

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: Divulgence of Characters

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Abstract

British Guardian Prize winner and thrice nominated for Booker Prize, famous Indian novelist writing in English Anita Desai's Sahitya Academy Award winning one of the masterpieces *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977. The book focuses on an elderly widow's isolation and loneliness as it tells the story of Nanda Kaul who lives in Kasauli and leads a solitary existence. The old lady, Nanda lives alone in a colonial house on a slope. She gives nobody a chance to interfere with her secluded life. She had spent numerous years thinking about her husband, their kids, and numerous grandkids. She has turned into a loner and remains confined from everybody including an incredible grandkid. This is her circumstance until the point that the colossal grandkid touches base on her doorstep. Raka, a young girl who is wiped out and is as withdrawn as Nanda. The child lives in her very own kind of disconnection as she withdraws into a universe of inward dream where she makes undertakings of pursuing snakes, creatures, and phantoms in the serene slopes that encompass her and her incredible grandma. The old lady sees that both of them share things for all intents and purpose however that a noteworthy distinction exists also. Nanda has been a solitary person while the young lady was naturally introduced to that sort of presence. Nanda gradually starts to need to be a

piece of the kid's life and needs to impart her reality to her. Her endeavours, be that as it may, seem, by all accounts, to be futile. Her awesome granddaughter will give nobody a chance to enter her life. Nanda is not debilitated and endeavours to associate with the child by imparting stories to her. Anita Desai talks of her writing as simply 'stories,' and of herself as a 'storyteller'. In this very simple way she has beautifully painted the female characters and their sufferings in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* which is the focused area of this research article.

Key Words: Indian Women, Loneliness, Isolation, Marriage, Relationship, Suffering, Grief

The title of the novel *Fire and Mountain* symbolises fire which burns in the heart of Nanda Kaul whose married life was nothing but a role of an ideal hostess to her vice-chancellor husband and caring mother to her children born out of a loveless marriage and a good grandmother to her innumerable grand children. Critic Ramesh Kumar Gupta very rightly says in his critical treatise "Trauma of a Housewife: Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*",

"Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* presents a study of trauma of a house wife, a trauma that takes refuge in seclusion." (p.106)

Her chosen isolation is actually tending of a deep wound in her heart caused by her husband's lifelong unfaithfulness. She has selected this dismissal from all human relationships after passing through psychic sufferings and bitter experiences of a hypocritical nuptial life. This marriage has been based on lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr. Kaul. Her husband never showed an iota of conjugal admiration which must be exhibited reciprocally in between a husband and wife. Rather he regarded her not even as the mother of his children but an excellent hostess of all the parties he held inviting maximum number of ladies guests. She is projected initially in the novel as a polished, self-controlled and

authoritative lady, having discharged her duty unflinchingly. But she had been struggling all the time in search of privacy and peaceful hour for herself since the beginning of the novel. She enjoyed the comfort and social status of a vice-chancellor's wife undoubtedly but without any meaning and purpose of wifhood and motherhood. Externally everything appears smooth and pleasant but internally Nanda Kaul was burning with frustration and suppressed emotions. Nanda Kaul suffers in silence and only the voice of silence; her inner-self keeps a conversation between them. Nanda Kaul dies quietly and her voice of silence is never heard and becomes ever silent at her death.

The most painful thing to the core of her being was her husband's illegitimate relationship with Miss Davidson, a member of his teaching staff. He invites her to badminton parties and compels her to spend the night in his home. Nanda never becomes hysterical and picks up quarrel with him. She maintains an iced up smile on her face and continues with her hostess act unperturbed. No one suspects burning fire in her, a blaze of intense hatred for her husband. Although Nanda got freedom from her husband and bondage of motherhood after his death, actually she was not free nurturing an injured ego mostly in her early life. She does not know how to forgive and forget remaining a prisoner to her memories. Raka arrives. She watches Nanda with great curiosity wondering what her life with her great grandmother is going to be like.

Raka, though a child appears to be a born recluse, she is a silent girl who does not like human company and throughout the novel she speaks only very few words. Raka is the daughter of an ill matched couple and had been a witness to the brutality of her drunken father towards her mother. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmare. Inadequate parental care and callousness have made Raka's life perverted. She feels insecure and lonely and yet wishes to be left alone with nature. She is attracted to Kasauli because of its ravaged,

destroyed and barren places. When she comes to her grandmother's house also, she knows that she is all unwelcome guests.

