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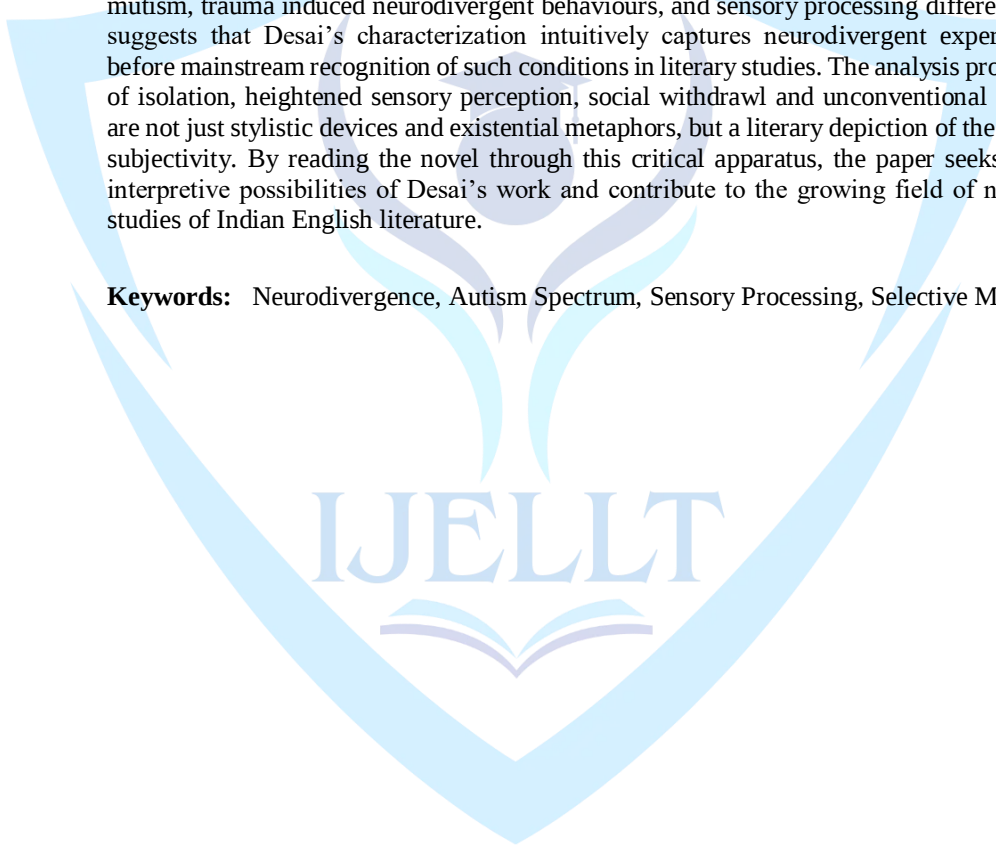
Literary Theories

Reading Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* Through the lens of Neurodivergent Studies

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Abstract: Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) has been extensively studied from feminist, existentialist, and postcolonial perspectives, yet a neurodivergence study remains unexplored. This paper undertakes a critical examination of the novel's three main characters named Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, from neurodivergence perspective, exploring how they process their cognitive, emotional and sensory experiences differ from normative behavioral patterns. Drawing upon contemporary neurodivergence theory, which includes theory on ASD characteristics, selective mutism, trauma induced neurodivergent behaviours, and sensory processing differences, this paper suggests that Desai's characterization intuitively captures neurodivergent experiences decades before mainstream recognition of such conditions in literary studies. The analysis proves that themes of isolation, heightened sensory perception, social withdrawal and unconventional communication are not just stylistic devices and existential metaphors, but a literary depiction of the neurodivergent subjectivity. By reading the novel through this critical apparatus, the paper seeks to expand the interpretive possibilities of Desai's work and contribute to the growing field of neurodivergence studies of Indian English literature.

Keywords: Neurodivergence, Autism Spectrum, Sensory Processing, Selective Mutism



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Introduction

Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize from the Royal Society of Literature, *Fire on the Mountain* is a compact novella that unfolds in the hill station of Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh. The novel follows three female characters: Nanda Kaul, an elderly woman who secluded herself in the isolated house of Carignano after spending her life as a housekeeper; her great granddaughter, Raka, a strange & solitary child who comes to live with her; and Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's old friend whose tragic end brings the novel to its dreadful conclusion. The novel has received extensive critical analysis, mainly through the feminist approach which emphasizes the patriarchal oppression of Indian women (Bande 45), the existentialist approach which highlights the alienation and solitude of the characters (Jena 112), and the ecocritical approach that focuses on the relationship between the characters and the landscape of Kasauli (Dwivedi 78).

