting stones and wept with little susurrating sounds. Pebbles suddenly released their hold on the hillside and went sliding down the ravine in a weeping rush” (114). The house’s transitional journey is measured not only through its occupants but also by the plants that were sown (apricot trees and their fruit that feature in the protagonist’s life were planted as three saplings by the second occupant - the church pastor many years ago). Though the novel begins with a sense of stillness and momentary cessation of movement as “Nanda Kaul paused” (11), there is an immediate flush of flourishing life which undercuts the controlled decidedness and stasis of human actions. Nanda Kaul pauses but “under the [*living*] pine trees to take in their *scented* sibilance and *listen* to the cicadas *fiddling* invisibly under the mesh of pine needles” (11) (emphasis mine). The narrator observes that “there were only the cicadas to be *heard*, a sound so even and so substantial that it seemed to emerge from the earth itself, or from the season - a *scent* of pine-needles made *audible*, a *spinning* of sunlight or of the globe on its axis” (21, emphasis mine). Throughout the course of the novel, Nanda Kaul’s lifeworld is seen to be diffusing into her immediate environment which is evinced by the event that the sight of him [postman], inexorably closing in with his swollen bag [of letters, message pleas, and responsibilities], rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day... She stepped backwards into the garden and the wind suddenly billowed up and threw the pine branches about as though to curtain her... she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake. (11)

Nanda Kaul sketches an affiliation with nature through Carignano’s barrenness as it becomes her haven to heal her past wounds, thereby rendering it an actively passive object into which her sense of being finds an inlet to diffuse itself. The narrator describes Nanda Kaul as lying on her

bed, absolutely still, composing her hands upon her chest, shutting her eyes to the brightness of the window, waiting for the first cool stir of breeze in the late afternoon to revive her. Till it came, she would lie still, still - she would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard (29).

It is only as the novel advances that the reader understands that Nanda Kaul's decision to reside in the hills in a solitary existence had always been not only a bid to discharge further duties and to keep social obligations at bay but also as a coping mechanism to heal from and accept her isolated past. However, with constant overlaps with the barrenness of nature at Carignano and the proliferation of instances of death, decay, and degeneration (Kaul is a great-grandmother), nature seems to function as a trope to accentuate the decline of Kaul's physical, emotional, social, and mental life. Though essentialist frameworks have associated women and nature with one another such that these socially constructed categorizations signify qualities of innateness, passiveness, and subservience to the androcentric needs of patriarchy and capitalist projects. In the act of feminizing nature and in naturalizing women, both by virtue of being historically oppressed are rendered as being interconnectedness such that "the domination of women by men reflects and reinforces the domination of the environment by society... patriarchal gender relations in society correspond to androcentric environmental ethics" (Natadecha-Sponsel qtd. in Robbins 506-7). Ecofeminist Val Plumwood makes a pertinent observation that the constructed signification "of nature-as-body, of nature-as-passion or emotion... of nature-as-primitive... of nature as the feminine— continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life" (21). Both women and nature are produced by exclusion and by defining women with an undertone of inferiority in terms of



metaphors such as ‘nurturers’ and ‘caretakers’ and conceptually constructing the earth as female, their shared roles as producers are reduced to function as mere sites of production for androcentric consumption. It is such an assumption which has normalized the domination of both women and nature by “patriarchal mal development” (Shiva 47). While approaching Desai’s novel thematically in terms of an ecofeminist reading is beyond the scope of this paper, the portrayal of an upper-caste character like Nanda Kaul who defies the conventional patriarchal construction of a woman as a nurturer and caretaker does puncture naturalized claims of feminine behaviours. If the natural space accords to Nanda Kaul a sense of amelioration, she is also seen to revel in the fact that “[e]ven when at her most desperate to beguile Raka, she had not used or misused, Carignano, for that shameful purpose. Carignano she had kept clean, true, open for the wind to blow through” (102). However, a close perusal of the same also brings to light the fact that such an association with nature that does not celebrate nature’s greenery but its soiled red and brown earth continues to almost validate life for Nanda Kaul. The narrator observed, “[I]ike 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. It was made up of very few elements, but they were exact and germane. She no more wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radiantly single life” (36). Imageries of barrenness, exclusion, solitariness, and aloofness function as a trope laying out the novel’s thematic- a sense of alienation. Breaking away from the ways of the ‘world’ which are ‘out there’, a world consciously left behind by Nanda Kaul to camp in Kasauli as her enclosed haven, macro cosmically also relegates Kasauli to the periphery from the centrality of the world which is out there where human and social labouring exist. A pertinent question that arises is whether Nanda Kaul’s residency in Kasauli