Fire on the Mountain also presents the real status of women in India. Whether a widow like Nanda Kaul, well reputed and economically independent or an ill-placed and poverty stricken bachelor like Illa Das or a girl child like Raka, all the three lead a miserable life. Nanda has been made dejected by an indifferent, disloyal husband. Illa Das has been made miserable by her irresponsible brothers who never care whether she is alive or dead and Raka, a little girl has been made despondent by the disharmony of her drunken father and helpless ailing mother. These three represent various stages of womanhood. The torment they carry within themselves is fermented by atrocious males. They are leading lives which is abnormal and in no way is their natural way of life. Through these women the novelist has put question marks on the status of women in contemporary society where marital, filial and communal relations have almost lost their true sense and women are fated to live stunted lives.

There are three sections of the novel *Fire on the Mountain*, each further divided into several short chapters of unequal length. The first section titled "Nanda Kaul at Carignano" runs into ten chapters. This section deals with Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist's lonely life in Kasauli. "Raka Comes to Carignano" forms the second section and continues next twenty one chapters. It portrays Nanda Kaul's change of attitude towards Raka, her great grandmother. The final section "Illa Das Leaves Carignano" is divided into thirteen chapters. This section presents the tragic end of Illa Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. The structural unity, as suggested by the section captions is offered by Carignano, Nanda Kaul and Raka, running counter to one another complemented by that of Illa Das also provide unity of structure. Like the other works of Anita Desai, the present novel contains neither any story value nor events that are interesting by themselves. The entire novel revolves round the

existential angst experienced by the women protagonists. In this novel, the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except the tragic end. The story revolves round the inner lives of the two female protagonists, Nanda Kaul and Raka. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul was living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She was leading a life of isolation and introspection. She shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver letter is frowned upon by her. But this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano to get better after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. But as days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself drawn towards Raka, something she has not expected. But the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude.

Illa das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka. A onetime lecture in the Punjab University, Illa lost her job subsequent to Mr. Kaul's retirement. She came to Kasauli now in her new capacity as an officer in the social welfare department. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice. This invites the wrath of many of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one. His attempts to trade his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and a few goats have been successfully thwarted by Illa Das. He is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening, when Illa returned from Carignano to her humble house in the valleys, he waylays her, rapes and murders her. When the news of Illa's death was conveyed to Nanda over telephone, she was shocked and succumbed to heart attack. Raka was unaware of her great grandmother's death rushed into the house proclaiming widely that she has set the forest of the fire. Nanda Kaul, Raka and to some extent Illa Das, are embodiment of the existential predicament experienced by the individual in an un-understanding and even hostile universe. A detailed examination of

the characters of these protagonists bring to light how Anita Desai has succeeded in giving expression to her existentialist world-view through the characters.

Anita Desai has tried to probe into the female psyche of modern woman who enters into the conflict of the traditional and newly acquired values and feels alienated from the male dominated world. Anita Desai has shown wives suffering from boredom, loneliness and portrayed their sensitive nature in tragic light. Her male characters are more practical where as female characters possess highly emotional sensitivity. Their temperamental differences lead to alienation which is the main theme in her love novels. Her novels are full of autobiographical elements. In this novel, we find female characters Nanda, Raka and Ila are also alienated characters. Here Anita Desai portrays inter-relations and difference of three alienated characters. All the three characters are victims of emotional alienation and crave for privacy, isolation and fantasy to escape from unpleasant reality of life.

Nanda is presented as a very pathetic character who has a tendency to look back and regret, Raka on the other hand is terrified of the past, present and future. Ila Das is depicted as a foil to Nanda, both of them share same kind of predicament. They do not succeed in lending any authenticity to their existence. In the end all the three characters choose their value systems to guard themselves from reality. Mostly she portrays world of a dissatisfied woman who is a lonely protagonist. She challenges the prevalent version of Indian women stereotype by subverting their quest for fulfilment with an intense dissatisfaction with family system hence a resultant unsatisfied ego. Desai's women are mostly in self search and in search of fulfilment of the emptiness which she feels even in ties between parents, siblings, friends and yet incomplete. Landscape becomes a resort to such dissatisfaction.

The story, plot construction etc. of the novel are not our concern here. This paper's main concern is the dialogue of the verse which reflects the feminine aspect of the writers

thinking. Her stories are not as complex as her woman protagonist characters. The essay's focus here is to look at the eccentric looking female protagonists, Desai has created a feminist discourse of literary writings showing signs of a seething discontentment, hatred for the patriarchal norms of "civilized" human existence, aspiration from liberation from societal and traditional family norms made compulsory for her acceptable existence in main stream male dominated society. Her female characters are mostly in search of self authenticity, independent of the identity that has been dumped on her. Desai however has a typical style of her own to register protest against patriarchal norms. These may not be to the liking of many. Any hard core feminist may be restless or even be dismissive of Desai's writings citing that her characters are hopeless and helpless before male hegemony and conforming to the expectations of the mainstream or rather "male stream" norms laid for an "ideal woman." Anita Desai is a woman interested in feelings, in what people experience within the family bubble. Her novels do not present many actions and adventures, but the author portrays Indian lives and social structures. She denounces the flaws of Indian society by bringing into light the pressures of everyday life.