However, a significant interpretive dimension has yet to be explored: the neurodivergent subjectivities that Desai's narrative constructs with remarkable psychological acuity. Neurodivergence, as coined by Judy Singer in the late 1990s, describes the natural variations in human brain functioning that includes conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyspraxia, sensory processing disorder, and other conditions (28). Neurodiversity, as Nick Walker tells us, is "the diversity of human brains and minds—the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species" (28). Importantly, the neurodiversity paradigm turns the differences not into defects, but into a normal variation of the human genome.

This paper argues that a neurodivergence reading of *Fire on the Mountain* reveals dimensions of the text that have been overlooked so far. Nanda Kaul's need for solitude, her discomfort with social interaction, and her construction of elaborate internal narratives; Raka's extraordinary sensory sensitivity, social withdrawal, fascination with specific objects, and near-complete silence; and Ila Das's inability to read social cues and her socially unmodulated speech patterns—all these characteristics, when examined through the neurodivergence framework, acquire new and richer significance. These characteristics are not just symptoms of a problem caused by the oppression of men, or a state of crisis, but characters in whom Desai has programmed different cognitive systems differ from the normative expectations, and his divergence is central to the novel's meaning.

Neurodivergence theory in literature is a relatively new and rapidly expanding field. The foundational work in this area emerges from disability studies, particularly the social model of disability that distinguishes between impairment (biological difference) and disability (socially constructed barriers). As Lennard J. Davis argues in *Enforcing Normalcy*, “the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person” (24). This theoretical stance is important for a neurodivergent approach to literature, because it involves a shift from the focus of a traditional reading on what is wrong with the character of the work to a focus on the ways in which social structures create conditions of exclusion and suffering. The neurodiversity paradigm, as stated by Singer and then expanded by other researchers such as Walker, Steve Silberman and Ralph James Savarese, believes that neurological differences are a natural variation of human beings. In literary studies specifically, the work of scholars such as Julia Miele Rodas, whose *Autistographies* examines autistic presence in literature, and Stuart Murray, whose *Representing Autism* traces cultural representations of autism spectrum conditions, has led to fruitful paths for rereading canonical texts. Rodas argues that “autistic characteristics can be found in a range of works within the literary canon, and many of the characters or narrators in these works have not been read through a disability or neurodivergence lens” (12). This observation is particularly pertinent to Desai’s novel, written decades before neurodivergence became a recognized critical category.

Furthermore, the concept of “neuroqueer” theory, expounded by Walker and Remi Yergeau, offers tools to analyse the way that neurodivergent subjects resist and subvert normative expectations not only of cognition but also of gender, sexuality, and social performance. Yergeau’s *Authoring Autism* counters this idea that autistic people lack rhetorical agency, arguing instead that their communicative practices represent alternative rhetorical strategies (6-8). This is particularly relevant to reading Raka’s silence and Nanda Kaul’s internal fabrications as forms of neurodivergent communication rather than deficits. Within the Indian literary context, South Asian literary criticism has largely overlooked neurodivergence discourse. Characters displaying neurodivergent traits in Indian English fiction are typically read through the lenses of cultural alienation, spiritual quest, or gendered oppression, but not as a category of neurological difference. This paper seeks to address this crucial gap.

Nanda Kaul: Masking, Burnout, and the Autistic Elder

Nanda Kaul, the central consciousness of the novel, is introduced in a state of radical solitude at Carignano, a house she has selected precisely for its isolation. Desai's description of Nanda Kaul's solitude is more than just a need for privacy or rest in old age. The opening pages create a character whose need for isolation is ontological rather than circumstantial one:

"Nanda Kaul was not merely old—she was grey, tall and bony, and she wore her old age like a crown, with great dignity and aplomb. She had wanted, she had desired, nothing else in life but this—to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, to have no one else to bother about" (3).

