

ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

*The role of woman is significant in the human world from the ancient time not only as a human being but also as an inseparable entity to take the mankind ahead with the time. The woman represents the symbol of nurture. She contributes to make progress in the family, society as well as country through her active participation same as the male counterpart. But woman is suppressed into lower status compared to the male power and position in the society intentionally, even after her great contribution in reality. The evidence can be found in the portrayal of woman in the literatures from the different cultures. How does the patriarchal society suppress the woman? How is the patriarchal ideology dominating the grand-narrative as well as molding the notion of woman's psychology? In what ways, the voice of woman is controlled and represented with manipulative hegemony in unconstructive words? How is the woman fighting against the psychic violence to construct herself? Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes* echo those thought provoking questions with ravenous eyes to discover the real female subject. Both writers exhibit the woman's situation, emotion and realization which are scrutinized to observe the universality of female psyche.*

Keywords: *Carving, Torment, Welfare, Unconditional, Turbulence, Protagonist, etc.*

Introduction:

Anita Desai's real concern is the exploration of the human psyche. Desai's treatment of women characters and her comments about them also indicate that feminist analyses of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and colonialism. Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices "the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments" (Prasad, 139). A woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Indian novelist and short story writer especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. Her novels create evocative and deeply moving narratives of individual lives caught in the throes of socio-cultural and existential dilemma.

The helplessness and fallibility of Human beings form bedrock of her existentialist approach to work. In the novel "fire on the Mountain" Anita Desai brings forth the existential angst and the utter fatalism as reflected in the marginal and challenged life of the protagonist, Nandu Kaul. Ila Das comes to personify the plight of hapless women whose lives are torn asunder under the unbearable weight of internecine conflict and tragic eventualities. The novel espouses the universal human struggle for survival, especially in the face of a never ending spiral of human failures and misfortunes 'Fire on the Mountain' deals with the elegiac life of the main protagonist in the early part, which later enjoined by Raka's character coming on to the scene.

Root of Alienation Commences at Childhood:

Alienation is present in school, work, and other settings in life, and is experienced by many people around the world. It is defined as the state of being an outsider or the feeling of being isolated from society. In most of the novels of Anita Desai the pearl of the character of alienation do exists in almost all the jewels of the novel. The special glow for this pearl of alienation is given by the author in the novel than all the other gems of the characters in the novel. She highlights the inner realities of personalities exhibiting alienation.

Fire on the Mountain falls into three sections, 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.

Married Life of Nanda Kaul:

Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She is leading a life of isolation and introspection. She shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. The novel begins with the incident of Nanda Kaul standing all alone under a tall pine tree in Carignano.

The description of Nanda Kaul by the author reveals that in spite of her age she is elegant, graceful and a kind of beauty gleams in her. She was introduced as a lady who has withdrawn herself from the clutches of all duties and responsibilities. She has distanced herself from busy plains, chained love of her members of the family, blaming society and she relishes and rejoices the loneliness.

Embracing Isolation in Silence:

She feels happy to live in company with silence and nature. She enjoys the moments of the gentle breeze embracing her. She knits her thoughts with loneliness and silence. It is right to express that the thoughts merge with isolation and silence to make these magical moments memorable. The author focuses on the nature and psychology of the protagonist through the description of the landscape. The landscape is used to reflect symbolically the mindscape of Nanda Kaul. This reveals that the author has used the effective technique of using nature to represent symbolism and imagery of characters. She is determined to be lonely and she gets irritated if her isolation gets disturbed by the arrival of the postman or the maid.

Her Oneness with Nature:

She receives the letter and sits in shaded cool veranda of carignano in her accustomed posture in her old cane chair with a letter on her lap. She looks at the view of the hills unconsciously without the intention of opening or reading a letter. The readers get a glimpse of serene view of the hilltops through the eyes of Nand Kaul. She watches the birds fighting and playing with one another. She heeds to the sounds of the birds and fluttering of the wings and remains thoughtful. The rustling of leaves for the gentle breeze that flows creates a poignant feeling in her. Even the sight of a butterfly distracts her from viewing the hills imply of her strong inclination with oneness with silence and her strong setting of her mind to become one with isolation. This distraction reminds her of the unfolded letter on her lap. She comes to know her granddaughter is on her way to Kasauli. She is annoyed and disappointed at knowing the arrival of her granddaughter. Her enjoyment in living a secluded life gets shattered by the arrival of her granddaughter. She feels her life at old age is guarded by her privacy and seclusion. The stillness and calmness present in the Carignano finds no place when an intruder comes to her house. The author reveals the root of her past life which resulted in a craze for her secluded life in Kasauli.

