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## Search for Identity: A Study of Female Characters in Anita Desai's

### *Fire on the Mountain*

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#### Abstract

The three leading female characters in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*(1977) are searching for their identity till the end of the novel. All of them are victims of various kinds. Nanda, though not a victim of direct physical violence, has certainly been a victim of her husband's indifference and of the family that has taken her for granted all her long life. Due to which she has finally decided to live a lonely life in Carignano. Ila Das in her own way for searching for her identity becomes the most obvious victim of violence in her own death by murder. Raka though a child searches for her identity due to the brutal and indifferent nature of her parents. She is a victim of the world of her parents that she is born to. But she is the one female character in the novel who is aware of the violence and finally get s the solution by setting the forest in fire.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Interconnectedness, Victimization, Nature

*“Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth- the truth that is, nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one- tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.” (P-348)* This is precisely what Anita Desai has tried to focus in all her novels, especially in her *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). As one can clearly point out the main themes in *Fire on the Mountain* are less of identity, escapism and a sense of the meaninglessness of life. This article puts the stress on identity crisis of the female characters of the novel.

Desai follows a triptyche structure also in *Fire on the Mountain*. Part-I of the novel, “Nanda Kaul at Carignano”, describes Nanda Kaul’s life of a ‘recluse’ in Carignano where she does not want anybody to interrupt her privacy. In Part-II, “Raka comes to Carignano”, Desai depicts Raka’s arrival and its impact on Nanda while Part-III, “Ila das leaves Carignano” depicts the violent rape and murder of Ila Das and the breakdown of Nanda Kaul’s make believe world.

*Fire on the Mountain* orbits around three women characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, their interconnectedness with nature, their victimization and the equal oppression of nature. The novel depicts the darker shades of nature and highlights its alliance to the darker aspects of the women concerned. Thus, this novel makes it clear that ecological issues are connected to women and non-human species. The three protagonists Desai created in her novel are trapped in dualistic pattern in which man symbolizes brutality, domination, fear and hate, arrogance and power, while woman and nature in every aspect of life are victims.

*Fire on the Mountain* exposes various forms of exploitation of both woman and nature. As regards the victimization of women, the narrative represents a discourse on violence that centers on the lives on the three women who are victims, either physically or

mentally of the patriarchal system. Nanda Kaul, a widowed great-grandmother, is a victim of her role as a dutiful wife to an unfaithful husband and as a mother of many children. Raka, her exclusive, withdrawn great-grandchild, is the victim of an abusive father. Ila Das, Nanda's childhood friend, unmarried and the victim of her selfish brothers and her own reformist idealism. In the words of BR Nagpal :

*“The women protagonists are portrayed as victims of an aberrant urban milieu, patriarchal family structures and bourgeoisie, bureaucratic, imperialistic, colonized, social scenario. It is in this context that the characters are in a state of revolt, despondency, morbidity and are driven to grapple with duality, fragmentation.” (p-49)*

*Fire on the Mountain* is the story of Nanda Kaul, the mother of many children and widow of an unfaithful man. As the vice-chancellor's wife and the center of a large family Nanda spends a life of duties and responsibilities ordering about “too many guests” and tending “so many children” . She has spent her life in a whirlpool of activities, draped in silk and presiding over table, caring for others and has managed to seem like the “ *still, fixed eye in the center of whirlpool of activities*” (p-24). But now she has become useless, “ *still and empty*” (p-19). Her mind going back frequently to that period of life full of activities, the vividness of her memory, even that of a cane chair she used to sit on, belies her claim: “*She had been so glad when it was over*” (p-32). And when she says “ *It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought struck...*” (p-33), it delimits a key psychic situation, her resentment towards her callous, selfish children who neither acknowledged nor reciprocated her labor nor her sacrifice. She now feels their memory is like a gorge, cluttered with heads. Hence, her memory now is more about her duties, her almost regal stature, than about her love and affection. She hardly ever recollects the husband but for his gestures, as the way he used to “*plait his fingers across his stomach and slip heavy lids down over his eyes*” (p-23) whenever Ila Das used to come to their house.

But after the death of her husband, and the children's departure to their respective places of work, she is "*left to the pines and cicadas alone*" (p-3) at Carignano. She gloatingly claims: "*It seemed as exactly right as a house for her... How could it ever have belonged to anyone else? What could it possibly have been like before Nanda Kaul came to it?*" (p- 5-6).

