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Some Reflections on Landscape Writing in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

The diversity of Indian literature in English offers fascinating points of entry to compare variations in spatial representation, notably when postcolonial writers engage with Western aesthetic covenants and the perceptual models they validate. Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* is one of the few novels written in English to address the two great landscape traditions that have developed first in China and later in Europe to probe the symbolic operations through which human beings' bond with their surroundings and develop a sense of place. A house in Kasauli stands as the pivot around which the plot revolves, attracting three central female characters to its garden and the breathtaking view of the plains of Punjab. Yet landscape writing in *Fire on the Mountain* does not serve the instrumental purposes of the standard novelistic setting, whether they are referential or ornamental. This paper argues instead that landscape writing contributes to the literary economy of the novel, prompting a self-conscious examination of the artifices of landscape and the place allotted to the disenfranchised within the field of representation.

Keywords: Indian literature in English, landscape theory, Anita Desai, ecocriticism.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is one of the few novels written in English that engages with the two painting traditions that successively arose in China in the 5th century CE, and in Europe a millennium later with the advent of the Renaissance. *Shanshui* – the Chinese alternative to the Western landscape – conjoins the two ideograms for “mountain” and “water.” They are the two constitutive elements of a style of painting which has developed since the Antiquity into myriad variations on the tension resulting from the

opposition and correlation between mountain(s) and water(s) (Jullien 2014: 39-40). In English, the word “landscape” – just like its equivalents in Romance languages *paysage*, *paesagio* etc. – does not distinguish between landscape as a reality out there and landscape as its representation on canvas or on the page (Berque 1995). This ambivalence reminds us that the Western landscape originated in Renaissance art when it ceased to be confined to the background of the painting and imposed itself as a portion of land viewed from a single, external point of view. In *L’impensé du paysage* (2014), François Jullien contrasts the Chinese and the European conceptions of landscape and explains that they proceed from worldviews premised upon radically different philosophical traditions. The division between subject and object informs the Western conception of landscape as a portioning of the land made possible by the external position of the beholder’s aesthetizing gaze. Jullien criticizes the splintering of subject/object, the abstraction that results from the subtraction of the part from the whole and, finally, the prevalence of the intellectual sense of sight in Western thought. These features, he argues, led with the advent of modernity to the constitution of nature as a reservoir of resources that could be exploited aesthetically as well as economically, which caused the Western point of view to become critically estranged from the environment. Jullien’s critique is particularly effective insofar as it proceeds from contrasts and comparisons. The sinologist uses the Chinese *shanshui* to determine what eludes conceptualisation in Western rationalism and its objectification of landscape. The Chinese painter does not represent landscape but records a differential field of tension and transformation between the opposite and correlated poles of mountain(s) and water(s) that involves the human participant in the process of its actualisation (Jullien 2014: 45).

This brief excursion out of Western rationalism into the processual conception of *shanshui* provides a convenient point of entry into Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* which contrasts several aesthetic codes regulating the appreciation of land as landscape. The novel foregrounds the symbolic operations through which human beings vest an interest in space and become attached to a special place – the affective ties for which Bachelard originally coined the

term *topophilia*, later made popular by Yi Fu Tuan among cultural geographers.¹

Landscape writing in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* does not serve the instrumental – that is referential or ornamental – purposes of most novelistic settings (Buell 1995: 252-257). Instead, landscape *fully* participates in the literary and symbolic economy of Desai's novel insofar as landscape writing mediates between the world of fiction and the world of the reader through which visions of space specific to an individual or to a group become naturalised. There is no landscape writing without the visual parsing that precedes the delineation of contours in amorphous space.² As a result, the coherence impressed by the perceptual focus on the formation of the image tells us perhaps more about the locus of perception than about the real which always stands in excess of what the human senses and intellect can comprehend and bring to the level of expression (Rosset 1977). Landscape, in other words, is a way of seeing encoded with ideological assumptions, aesthetic values, and affective significance.

But there is another reason why landscape writing may be said to *fully* participate in the poetic economy of Desai's novel. Because its conventions originated in painters' studios in the Far East over a thousand years before landscape appeared, albeit in a different guise, in the Netherlands and in the Italy of the Renaissance, Desai's self-conscious references to these two contrasting pictorial traditions prompt a wider reflection upon ways of seeing that are just as historically transient, socially and culturally specific as the objects they deem worthy of being recorded.