Her memories of past unpleasant, unhappy, burdened tasks are unfolded from her painful memory. She was busy all the time with thankless and endless household work. The memories go in ripple to recall the busy life which she had in those days. Sewing, sweeping, cleaning, supervising cooking, issuing instructions to the servants, taking care of three children, receiving the husband's guests, streams of visitors and bearing with their unshameful flattery. Recollection of her past brings her no sweet memories but only the painful memories of child bearing, many confinements and endless child rearing along with all sorts of annoyance, exhaustion, humiliation and the compulsion of keeping the posture in spite of all the exacting demands and her husband wanted to appear elegant before the guests. We could clearly understand her frustration, and feeling of emptiness and vacuum of

fulfilment in her life. Her life as the wife of Vice Chancellor was meaningless and unsatisfactory. To the outer world she enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary but deep down she felt lonely and neglected. She was dutiful wife attending to the needs of her husband and the children. But the relationship between the husband and wife was unhappy.

Although her busy schedule lacked warmth and understanding, she carried on because of her obligations to her husband and children. Her extra martial affair with Miss David was one of the reasons for their unhappy bonding of married life. Emotional deprivation is at the root of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. Her husband did not love her as a wife and treated her as a tool needed for the efficient running of his household. Her husband's frequent visits to Ms. David troubled her which could have been the reason for her disillusionment. She had been a silent victim undergoing the pain, stress even after knowing the illegal relationship. She had been under a complete control in the hands of her husband. The author has clearly sketched the traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul. The life of Nanda Kaul represents Indian women on a whole who live their life for the children, husband, family and the society. Therefore their wishes, desires, talents are buried deeply in the hearts of the women. Their desires are buried along with them.

Their wishes are not revealed to others unless they are brought by these authors who can scan the minds and hearts of the women in different perspectives and in different situations. Anita Desai is the best reader of thoughts of women. She vividly captures the hidden tear in the corner of the eyes of the women and the pen of the character which has drawn the tear in the eyes of the women. She plunges in the hearts of the protagonists and clearly captures the emotions and sentiments going on in their minds. So she decides to settle in a calm place as she is released from the shackles of endless duties after so many years. Once again she is again called for caring, comforting and communicating with another human. The news of the arrival of the granddaughter upsets her. Her life at Carignano can be rightly compared to the surface of the river which is very clear and it reflects isolation. The arrival of the granddaughter is like a stone thrown on the surface of river where her isolation is disturbed forming ripples. Here the author introduces another character, Raka who prefer to live a deserted life. Psychological experiment of the writer in the novel can also be seen on the portrayal of Raka's character. Psychologists attach great significance to the parent-child relationship, because, according to them the patterning of emotion takes place particularly during childhood.

They argue that the prevailing quality of the experience the child has with his parents particularly the mother during early childhood is of paramount importance. Childhood is the most formative period of one's personality and socialization of the child begin in the family in the company of his parents who are the first individuals with whom the child interacts. Child learns the patterns of behavior which the parents set out to teach him in order to make him an acceptable member of the society. The emotion of the child depends largely on the quality of the emotional interaction that prevails between the child and his parents.

Arrival of Raka:

Anita Desai strongly believes that childhood impressions shape the personality and attitude of the individual, but through this novel she has carefully knit the plot to state that "even adult life contains many traumatic experiences". The inordinate desire for isolation and oneness with silence is due to the unhappy and unhealthy relationship between her and husband. The news of the arrival of Raka reminds of her unhappy waves in her past sea of life where she was very busy like the waves in the sea where she was forced by her husband and children.

If Nanda Kaul symbolizes a particular aspect of existentialism, Raka epitomizes another aspect of the existential predicament: the influence of her parents on her life. Anita Desai makes Raka both young temperamentally and solitude-loving. When the characteristics of Raka is said to be different in the way that she never likes to have a glimpse at the bunch of the flowers or play with the companions of her age, the readers read the mind and psyche of her that there is something bizarre about her. Through several interior monologues enacted in Raka's subconscious mind, the reason for the abnormality in her is unfolded. The daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka has been subjected to the brutality and futility of human existence. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmarish nights that have made her almost a child-stoic. During the narration of her past story we feel pity for her unhappy childhood and our hearts melt imagining the sufferings and pains which she could have undergone as a child in silence.