The novel opens when Nanda Kaul taking a stroll through the pine trees sees the postman and feels irritated at the intrusion. She has revealed the sparseness of this sequestered house. But unknown to her this house, Carignano, is witness to the jinxed past of some earlier residents. The military officer, who built the house, lived there a sad, lonely life, his sickly wife and all seven children dying before him. All latter occupants met with a similar sad, troubled or unfortunate end. Irony thus becomes an effective structural design in projecting Nanda Kaul's lonely and dreary life and her troubled psyche. Raka's arrival at Carignano adds to her woes.

Raka of *Fire on the Mountain* is perhaps the most complicated and mysterious child character in the entire gamut of Indian English fiction. She presents an intriguing picture to the readers by her unusual behavior. Her great-grandmother Nanda Kaul, describes her like "*one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, or thin, precarious legs*" (P-39). Raka's "*Extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes*" (p-39) make Nanda Kaul feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect. Besides, she has "*large and protruding ears*" (P-40). Raka does everything so silently and secretly that Nanda cannot discover what she does with herself all day long. She finds out that "*The child had a gift for disappearing- suddenly, silently. She would be gone, totally, not return for hours*" (p-45). She returns with her brown legs scratched, her knees bruised, sucking a finger stung by nettles. Her eyes look very still and thoughtful as if "*She had visited strange lands and seen fantastic improbable things she lingered in the mind*" (p-46). Sometimes she emerges from the dark "*like a soundless moth*" (p-46).

Raka has gift of avoiding what she regards as dispensable. Gradually, Nanda finds Raka to be *“the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment”* (p-47). Like her, Raka does not love company: *“She had not a dog’s slavishness to companionship”* (p-56). She out rightly rejects *“the very thought of school, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience”* (p-59). She has a non- conformist and detached self. With her undemanding nature and independent existence, Raka leaves Nanda wondering what an extraordinary child she is. No normal child will be like Raka. She *“was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs”*.(p-47) Childhood is a formative period when a person has intrinsic desires for spiritual health. Raka’s parents have no time or inclination to fulfill her emotional needs. Her mother Tara is in such an unhappy predicament that she cannot do anything to help Raka. Her shattered mental equilibrium and deteriorating physical strength render her helpless. Her father has not time to look after her well-being. As a result of which, unlike any normal children, she is not interested in stories about people or about any relation. So when she moves about in Carignano, she does not feel home-sick. This strange attachment on Raka’s part to the place may be interpreted as her way of forgetting all the suffering associated with her home and parents. *“Her traumatic childhood”* says Santa Krishna Swamy, *“has hardened her into a hard little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now recovering from a bout of typhoid, her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting”* (Swamy-273).She dares to such places where no ordinary persons dare to go. She is attracted to a land *“where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in grey”* (p-90). What attracts Raka will be frightening enough to any normal child.

Ila Das is described in the third section of the novel as the victim of the assault of some school boys, who in the end take her umbrella and crash and kick it till it is stuck among the railings of the fence which runs along the road. Ila Das has a hard life, though in a different way, made as it is of privations and poverty, nevertheless she still cares for the social problems which continue to plague India. On the contrary, Nanda Kaul has never experienced such an engagement, she smolders her rage within herself and her retirement. Ila Das still fight against local superstitious priests, who deny the children the possibility to be treated in hospitals, and let them die. Furthermore Ila Das is conscious o the role of women in the process of modernization that India is undergoing after Independence. Nanda Kaul's recommendation to her friend not to preach against the priest, and the grain seller's reproach not to go out at night alone are just anticipations of what is going to happen. Ila Das falls victim of the ambush and rage of Preet Singh, who wants to marry his seven years old daughter to a widowed man, and does not accept Ila Das's intrusion in that matter. Ila's sacrificial death and rape catches the by surprise as a signal of blind violence that happen every day in every corner of India.

The death of Ila Das is announced as was her arrival: by a phone call, from the police station. In this sudden and incredible revelation, Nanda Kaul breaks down and becomes conscious of all the lies she told herself and Raka of a happy life with her father and husband. The novel ends abruptly with Raka putting the forest on fire and coming to Nanda Kaul, *"Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look Nani look the forest is on fire".(p-145)* *"Tapping, then drumming, she raised her voice, to look in and saw Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling" (p-159).* This surrealistic vision brings with it its own sadness and horror of Nanda Kaul's existence although there is a thin silver lining. The reader also can mark that in the end of the novel Raka calls Nanda as "Nani" , though she is not able to respond. In this way all the three

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prominent lady characters of the novel search for their identity very sincerely which attract every reader to read the novel again and again.

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