According to the *O.E.D.*, the term "landscape" did not appear in English until the sixteenth century when it was borrowed from the Dutch as a painter's term. It originally implied the framing of a portion of land from the point of view of a static observer. The term "landscape" consequently implies the distinction maintained by "the philosophical tradition that separates the 'objective world' from the 'viewing subject'". (New 1997: 10) This division, however, is not sustained in India. Anita Desai emphasised this point in her essay "Feng Sui or Spirit of Place" in which she observed that "Indians are interested in landscape and seasons only in so far as they relate to human emotions and sensations, not in place or nature as such"

(1984: 107). In the same essay, Desai does not look West to analyse the centrality of a sense of place to her writing, but she turns further East, towards China and Japan where the Taoist opposition-correlation between full and empty energizes the apprehension of space, its material representation with ink and brush and its spiritual contemplation. In all of Desai's fiction, *Fire on the Mountain* is the novel that is most concerned with space, the aesthetic conventions through which it is apprehended as landscape and its perception by the characters as having a personal relevance and resonance. In this short, compact novel (one could almost call it a novella) the plotline remains elusively thin until the penultimate chapter in which violence surges with unforeseen brutality. The contrast with what precedes the ending is all the more effective as, up to this point, the narrative has unfolded at a sedate pace into a triptych introducing each of the novel's main characters in relation to a pivotal locale: the estate of Carignano near Kasauli. The triptych's three panels contrast different viewpoints on the estate and its surroundings, but only the first and the last one approach their description in terms that explicitly evoke landscape painting. In the first section, "Nanda Kaul at Carignano," the old woman imagines how a watercolourist would paint the view from her balcony, whereas her great-granddaughter, Raka, is associated with a nearby ravine in the subsequent section entitled "Raka Comes to Carignano." In the third and final part, "Ila Das Leaves Carignano," the third female character, a friend of long standing, is portrayed unwittingly heading for death, threading her way through the misty shadows of a Chinese scroll. My intention in this paper is to analyse how Desai skilfully articulates these successive views into a dynamic triptych in which the Western and the Eastern landscape traditions operate in a mutual tension, which prompts the reader to look closer at the unsightly view displayed in the central panel, and envisage the consequences of the inclusion of women into the field of representation.

Right Here in Carignano

Carignano's anchoring in India's colonial history is constitutive of a sense of place permeated by the memories embedded in the old colonial mansion. Although the narrator does not comment on the toponym, its namesake in the Piedmontese hills is a clear indication

of the picturesque tastes the estate's original masters acquired on their Grand Tours to the sun-drenched hills of Northern Italy. The house in Kasauli consequently stands as an architectural vestige of the hill station's luxurious and somewhat embarrassing colonial past. "Embarrassing" is indeed the adjective that comes to mind when Nanda Kaul, the present-day owner of the estate, remembers how her young self – she was then the Vice-Chancellor's spouse – the Vice-Chancellor himself, and their friend Ila Das used to play badminton mixed doubles with a Miss Davies with whom Nanda's husband shared much more than a passing interest in physical exertion. As a vignette of the life of the anglicised, sometimes Anglophile, upper-class during the Raj, the episode constitutes one of the leitmotifs of the novel, fusing together colonial alienation and conjugal humiliation (see *Fire* 24-25, 122, 134).

Carignano then functions like a time-space. In Bakhtinian terms, it operates in the manner of a "chronotope" evincing "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 1981: 84). The colonial house brings to mind similar architectural chronotopes representing Britain's waning imperial splendor, from V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, to the Ayemenem estate in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, or even Darlington Hall in *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro. These mansions unfailingly summon memories of the builders of Empire, of the dwellings they vacated as decolonisation gained momentum, and of the new occupants who then moved in, striving to reconcile the duality of their cultural affiliations with post-independence loyalties. It is then no wonder that placing Carignano, that is to say locating it in the geography and history of the subcontinent, should evoke memories of the British officer who had the house built in 1843, and of the owners that succeeded him – all of them oddballs with unpredictable tempers and murderous tendencies (*Fire* 6-9). One century later, with the advent of Independence, "Carignano was up for sale and Nanda Kaul bought it. The little town went native" (*Fire* 10).