posits a re-engagement with her environment or does it problematize her engagement with nature as it furthers her sense of alienation and disinterestedness?

Even with a deliberate act of distancing, events and distant happenings filter into the ‘unmediated’ life at Carignano. It is not only the arrival of unwanted guests (postman, great-granddaughter, and friend), but also capitalist ventures that voice their ‘outside’ presence within the ‘inside’, quaint, and the self-sufficient world of Kasauli that Nanda Kaul seems to have been effectively constructing. Storytelling sessions by Raka’s father and grandmother about the flattering tales of the Himalayan hill station do not include the reality of the eyesore “square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked” (46) factory located in Kasauli and “[c]hutes [which are] emerging from its back wall...to disgorge factory waste into the ravine” (Ibid.). Such an effacement heightens the narrative of a sociocultural construction of nature as an auratic space which is imagined as pristine and untouched by anthropogenic human intervention. Paradoxically, Kasauli’s natural environment is also rendered as a resourceful site for industrialized waste disposal. The novel also mentions the removal of animals from their localized terrain to perform the role of laboratory specimens so as to test the efficiency levels of chemical serums for injections. They are relocated to “concrete [Pasteur] Institute walls that had worried Raka by their incongruity and their oddly oppressive threat” (48). However, the novel does not dwell on the risk factor that the chemicals pose for lifeforms inhabiting the same environment via the porousness of bodies involuntarily absorbing chemicals. Nonetheless, such close proximity to the incessant expulsion of smoke and chemicals aggravates a sense of threat and decay. Moreover, it opens the local platial setting of Kasauli to more-than-local consumer markets, thereby accelerating processes of production, consumption and thus, devastation.

By constantly conflating the human and her environment as if one energized the other, the novel also puts into place, an interaction between the human and nonhuman lives - “a day lily was in bloom and Nanda Kaul went slowly over to congratulate it on its well-formed, clear yellow flower that would be shrivelled by tomorrow” (129); “She [Nanda Kaul] put out her ringed hand and gave the lily a little shake so that the creature [praying mantis] tumbled off into the leaves. There it would be safe from the birds” (Ibid.). However, it is only towards the end of the novel that the narrator discloses the falsity behind Nanda Kaul’s concocted tales of finding ease in living a solitary life at Carignano as

[s]he had lied to Raka...about everything... [t]hey had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her...he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress...whom he had loved. And her children...were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquillizers, pills. (139)

For Nanda Kaul, Carignano functions as a space that can be shaped as a platform upon which she can stage a personal transformation and perform a life story that bears no real resemblance to the one that she lived before she reached Carignano. As Erving Goffman notes, “[a] back region or a backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (69). If her role as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor left her unfulfilled, Carignano’s barrenness infused a sense of comfort in a manner that required the least human interference.

However, nature's presentness and liveness in terms of its proliferating dynamism are presented through the character of her great-granddaughter, Raka. Her willingness to engage with the world which is 'out there' draws in a freeing embodied consciousness. The narrator states that she [Raka] would have to break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly. She thought desperately, with longing, of the charred house on the ridge, of the fire-blasted hilltop where nothing sounded, mercifully, but the creaking of the pines in the wind and the demented cuckoos, wildly calling. (98)