The author has portrayed the psyche of many children who live under these circumstances in the world through this character in the novel. When they live in the circumstances, their mind, attitude and approach undergoes a strange change which is reflected not for a particular period in their life but throughout their life. Compared to the boys generally the girls are affected a lot where the boys' pain and sufferings get diluted when they go out and play out and they are exposed to the outer world for a long period of time than the girls. The jackals are symbols of the mystery of life and Raka's walk to the Monkey Point is symbolic of her search for something unknown, yet inevitable and indispensable. Not all children would dare to brave the rough terrains of the ravines and impending menace of the jackals.

Ila Das, Childhood Friend of Nanda Kaul:

Ila Das is the third female protagonist of the novel. Unlike Nanda Kaul and Raka who are central to the story, her role is only marginal. Nonetheless, Anita Desai has projected yet another aspect of the existentialist philosophy through her character. There is another depiction of human being in this world who is at the peak of miser and meaningless existence. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka. A onetime lecture in the Punjab University, Ila Das had lost her job subsequent to Mr. Kaul's retirement. She has been appointed 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 barter his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and a few goats have been successfully thwarted by Ila Das. He is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening, when Ila Das returns late from Carignano to her humble house in the valleys, he waylays her, rapes and murders her. When the news of Ila Das's death is conveyed to Nanda Kaul over the phone, she is rudely shocked and falls dead. Raka unaware of her great grandmother's death rushes into the house proclaiming wildly that she has set the forest of fire.

Anita Desai has added a new dimension by writing a novel like *Fire on the mountain* to the Indian fiction in English probing deep into the fathomless pit of human psyche; she brings the hidden contours into much sharper focus. The charm of her art lies in her characters, independent, agonized frustrated and combating with angry defense. She has carved an important place for herself in Indo-English fiction writings by making the readers visualize the exact thoughts flowing in the minds of protagonists. She vividly focuses the inner world that exists in each person which reflects the essence of sheer, unpolluted, unadulterated reality. Her camera of the eyes captures the mental state of the protagonists where the accurate visions, thoughts, plans that go alive in the hearts and minds of the protagonists are clearly recorded in the plot.

In a way she has presented the potentials of the post independent writers in English. It is true that Desai has her limits but she compensates her material in intensity what she lacks in variety. Desai's unquestionable existential and psychological concerns have distinguished her from other novelists of her generation. The peculiar characteristics to be noted in the author are that the way she unravels the subconscious of her highly sensitive protagonists.

The Voice of Silence:

Silence, deep within oneself, born out of a peace of mind is the most precious gift of God could have given to man. This silence is the silence of the Universe, where the invisible makes her visible. This silence of the universe, echoed in the heart of man is the dwelling place of God. In this silence man hears God whispering and God listens to Man's whispered prayers. In Anita Desai's novels, some of the protagonists, especially women apparently live in a wall of silence: but deep within, a scream of anger, frustration at the way life has treated them and protest at the disillusionment life has doled out to them goes on and on. This scream is the voice of silence of the anguish of the protagonists which will die only when they die. This is very much true of Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha of *Voices in the City* and Nanda Kaul of *Fire on the Mountain*.

It has been said that *Fire on the Mountain* is plays skilful dramatization of experiences of women embroiled by the cross way of life" (Choudary, 77). The novel presents the existential angst of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul. She is an old lady, living in isolation. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. Nanda lives in Carignano, all alone by herself with just the cook Ram Lal to help her. She shuns all human company. She finds even the arrival of the postman to deliver an occasional letter proves an unbearable intrusion into her privacy. But this

self-willed isolation does not last long. A letter arrives, informing of the arrival of Raka, her young great granddaughter, who is arriving to convalesce after an attack of typhoid. Raka also is a recluse, as silent and as withdrawn as her great grandmother. Both the old lady and the young girl live in double singleness. While the old lady shuns any companionship, Raka shuns human company, finding comfort in the companionship of nature

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