Terse as it sounds, the last sentence is packed with innuendoes of excess, the source of a disapproval that aligns Nanda Caul with a colonial sensibility. The resurgence of local character is indeed conveyed through a turn of phrase brimming over with

immoderateness, a barely veiled reference to the communal violence that flared up with Partition. Years later, the older Nanda finds the barrenness of Carignano soothing, its scant vegetation and vacant vistas comfortably empty after the turmoil of the past. The memories she would rather leave behind cannot, however, be sealed away, but keep surfacing in the present through analogies with the landscape stretching under her eyes:

Getting up at last, she went slowly round to the back of the house and leant on the wooden railing on which the yellow rose creeper had blossomed so youthfully last month but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans again. She gazed down the gorge with its gashes of red earth, its rocks and gullies and sharply spiked agaves, to the Punjab plains – a silver haze in the summer heat – stretching out to a dim yellow horizon [...]

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her. (Fire 17)

The description mixes conventional symbols, among which the rose recognizable as an emblem of youth in traditions ranging from European courtly literature to ghazal poetry, with elements one would not expect in a bucolic context. Sustained by alliterations in /gr/ and /cr/, the morphing of colour into noise (“grey creaks”), and of noise into the sound of pain (“creaks and groans”), signals the passage from objective description to subjective impression, from landscape to mindscape. In fact, even when she becomes engrossed in the contemplation of the remote vista, Nanda remains alert to signs of the living forces that disrupt the still surface of things. Her perception of space is structured by the line of the horizon pulling the safe and distant background away from a foreground replete with foreboding notes. Here spiky succulents and the red gash of a clogged-up gorge evoke the torn skin of a supine body whose integrity has been tampered with. The ominous description has its signification revealed in the final pages of the novel when Ila Das leaves Carignano to return to her destitute home down in the plain. Walking past “a particularly large and murderous agave” (Fire 141) the old lady falls prey to one of her neighbours who rapes and beats her to death. It later transpires that the assassin felt threatened by Ila

Das's active campaigning against child marriage and the threat it posed to his own matrimonial arrangements.

Far Away into the Distance

Whereas the short range is rife with danger, distance makes for a safer sense of composition and aesthetic satisfaction:

[Nanda Kaul] wished, as often before, that she could invite an English water-colourist of the nineteenth century to come and paint the view from her garden. They were masters, she felt, at conveying light and space, the two elements of the Kasauli view. Or was it too unsubstantial a scene for an English artist? she wondered. No Indian artist of any epoch could have painted it, she knew, and she had her doubts about the English. She had seen nineteenth-century lithographs of what were then known as the Kussowlie Hills and although they had amused her, they had not satisfied. Perhaps a firmer outline, a more definite horizon was required by an etcher. Here hills melted into sky, sky into snows, snows into air. (Fire 28)

Self-conscious analogies with landscape painting obsessively recur whenever Nanda Kaul gazes at her surroundings. Her rejection of Indian artists in the passage above has jarred on some critics who have dismissed the character's reaction as a "clear case of cultural denigration" (Johae 2004: 271). Yet, Nanda Kaul's assessment of the English water-colourist or etcher is clearly nuanced, insofar as she does not believe that any of these artists³ could render the balance between sharply-defined volumes and the light and air interspacing them. The same impression of saturation causing surfeit dominates in the painterly metaphor that crops up when Nanda Kaul learns of the imminent arrival of her great-granddaughter. At this point, she is overwhelmed by memories of the years she spent attending to the endless needs of her family: "There were so many of them and they were so alike. She could not summon Raka out of the common blur. She was no more than a particularly dark and irksome spot on a hazy landscape – a mosquito, a cricket, or a grain of sand in the eye" (Fire 35). The reference to landscape reveals that Nanda views Raka's arrival as an additional element disturbing the formation of an image. Because it focuses the attention upon itself, the detail of Raka's appearance upsets the subordination of the part to the whole and of the foreground to the background. But once the little girl has settled in Carignano and her great-grandmother has come to realize that the

child will make no claims on her, the view from Carignano’s balcony resumes a sedate air more suited to the old lady’s pictorial tastes:

The storm was over. The clouds disappeared: one wisp after another was folded up and whisked away into the blue and a lovely evening emerged, lucid and peerless, the hills fresh and moist and wooded, blue and green *like coils of paint out of a tube*. Away in the north the rock-scarred snow range glittered. To the south many hundreds of miles of the plain were visible, streaked with streams and pitted with bright pools of rain. (87, emphasis added)

Perhaps more subtle than the storm – a rather obvious objective correlative in this context – are the many references to colour and design affiliating the description to a painting tradition which does not require completion to inspire contemplation. Here the narrator gives prominence to mountain and water, the two constitutive elements of Chinese *shanshui*, rhythmically interspersed by the recurring *yubai* or blanks that invite the beholder’s imagination to enter the painting and follow the sinuous curves of lakes, streams and mountain paths leading to spiritual elevation (Berque 1995: 76).