This reveals a lifelong desire for solitude that has only now, in old age, found its fulfilment. When read through a neurodivergence lens, this echoes what autism researchers describe as the experience of "autistic burnout"—a state of chronic exhaustion resulting from years of "masking" or "camouflaging" one's true neurological needs to conform to social expectations. Dora Raymaker et al. define autistic burnout as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports," characterized by "pervasive, long-term exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus" (132).

Nanda Kaul's entire adult life, as revealed through flashback, has been a performance of the roles expected of her: wife of a vice-chancellor, mother of numerous children, hostess of countless social gatherings. Desai makes clear that these roles were performed, not inhabited:

"She had had to do all this because she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife... She had been so busy, so busy, and so tired, always. She had run that big house as no one could, she told herself with pride, and now she wanted, she wanted—to be left alone." (Desai 30)

The repetition of "so busy" and the emphatic doubling of "she wanted, she wanted" suggest a lifetime of forced accommodation to neurotypical social demands. The concept of "masking" in autism studies refers to the suppression of autistic behaviors and the performance of neurotypical social engagement, a practice that is particularly prevalent among women and those assigned female at birth. Laura Hull et al. describe masking as involving "compensation strategies, such as learning and using social scripts, and assimilation strategies, such as forcing oneself to make eye contact" (2519). Nanda Kaul's decades of performing the role of the perfect hostess, devoted wife, and attentive mother constitute precisely such a sustained masking effort. Importantly, the novel makes it clear that Nanda Kaul's elaborate stories about her father—a story of a romantic and adventurous past—are just fabrications.

Desai writes:

“It was not the truth... She had not wanted any of it. She had wanted only to be alone, all her life, from the very beginning.” (Desai 145)

This revelation is crucial from a neurodivergence perspective. The construction of alternative narratives about oneself is a recognized feature of autistic experience, particularly among women who have spent lifetimes masking. As Bargiela et al. note in their study of late-diagnosed autistic women, many participants “created ‘personas’ or alternative versions of themselves to navigate social situations.” (3286) The same is true of Nanda Kaul’s fabricated past: it provides a socially legible narrative for her solitude, transforming neurologically motivated withdrawal into a romantic biographical choice.

Another important aspect of Nanda Kaul’s sensory experiences should also be noted. Throughout the novel she is more conscious of the world’s sounds, textures and environmental details, which occupational therapists and autism researchers refer to as “sensory processing sensitivity”. When the phone rings with news of Raka’s impending visit, her reaction is visceral and disproportionate: “With her lips tightened, she put down the phone and immediately thought of it as an intrusion, even an assault” (4). The use of the terms intrusive and assaultive, related to a family visit, reflects a nervous system that interprets social demands as real threats—a trait well documented in neurodivergent populations.

Raka: The Neurodivergent Child

Nanda Kaul is the neurodivergent elder, who lacks a respite from her life-long practice of masking, while her great-granddaughter Raka is the neurodivergent child yet to be fully socialized into compliance. Raka is perhaps the most overtly neurodivergent character in Desai’s oeuvre, and her portrayal is remarkably prescient of how autism spectrum presentation is understood in young girls today. Desai introduces the character of Raka as fundamentally other:

“Small, dark, sly, she seemed to Nanda Kaul like an insect—a praying mantis or some such thin, angular creature.” (Desai 38)

The comparison to an insect is important not merely as a description of physical appearance but an indicator of Raka’s perceived otherness—her failure to fit in the category of “normal child”. The animalization of neurodivergent individuals, as Murray notes, is a common thread in literary and cultural depictions of autism, reflecting neurotypical society’s inability to categorize individuals who do not conform to expected social behaviors (67).

The most notable feature of Raka is her near inaudible speech. She does not speak voluntarily, responds to questions with few words, and shows no interest in social interaction: “Raka didn’t say a word, even seemed deaf and went away to the edge They peer down in the ravine below knoll” (42). This behavior is what clinicians describe as selective mutism or the social communication impairment in autism spectrum conditions. Importantly, Raka’s silence is not presented as an inability to speak but as a choice—or, a way of being that is experienced as a choice only from the outside, by those who assume speech to be the default. As Yergeau argues, “silence is not always absence. Autistic silence can function as a mode of being, a form of communication, and a strategy of resistance” (Yergeau 45).