Indian society has always had strict rules. The pressures created by these rules are huge and directly acts upon the individual, sometimes leading to isolation, and even alienation. We will begin our study of Desai's fiction with an analysis of how Indian society relentlessly attempts to 'mould' individuals, shaping them in its own image. Woman and children are the main victims because they are vulnerable figures with very small importance in the family circle. They are enclosed in a patriarchal society. The family has a great role to play in the creation of isolation.

Marriage is one of the main social conventions in India, but hypocrisy is the key word which rules in Desai's novels. Marriages are rooted in the Indian traditions, they are arranged by the family and the people concerned have no choice. Social pressure and rules lead to the

failure of marriages but since divorce is not allowed, people still have to live with each other. As a consequence, the characters experience alienation and the children are subjected to terrible pressure, generally has its roots in failed marriages. Let us take the case of woman, they cannot find fulfilment in marriage.

The modern woman lives in a society dominated by men and marriage frequently brings destruction of the wife's individual personality. There can be an incompatibility of personalities. In "Fire on the Mountain" we find Nanda Kaul who is imprisoned in her home by the burden of responsibilities and the society pressure. She has been broken by her husband's affairs with a mere teaching faculty in his institution, Ms. David; an affair which lasted all his life, sending Nanda back to her own existential void and lack of love. This fed her bitterness. Her husband had been to drop some of the guests at their home; she corrected herself with asperity, one of the guests. She watched him go up the veranda steps, puffing at his cigar, and smelt the rich tobacco. She had stood still in the shadow, flung by the loquat tree in the corner of the lawn. She had not moved, not made a sound. She had watched him across the veranda, went into the drawing room and waited till the light there went out and another came on in the bedroom that had been only a small dressing room till she had had his bed put there. Then she placed the lawn again, slower and slower. This quote, the isolation of Nanda is obvious, she only sees her husband walking away from her, she is distant from him as well as love is distant from marriage. Nanda is a spectator of this failure but she ignores everything for the sake of pride. This pride creates a resentfulness which affects her children who cannot perceive her as a good and loving mother. Her nature is undecipherable to them.

Her great-grandchild, Raka embodies her parents' failed marriage being wild, silent and enclosed in her own world and pain. What we commonly call a home, that is to say a building has very different meanings for Raka since she feels at home in the wilderness, in the open space of nature. The building does not have the function of a home to her. *Fire on*

the Mountain can be defined as belonging to a phase of writing which explores the painful existential problems of Indian woman trapped by society. Women are psychologically and socially dislocated because of the Indian home and it leads to a fight to be freed. India is challenge for women because stereotypes about them are present in legends, myths and religion. They are part of the culture, for instance the Law of Manu, “her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age ; a woman is never fit for independence.” So the female characters at home are ‘imprisoned’ as example Nanda Kaul for whom tradition was a real burden to her but she accepted confinement and domesticity because she could not choose at that moment to be an outcast. She fought to change this prison into a private space but she achieved it only through loneliness. Domestic life is composed of repressed chaos and frustration overhung by furious uproar of activities quoted by Nandan and Jyoti, “a challenge to third world womens’ status as other in fasting and feasting.”

Home is often a prison where the characters cannot develop their identity which is already fragile and they are crushed everyday and where they lose their individuality bit by bit. “Being at ‘home’ means searching for an adult accommodation to the ineluctable condition of imprisonment.” In this novel Nanda reveals her need for a masculine figure, telling Raka stories of her childhood; as a woman she has always been dependent on men, they are linked to security or attachment and without them the self is dislocated. Nanda tries to link home and security with the memory of her father.

The stories she tells are about her, bringing home animals from foreign countries: “He would feed them himself. They loved fish. We used to catch fish in the stream for them, but we never dared feed them ourselves they had such sudden vicious claws.” But Raka seemed not to enjoy the picture of the caged animals devouring the fish.” Raka seems free, she is not interested and she is opposed to the two other female characters being wilder and being a

child. Home is a prison to her and she feels at home in nature, so home is not a place of protection and love and security; all these roles are subverted. Home is a recurrent pattern, strengthened by the titles of the parts, “Each character of the trio evoked, linked to the place Carignano, so to Nanda’s home. There is a progression from a static state to movement.”

Each of the characters hopes in a way to find a home in this place but fails. The three women are dislocated from their true home, even Ila (Nanda’s friend) who has to work hard to survive and lives in great poverty. The place of women is at home but home is not where they are happy and well-adjusted. Women in Desai’s work are “confined within the cyclic parameters of house-womb-tomb.”

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