Elsewhere the narrator self-consciously sets up parallels between Nanda Kaul’s distinctive way of seeing, her need for space and distance, and principles characteristic of Japanese art, notably its reliance on the efficacy of subtraction in an aesthetic that values the minimal over the plentiful:

Like 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 a very few elements, but they were exact and germane as the strokes in a Japanese scroll. (Fire 31)

An earlier parallel between Nanda Kaul and Sei Shonagon’s time-honoured *Pillow Book* prepared for the parallelism in the citation above between Nanda Kaul’s special poise and the artifices of landscape, in the double sense of landscape *in situ* (the garden) and landscape *in visu* (the painting). At that point, Nanda Kaul detected in the lists and aphorisms of *The Pillow Book* a sense of place attuned to the emotions Carignano arouses in her:

[S]he smiled again, in spite of herself, wondering if Carignano would live up to that epicurean lady’s ideas of how things should be. Not quite, for it was not desolate and it was not derelict. But she had an

idea that its sparseness, its cleanness and austerity would please the Japanese lady of a thousand years ago as it pleased her. (Fire 29)

The orientalist paraphernalia draws attention to the discrepancy between the actual Carignano and the way Nanda aestheticizes the estate into a satisfyingly empty picture sealing it away from the ugly, raucous reality around her. Indeed, delightful as Chinese *shanshui*, Japanese gardens, a geisha's pillow book and Marco Polo's travel narratives may be (Nanda shamelessly pilfers from the latter to ingratiate herself with her great-granddaughter), all of the above screen Nanda Kaul from the bare facts other characters cannot afford to avoid. A brutal shift from Oriental refinement to exotic obfuscation consequently occurs when Ila Das is shown returning from the genteel tea party in Carignano, scurrying back to her reduced circumstances before dusk sets in: "Leaving behind the last of the shabby, rundown houses and dried up, untended gardens of the town, Ila Das began to hop, skip and slide down the footpath to her village, already lost in the evening shadow of the mountains" (F 140). The brooding threat contained in the adverb "*already lost*" signals on the verge of the ending that the narrative shifts away from the character's narrow focalisation, just before the advent of absolute destruction, and widens its scope to assume the commanding language of omniscience:

There were only a few more farmhouses on the way – solid, square houses built of Kasauli fieldstone, with pumpkins and corn drying on their roofs, goats tied to the doorposts, women noisily dipping brass pots into barrels of water. [...] Although it had been hot all day, now there was a chill like a white mist beginning to creep out of the shadows of the great jagged rocks and filter through the pine trees and set Ila Das, in her frayed, worn laces and silks, shivering. The day gone, the light gone, the warmth of life gone, it was like wandering lost *in a Chinese landscape* – an austere pen and ink scroll, of rocks and pine and mountain peaks, all muted by mist, by darkness. (Fire 140-141, emphasis added)

An additional mention of the "Chinese landscape" Nanda Kaul yearns for can be spotted one paragraph further, when Ila regrets not having asked Nanda for her hospitality, since it would have made it possible for the former to survive on her scant pension while carrying on with the education and alphabetisation of the illiterate population of nearby villages. As the reader follows the old lady scurrying

towards her ordeal, the description of the darkening landscape around her fulfils several purposes. First it sets off the brutality of the assault through delay and “symbolic doubling” (Buell 254) as the mist and chill close around Ila Das. But the pathetic fallacy cannot quite operate insofar as the composition flaunts its artificiality in a postmodernist gesture that simultaneously asserts and disowns its generic affiliation. Here the landscape is blatantly of a composite nature. It combines a picturesque prospect complete with “great jagged rocks” and rustic farmhouses in the middle ground (Fire 140) with a sublime sunset on the Kasauli ridge in the background, whereas the foreground belongs to the radically different style and period of the Chinese *shanshui*. “Mist – now, in summer?” the narrator wonders, sharing in free direct speech the character’s disorientation with the implied reader. The conflation of the two styles leaves out an *unheimlich* residue, characteristic of the rearticulations of hybridity according to Homi Bhabha (1994: 25). “Less than one and double” (Bhabha 1994: 116), the hybrid landscape lacks transparency, but glazes over and fractures along the trajectory of a woman who literally has no place, neither in the vacant vistas of Nanda Kaul’s oriental fantasies nor in the picturesque version of a quaintly rural India.