Raka’s relationship with the natural environment provides further evidence for a neurodivergence reading. While she shows little interest in human interaction, she demonstrates great interest in the natural world—the animals, insects, plants, and geological features of the Kasauli hillside: “She watched with the most intense absorption as a column of ants made their way up the trunk of a pine tree, carrying bits of food and dead insects with them.” (Desai 55)

A hallmark of autism spectrum conditions is this kind of hyper-focussed interest in specific subjects—what the clinical literature refers to as “restricted interests” or “special interests”. The neurodiversity paradigm however, takes a different approach to these interests because it sees them not as restricted but as deep— “representing a cognitive style characterized by intense focus and detailed attention rather than the broad, shallow attention that neurotypical social life demands” (Milton 883).

Raka's sensory relationship with the landscape deserves particular attention. Desai describes her engagement with the environment in terms that foreground sensory intensity:

“She loved the dry, cracked earth, the rocks, the sound of the crickets, the pine needles underfoot. She picked up stones, smelt them, put them down” (60). The act of smelling stones is deeply significant from a neurodivergence perspective. Sensory-seeking behavior—the active pursuit of specific sensory experiences, often through non-normative channels such as smelling objects, touching textures, or visually examining details at close range—is a well-documented feature of autism spectrum conditions. Bogdashina describes this as “a different sensory-perceptual system” rather than a deficit, noting that “autistic individuals often perceive the world through a different hierarchy of senses than non-autistic people” (42).

Raka's fascination with fire is the novel's most symbolically charged element, and it too acquires new significance through a neurodivergence reading. Her repeated interest in forest fires, her questions about them, and her ultimate act of setting fire to the hillside have been read variously as symbols of destructive femininity, revolutionary rage, or nihilistic impulse.

However, a neurodivergence reading suggests an alternative interpretation: fire is the ultimate sensory experience—visual, auditory, thermal, olfactory—and Raka's attraction to it may reflect the strong sensory-seeking tendencies of neurodivergent profiles. When she finally sets the fire, she describes it with a striking absence of emotional motivation: "I have set the forest on fire," she said in that flat, unexcited voice"(145).

The "flat, unexcited voice" is most important. Flat affect— One of the defining characteristics of autism spectrum conditions (ASC) is a lack of emotional expression in voice and body, which is often mistaken as indifference or sociopathy. As Happé and Frith note, "flat affect in autism does not indicate absence of emotion; rather, it reflects a difference in the expression of emotion" (1379). Raka's lack of emotional expression and emotional processing at this climax moment is not necessarily a sign of her lack of feeling, but rather a sign that she processes and expresses her emotions differently than is socially expected. The relationship between Raka and Nanda Kaul is itself illuminating from a neurodivergence perspective. Despite their initial mutual resistance to each other's presence, they develop a form of companionship characterized by parallel existence rather than active interaction: "They lived in the house together, Nanda Kaul and Raka, but separately, with great stretches of silence between them." (Desai 56) . This style of co-existence, an autistic counterpart to the neurotypical mode of social interaction, is often reported in autism literature as the way in which autistic people prefer to engage socially with others; they may find comfort in the presence of another person without engaging in the kind of verbal and emotional exchange demanded by a neurotypical relationship. (Crompton et al. 1965).

The recognition between Nanda Kaul and Raka—the elderly woman who has spent a lifetime hiding her need for solitude and the child who openly inhabits hers—constitutes a form of neurodivergent kinship.

Ila Das: Social Dysregulation and Neurodivergent Speech

Ila Das, the third central character, presents a different neurodivergent profile from Nanda Kaul and Raka. Where they are characterized by withdrawal and silence, Ila Das is marked by social excess—an inability to control her speech, behavior, and emotional expression according to social norms.

She is always described as ‘shrill’, ‘excessive’, and ‘uncontrolled’ in her speech: “Ila Das’s voice rose to a shriek, a kind of scream of excitement that made everyone wince” (Desai 120). This pattern of vocal dysregulation—speaking too loudly, too much, with inappropriate pitch and intensity—is associated with several neurodivergent conditions, including ADHD, certain presentations of autism, and prosodic differences. As Peppé et al. note, “differences in prosody—the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech—are among the most persistent communicative differences in autism and related conditions” (1015). Ila Das’s high-pitched, uncontrolled voice is not merely a comic or pathetic trait; but a real difference in the neurological control of speech output.