While Raka's interaction with nature emerges as an expression of social embeddedness in a material world where meanings are constructed through ethnocentric relations, Desai poignantly locates a concomitant relationality between nature and human interference as Raka manages to portray a counteraction that responds to nature's ability to exist at a prelinguistic level. Raka actively uses her body to receive nature's utterance. Due to the lack of availability of water in June to douse the forest fire, nature veils the hills with ash which is in turn, received by nature-bound Raka as she "woke to find the hills blotted out by smoke and summer haze. The fire was blotted out, too. The north wind brought with it a cindery smell and a layer of ashes that it deposited on Kasauli like a grey pelt. Raka went about thoughtfully drawing lines in it with her finger" (75-76). Desai's eco-fiction displaces notions of anthropocentrism as she weaves into the narrative, numerous instances which map events and places by taking into cognizance the simultaneous existence and intermingling of both, human existences but also those of the more-than-human presences. The character of the little girl Raka opens up a window into the lifeworld of the garden. The narrator describes how Raka stared up at the hoopoe's nest in the eaves, concealed from sight and giving itself away only by the whirring and whistling of the nestlings

whenever the mother arrived with a mouthful for them. They were silent except when she arrived and stirred them up into a clamour...there was hardly an apricot Raka picked up from the grass that didn't bear the mark of her long beak. (67)

Though the recognition of the same is through a human sense-perception, the episode also accords agency to the lifeworld of the bird as well. There is a constant weaving in and out of human-hoopoe entanglement. Furthermore, while there is an acknowledgement of the active presence of the other living organisms and articulations of nature's expression through environmental factors and processes of gestation, it is the presence of the wild-spirited Raka that steadily creeps into occupying Nanda Kaul's wakefulness. It is Raka's uninvited visit that further sets in motion, an invisible yet steady change in Nanda Kaul's disposition. Concocting tales to keep Raka intrigued, while retaining a controlled demeanour of performing detachment, the narrator informs the reader that "[o]ne might have said she [Nanda Kaul] had arrived at her second childhood if one believed in such things. She looked so exactly like a baby thwarted, wanting attention she did not get" (100). Raka's presence steadily shifts Nanda Kaul's tones of engagement- from finding reflective relevance in nature and the brown earth's green earthlings, she is now receptive to another human's nature that seems to naturally mirror her own forceful detached attachments. However, it is through Raka and perception of her natural behaviour noted by Nanda Kaul that evinces traces of dislodging anthropocentric perspectives due to the child's willingness to be open to nature's self-expression. Though the novel exhibits glaring similarities between Nanda Kaul and Raka as "[l]ike an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine-needles of the hillsides, like her own great-grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (Desai51); a close perusal of their engagement with nature highlights a primary and irreconcilable difference. For

Nanda Kaul, nature becomes a text that she reads into, to subside and possibly efface the chaos within. Thus, her presence at Carignano develops its environment as a site for dwelling via minimal interruptions (both natural and manmade). While on the other hand, the precocious Raka's hunger to know the ways of the natural world through happenings that entail action-oriented expressions and experiences, creates for her moments of engagement with nature by way of a recognition of difference and humble unknowability. While Nanda Kaul actively seeks to blur boundaries between herself and her environment by gravitating towards removing her body by dispersing into her environment to seek an antidote for her alienating self, Raka actively inserts her body to engage with the nonhuman lifeworlds and absorbs knowledge through an embodied interaction as

[s]he patted a cheek of wood here... She met a spider that groomed its hairs in a corner, saw lizard's eyes blinking out of a dark groove. She probed the depth of dust on shelves and ledges, licked a windowpane to cool her tongue-tip. It [the sun] summoned her to the window, dragged her the length of a ray and drew her to the ledge where she laid her head on its comfortable guillotine' (45).

Thus, as one becomes a traversal perspective cutting through the other's manner of engagement with nature, the interface between their respective sense of self reiterates the relevance of the material and sensory dimensions of places. The exuberance of experiences that Carignano generates allows the novelist, characters, and readers to engage with a story world that is deeply entangled with the spatial dimensions of temporal realities. Desai's novel primarily deals with historical events of the personal and localized lives of its characters while colonial History gurgles at the novel's margins. Her work can thus be read as a contestation of the neglect of the landscape's sensual aspect.