Chaos and Rejuvenation in the Middle Ground

Nanda Kaul’s great-granddaughter is only female character capable of confronting the sheer violence exuding from external space. The girl soon turns her back on the colonial prospect of the Punjabi plains to explore the ravine at the back of the estate where the tall walls of the Pasteur Institute block the view, its chutes disgorging the laboratories’ refuse down the slope along with the putrefying carcasses of animals infected with rabies:

Crouching by the rail, [Raka] made out the details that gave the hazy scene edges, angles and interest. Shoals of rusted tins, bundles of stained newspaper, peels, rags and bones, all snuggling in grooves, hollows, cracks, and sometimes spilling. Pine trees with charred trunks and contorted branches, striking melodramatic attitudes as on stage. Rocks arrested in mid-roll, rearing up, dropping. Occasional tin rooftops, glinting. (Fire 41)

Although the description is perspective-oriented as it moves from close (smaller objects) to a middle plane (the larger shapes of

trees and rocks) towards distant roofs, the pell-mell assemblage lacks the completion defining landscape, whether decorative or not. Instead, the parataxis accumulates visual material and lists elements that are not subordinated to the logic of precedence or temporal development implicit in the receding succession of foreground, middle- and background. The chaotic accumulation has something strangely appealing about it, and the impression undoubtedly arises from the point of view that tinges it. Raka's curiosity for life's multifarious forms is perceptible in the trees' anthropomorphic silhouettes and the shape-changing rocks. The child's standards of beauty have nothing to do with Ila's refined tastes or her great-grandmother's spare elegance. But she is the only character apt to recognise the transformative potential of a site that goes by several names – wasteland, dump, "edgeland" or "third landscape" (respectively Farley and Symmons Roberts 2011; Clément 2004). The gorge behind Carignano thus features among the interzones that have been fascinating artists and environmentalists alike in the last two decades on account of their indeterminate nature as left-over land, the repository of human waste which is also the refuge of startlingly resilient life-forms.

Likewise, seen through Raka's eyes, the tawny plain is frequently compared with the pelt of crouching felines such as a lion, a tiger (Fire 41), or a cat (Fire 61). She likens Chandigarh Lake to a snake's eye, gleaming in the distance (Fire 49). But it is at close range that Raka's intimacy with her surrounding is most obvious. "As still as a twig" (Fire 72), "her head like a berry" (Fire 91, see also 116) the child is part of Carignano. She blends with and disappears among the creatures of the garden, achieving an intimacy with them that is denied to her great-grandmother. She also responds to their voices, trying to decipher the Sanskrit-like language of crickets rustling in the afternoon heat (Fire 49). Freakish as she may look and sound, Ila Das also shares Raka's ability to merge with her surroundings. She is compared first with a small piece of gravel (Fire 110), and her speech with a waterfall (Fire 118), an odd simile when bearing in mind Ila's frailty. The discrepancy is meant to snag the attention, implying that if people could lend an ear to what the old lady has to say, her eloquence would perhaps put out the violence smouldering in the landscape. It is also the role that Nanda Kaul fleetingly fancies for

herself when she muses that, “Now was the moment to rise and put all in its place, like the goddess of a naughty land returned to deal with chaos” (Fire 122). But it is finally the child who dares to confront chaos with a radical gesture when she sets the mountain on fire:

The last of the light had left the valley. It was already a deep violet and only the Kasauli ridge, where Carignano stood invisibly, was still bright with sunlight, russet and auburn, copper and brass an eagle took off from the peak of Monkey Point, *lit up like a torch in the sky*, and dropped slowly down into the valley, lower and lower, *till it was no more than a sere leaf, a scrap of burnt paper*, drifting on currents of air, silently. (Fire 140, emphasis added)