Moreover, Ila Das demonstrates a pattern of social behavior that suggests difficulty with what cognitive scientists term “social calibration”—the ability to adjust one’s behavior to match the expectations and comfort levels of others in a given social context. On an errand to Nanda Kaul, she fails to pick up on the social signals that her friend doesn’t want to be disturbed:

“She did not seem to notice that Nanda Kaul had not wanted her to come. She talked and talked, not seeing the expression on Nanda Kaul’s face.” (Desai 118).

This inability to read facial expressions and adjust behavior accordingly shows what Simon Baron-Cohen termed “mindblindness”—an inability to understand other people’s mental states (60). Although Baron-Cohen’s model has been criticized for its deficit perspective, the reality of his model, that is, genuine difficulty with attending to and interpreting social cues that most people take for granted, is clinically and experientially relevant. Ila Das’s social difficulties are not a failure of caring or attention but a difference in the way she processes things. Unfortunately, Ila Das’s neurodivergent social presentation makes her vulnerable. Because she cannot control her actions, she is socially isolated, and she does not realize what is dangerous in her surroundings, this results in her brutal assault and murder at the end of the novel. Desai describes the attack with devastating economy:

“She never saw the man who followed her through the dark. She never heard him.” (Desai 143)

From a neurodivergence perspective, this tragedy is a re-enactment of a pattern of violence, exploitation, and abuse that has been well documented by disability scholars and directly observed by neurodivergent people. As Hélène Brown notes, “people with cognitive and communicative differences are significantly more likely to experience violence than their neurotypical peers, in part because their differences make them less able to detect, avoid, or report danger” (147).

Ila Das's death is not merely a narrative event but a representation of the of neuro deadly effects of neurodivergent vulnerability in a hostile social environment.

The Landscape as Neurodivergent Sensorium

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the neurodivergence interpretation of *Fire on the Mountain* is the landscape of Kasauli itself. Desai's depiction of the environment is characterized by an extraordinary sensory richness that mirrors and externalizes the characters' neurodivergent sensory experiences. The landscape is not neutral, it is always experienced through a heightened sensorium: "The sun beat down on the rocks and earth and a kind of madness seemed to emanate from the cracked, dry landscape, a madness of heat and light and desperation." (Desai 15) The use of "madness" here is important, the landscape itself is described as being "neurodivergent", as exceeding the bounds of normative experience.

This pathetic fallacy, when read through a neurodivergence lens, reveals shows how far Desai's narrative perspective is filtered through sensory systems that process environmental stimuli with unusual intensity. The recurring motif of animals—jackals, eagles, langurs, snakes—functions similarly. They were seen by both Nanda Kaul and Raka with deep and prolonged contemplation; these beings are not human and, as such, are forms of consciousness free from the social pressures which torment the human characters. Temple Grandin has famously proposed that autistic cognition has some qualities in common with animal cognition, such as focus on sensory detail, pattern recognition, and an aversion to abstract social categorizations (6-7).

The characters' affinity with animals may thus represent a neurodivergent identification with non-social forms of consciousness. The house of Carignano itself serves as what we might term a "neurodivergent sanctuary"—a space organized around the sensory and social needs of its neurodivergent inhabitant. Nanda Kaul has arranged her life at Carignano to minimize sensory input, social demand, and unpredictability: "Everything was still. Everything was quiet. Everything was grey and dry and hushed." (Desai 3).

The repetition of everything and the piling up of adjectives qualifying senses is interesting. The words reduction—still, quiet, grey, dry, hushed—set up a tone which echo the low stimulation environments often desired by sensory sensitive people. It is not simply a description of a place but a description of a neurologically optimal environment for sensory-sensitive person.