If Carignano's environing landscape recognizes spatial sense-affect, the narratorial technique situates a distanced affiliation with Nanda Kaul as throughout the novel she is always mentioned by her complete name. It is only her friend Ila Das (having shared the same spaces and places with Nanda Kaul in the past) who unhesitatingly addresses her 'Nanda'. The reader is thus effectively kept at a distance and made to feel unwelcome in the private life of Nanda Kaul, to accentuate the underlying sense of discomfort that runs its course through the novel. Furthermore, it is only in the novel's last interaction that she is addressed by Raka as 'Nani' (maternal grandmother) though unaware of her Nani's passing away due to heartbreak upon hearing about her friend Ila Das' death (who is raped on her way back). If the narrative in its domestic interaction strikes a balance between establishing a connection and fading away of life, it zooms outward towards the mountain with Raka's exclamation of a manmade intervention, "[l]ook, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani – look – the forest is on fire" (139). The natural environment asserts itself and surfaces as an agent unto itself as the novel ends with a happening- "[d]own in the ravine, the flames spat and crackled around the dry wood and through the dry grass, and black smoke spiralled up over the mountain" (Ibid.). Desai deftly creates the stage for nature to perform itself, sans human sense-perception but as a physical-material entity in itself. However, it is to be pointed out that forest fires are induced by human activities, the repercussions of which are articulated by nature through wildfires themselves. Furthermore, the lifeworlds of Carignano, its nonhuman earthlings', and the earth's multifarious voices also articulate themselves. However, neither does Desai's novel articulate the humanistic verbalization of nonhuman voices nor does it represent them as objects. Rather, it steers our attention to the liveness of those lives and writes them into the novel as indivisible wholes with claims to protection of their own rights. Nonhuman voices are not linguistically recognizable to

human cognition, but the multi-voice and agency to act according to their lifeworld's protocols are expressed and experienced within the narrative. As Haraway observes, "[n]ature may be speechless, without language, in the human sense; but nature is highly articulate. [...] To articulate is to signify" (324). Thus, what is emphasized are the sounds within apparent silences and visualizations within apparent absences.

Ecocritic Swarnalatha Rangarajan states that a life-place (bioregion) "signals a deep and respectful attachment to place and its other-than-human inhabitants. It is also the locus of what E.O. Wilson [American biologist] refers to as 'biophilia'- the feeling of oneness with all life forms- and what Yi-Fu Tuan [geographer] defines as 'topophilia'- 'the affective bond between people and place or setting'" (64). The novel dovetails deep-rooted lived experiences of its characters' engagement with Carignano's landscape with intensities that facilitate both positive and negative affective dwelling. However, Nanda Kaul and Raka's engagement with Carignano as bioregion where the story performs itself is in complete juxtaposition. Though related by blood that does not hold a connection, it is their togetherness laced with differences in terms of age, bodies, and life experiences in the same locale and engagements with the enviroing landscape that establishes a connection between the two. Moreover, what also gets played out is the interface between the material world's spatial reality and conceptional spaces of lived (embodied) realities. Rangarajan further observes that "[a] bioregional perspective can also help us relate positively to the world around us as well as help construe our identity beyond the narrow confines of the ego-bound self" (Ibid., 65). While Nanda Kaul's tired alienation propels her to vanish into her surroundings, she still speaks from an egocentric perspective whereas Raka who proactively yet silently engages with the natural world functions from an ecological perspective which is receptive to the ways and the multiple voices of nature. The burgeoning



field of ecological literary criticism's thematic crux lies in its "commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point" (Buell11). If Nanda Kaul builds a passive dwelling, it is precisely her sense of alienation that enables her to lifelessly respond to Carignano's natural state that has been effectively shaped by prior dwelling and neglect. Raka pushes the imagination further by accepting nature's unknowability yet strives to strike a dialogue through a positive effect and embodied sense-perception. Ila Das functions in the novel as embodying repentance as she laments over her cultivated skills which fail to help her connect with an earth-centric way of living. The lifeworlds of these three women characters and Carignano remain entangled till the very end. With young Raka as the survivor, *Fire on the Mountain* posits an entangled environmental engagement that holds within its contours, practices of human-nonhuman co-habitation that do not create fire on the mountain but instead, revel in 'thinking like a mountain'.

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**Bionote:**

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