The vignette occurs in the context of Ila Das’s fated return to her village home, at the exact point where the two different landscapes overlap, the sublime sunset over Kasauli fading into the muted colours of a Chinese *shansui*. Darkness immediately follows the flashing incandescence of the sinking sun. The quick succession is presented through an ambiguous image which may pass unnoticed in the descriptive flow, especially for a plot-oriented reader eager to see Ila Das back in the safety of her home. Before that reassurance, however, the trajectory of the eagle smoothly morphs into a searing trace through a succession of similes. The complex sentence unfurls into parallel clauses replete with symbolic significations. The syntax omits the mention of a human agent when it leaves out the hand that struck the match,⁴ and organises the visual composition around the focal point of Monkey Point. The site owes its name to an episode in the *Ramayana* when Lord Hanuman returning with a mountain of magical herbs from the Himalayas stepped on the hill, his giant foot creating a small depression on its top. The intervention of an eagle likened with a dropping torch also brings to mind key elements in Hanuman’s legend among which his divine conception after an eagle dropped a slice of pudding stolen from the Sun-God into his mother’s lap, his first prank when Hanuman swallowed the sun he had mistaken for a fruit, or a later feat when he used his burning tail to destroy the city of Lanka. The figurative process that links destruction by fire with creation through allusions to the *Ramayana* is both indirect and richly evocative, which calls for a number of concluding remarks.

The first one is concerned with Desai's use of both pictorial and narrative frames to enhance suspense in her intensely descriptive narratives. A meticulous stylist, Desai is also a crafty teller, knowing what to conceal and when to reveal it. The authorial choice to leave decisive elements outside the scope of narrative is a ploy she has often used to question the limits of the field of representation as they include objects deemed worthy of attention just as they are likely to exclude eyesores – things as well as people who do not fit the picture, and spoil the view because they challenge aesthetic and political hegemonies. Ila Das's activism and the systemic violence perpetrated against women are thus strategically left out of the narrative until Ila's murder. This deferral is reminiscent of *In Custody* and the treatment of Imtiaz Begum whose poetic talent is left to the appreciation of a biased narrator until one of her letters finally forces readers to revise their initial opinion.

The allusions to the *Ramayana* and the mythic origins of Monkey Point implicitly link Raka to the mischievous, transformative figure of the monkey god.⁵ Many in Desai's international audience may not readily respond to an allusion that turns a childish prank into a sacred sign of rejuvenation and purification. A Western reader, however, would perhaps be more prone to view Raka as a Promethean figure. The girl's symbolic association with cosmic fire finds an echo in the countless stories and paintings that picture the Greek demi-God with two attributes – the fire he stole from Zeus and the eagle later sent to torment him. *Fire on the Mountain* therefore bears witness to Desai's elaborate stereoscopic vision as theorised by Marta Dvorak:

A stereoscopic technique of representation, if one makes an analogy with the optical instrument allowing the observer to superimpose or fuse two images taken at a slight distance from each other so as to produce an effect of solidity or depth, invites her readers to expect complexity when one culture supersedes another, and to distance themselves from reductive, totalizing statements amalgamating language and identity politics. (2009: 53)

In *Fire on the Mountain*, landscape writing rests upon an interplay of pictorial traditions that upset static views of an eternal India steeped in tradition. Marc Brosseau has famously commented on the role of literature which as a social agent is also a potent vector of

change participating in the transformation of the world out there. The aesthetic dimension of *Fire on the Mountain*, the way it affects us as readers, also has transformative potential insofar as Desai's novel encourages us to imagine alternatives to the traditional place of women in Indian society. The novel came out in 1977, four decades after India's Independence, and on the eve of the spatial turn. Half a century later, Desai's wrestling with the unsightly still has the power to shock, move and question any complacency regarding the place granted to women in today's India, as well as in other great democracies.

Notes

1. Topophilia is defined as "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment" (Tuan 1974: 93).
2. As evinced by the grid-like contraption Dürer invented to produce his eerily realistic sketches of both landscapes and reclining female nudes. The reversibility of the conventions ruling the representation of landscape and supine female bodies suggests a common origin in the male gaze that controls the production and visual consumption of analogous images for the land and the female body (Berger 1972: 62-63).
3. The narrator's description evokes the lithographs Mrs W.L.L Scott published in her *Views in the Himalayas*. See for instance *Kussowlie and the Plains Beyond Sunrise* (1852) on the British Library online gallery <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/other/019xzz00000670u00001000.html>. Consulted 28 February 2022.
4. Raka is clearly identified as the human cause for the fire: "She raised herself onto the tips of her toes – tall, tall as a pine – stretched out her arms till she felt the yellow light strike a spark down her fingertips and along her arms till she was alight, ablaze" (Fire 91).
5. See "The Birth and Youth of Hanuman," <http://www.gauranga.org/hanuman.htm>. Consulted March 1, 2022.

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