Silence, Communication, and Neurodivergent Rhetoric

One of the most impactful aspects of the novel is how it makes use of the power of silence and speech. The three central characters represent three different relationships to language: Nanda Kaul's selective and performative speech, Raka's near-total silence, and Ila Das's unchecked speech. Together, they map a spectrum of communicative difference that resists the neurotypical assumption that speech is the natural, default mode of human communication. This communicative difference is enacted in Desai's prose style. The dialogue is often omitted, in favour of rich sensory detail, interior monologue, and imagistic details. Long passages proceed without any speech at all, creating a textual experience similar to the communicative environment of its neurodivergent characters. As Rodas states in her essay on autistic literary style, "autistic textuality is characterized by a preference for description over dialogue, for sensory detail over social interaction, and for pattern and repetition over linear narrative progression" (78). Desai's prose, with its hypnotic rhythms, its sensory saturation, and its resistance to conventional narrative momentum, displays many of these features. The moment of recognition between Nanda Kaul and Raka—when the elderly woman realizes that the child shares her own need for solitude—is communicated almost entirely without words:

"She saw that the child had her own world and she need not try to enter it. She would not have been able to enter it." (Desai 63)

This recognition of the other's impenetrable subjective reality is quite profound: forming a connection to what Damian Milton calls the "double empathy problem"—the recognition that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic individuals are mutual rather than one-directional (Milton 884). Nanda Kaul's realization that she "would not have been able to enter" Raka's world is not a failure but an honest acknowledgment of cognitive difference.

Trauma, Neurodivergence, and Intersectionality

Any neurodivergence reading of *Fire on the Mountain* must account for the role of trauma in the characters' experiences. Raka, it is implied, has witnessed domestic violence—her father's abuse of her mother: "She had seen things, that child, that no child should see." (Desai 70) The relationship between trauma and neurodivergence is complex and much-debated in contemporary clinical literature. Some scholars argue that trauma can produce neurodivergent-like symptoms (van der Kolk 152); others contend that neurodivergent individuals are disproportionately likely to experience trauma due to their heightened sensitivity and social vulnerability (Haruvi-Lamdan et al. 1487).

In Raka's case, it is likely that both dynamics are operative: her neurodivergent sensory sensitivity may have made the experience of witnessing violence particularly devastating, while the trauma itself may have intensified her withdrawal from social interaction. The intersectionality of gender and neurodivergence in the novel is equally significant. All three central characters are women whose neurodivergent characteristics have been shaped, suppressed, or punished by patriarchal social structures. Nanda Kaul's masking was demanded by her role as a vice-chancellor's wife; Ila Das's social difficulties made her vulnerable to male violence; Raka's silence is partly a response to patriarchal domestic violence. As Lai et al. note, "the intersection of gender and autism creates unique vulnerabilities, as women and girls on the autism spectrum face both the social demands of femininity and the challenges of neurodivergent cognition" (1081). Desai's novel, though written before this intersection was clinically articulated, captures it with extraordinary precision.

Conclusion

Reading Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* through the lens of neurodivergence does not replace existing interpretations but enriches and complicates them. The feminist reading remains essential: the novel is very much about the oppression of women in patriarchal Indian society. The existentialist interpretation is still relevant: the novel deeply engages with questions of solitude, meaning, and authenticity. These other approaches, however, only account for a part of the story—the neurodivergence reading adds a dimension that these other frameworks cannot fully capture—the aspect of neurological difference that shapes human experience. All these are true: Nanda Kaul's whole life of covering up and her final retreat to solitude; Raka's intense sensory engagement with the natural world and her resistance to social communication; Ila Das's vocal and social dysregulation and her tragic vulnerability—these are not merely metaphors for the condition of Indian women or the human condition at large. They are representations, however intuitive and pre-diagnostic, of neurodivergent subjectivity. Desai's genius lies in her ability to render these subjectivities from the inside, to create a prose style that enacts sensory intensity and communicative difference rather than merely describing them. The novel's final image—Raka's simple statement that she has set the forest on fire, delivered against the backdrop of Ila Das's murder—brings together the novel's neurodivergent themes in a moment of devastating convergence. The fire, with its overwhelming sensory totality, represents both the destructive potential of a world and the explosive release of subjectivities that have been compressed, suppressed, and denied. As the mountains burn, the novel's neurodivergent vision reaches its fullest expression: a world transformed by a different way of perceiving, a different way of being in the world.

On a larger scale, the theory of neurodivergence provides ample opportunities for rereading Indian English fiction where characters who are socially withdrawn, sensitively hyperactive and communicatively differently are common. Indian English literature is waiting for critical recognition of the neurodivergent subjects. This analysis could be extended to other works in Desai's oeuvre in future, such as *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) with its protagonist's highly sensitized and psychologically split world, and Baumgartner's *Bombay* (1988) that portrays social alienation and obsessive routine.

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