

QUEST FOR SPACE: REREADING ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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Abstract

Anita Desai's various novels, such as Voices In The City(1965), Clear Light Of Day(1980) and Fire On The Mountain(1977) address female psychological trauma at the sites of colonial and post-colonial clashes. Her preoccupation is with the 'modern' Indian woman's psyche, and the isolation of the physically ill and the psychiatrically 'other' through social structures and customs. However, scholarly work on her writings has disagreed disability studies perspectives as viable interpretive tools for analysis. Instead, there are endless confluences of psychiatric disabilities as symbolic of national fissures, cultural crisis, states of corruption, internal strife and ethnic violence. These issues can be seen in many of her writings. The male chauvinism is also exposed in her writings, where women are used as puppet. She raised her voice through her writings against the patriarchy and contemporary social system.

Keywords: Psychological, Isolation, Cultural Crisis, Male-chauvinism.

In Fire on the Mountain, Anita Desai depicted the sufferings of three different women from different trauma. And this trauma does not confined within the barrier of age. Because Nanda Kaul's great granddaughter Raka also suffers from it. From the beginning to the end the trauma hunts the female characters. When the novel opens Nanda Kaul was in panic with the arrival of the post man "Nanda Kaul paused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of pine needles when she saw the post man slowly winding his way along the upper mall. She had not gone out to watch for him, did not want him to stop at Carignano, had no wish for letters."(Page-3)

Nanda Kaul, the wife of vice-chancellor had never lived her own life. She always had to live for others i.e. for her children, husband and family. Throughout her married life she had served for her husband, the guests and also for children. So, very naturally it is subject to become monotonous. She was totally devoted to her family. She did not have any time for her own not even her own space. And coming to an old age she afraid of this bitter experience of family. That is why she does not want to be disturbed or to be involved once again with family. She initially avoids Raka only for that reason. The trauma (because of family) is still within her mind and she does not want to repeat it once again.

Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul also suffers from some sort of trauma. She had seen her drunken father often beat her mother. The adjustment was not possible anyhow between her father and her mother. For that reason also Tara (NandaKaul's daughter) planned to send Raka to Nanda Kaul. Actually Tara wanted to take another chance to make an adjustment between Raka's parents.

The very concept of family was topsy-turvy to Raka. She was suffering from this trauma. That is why she did not want to get involved with Nanda Kaul at Carignano. Rather she preferred to Ramlal for enjoyment. So, it may be that the bitter experience of her family is still haunting her.

On the other hand Illa das was an old school friend who had been dogged with disaster. She was born to a rich family. Her father spent all the money on the son's education, who turned out to be worthless and irresponsible. Her brothers had cleared the family inheritance. Illa Das gets an education which comes to no use when earning becomes a dire necessity. She shouldered the responsibility of her mother and sister. She had never married and had moved from one job to another, eking out an existence. Illa Das is pathetically unconscious of her unattractiveness i.e. her ugly appearance, repulsive voice and peculiar gestures. She used to be taunt by others. She always suffered from loneliness. She was also afraid of being attached by others.

In *Fire on the Mountain* the male dominating society has clearly depicted by Anita Desai. All the women characters severely suffers from it. Every time women are the target, the sufferer, the exploited and the tortured.

In Nanda Kaul's life also she had served for the vice-chancellor husband. Also she had to take care of his guests & friends. Even she had to attend the 'Badminton Court' not as a player rather as a spectator. She often watched her husband with his own girlfriend Ms. David. Her husband had a lifelong illegal relationship with her. Nanda Kaul tolerated it throughout her entire life. It may be also that she tolerated it for sake of her children and for her family.

Raka in her life was also a victim of it. She had seen her drunken father. He used to beat his wife. Quarrelling was very common to the family. The entire peace of the family was disturbed by that drunken person. Raka could never find an ideal father figure in that person. Rather a drunken personality with dominance was much more prominent in him. The situation was well understood by Tara (Raka's grandmother). That is why she planned to send Raka to Nanda Kaul after being recovered from typhoid. Actually Tara advised her daughter Asha to adjust anyhow with her husband. And Tara realized that they should have been some privacy. Perhaps it will possible in that way. But if we see towards the past we realize that it was not possible in that way. But if we see towards the past we realize that it was not possible due to the fierce of that drunken man. Though Asha tried it again and again but all her tries was in vein due to his cruel and rough treatment of her husband. Anita Desai has very cleverly projected the drunken father to expose the naked face of male dominated society. Raka's drunken father is a representative or an agent of this male-chauvinism or male dominated society.

Illa Das also has faced it in her life. In her family her father spent all the money for the education of his sons. Though later we find that they turn out to be worthless and irresponsible and finally they reject their family. So, Illa Das's father is also from male dominated society. Because he had a firm belief to his sons. He could not depend on Illa and her sister due to the conventional concept. Because there was not the trend of girl's education. So, her did not focused on Illa and her sister. But later we see that Illa shouldered the responsibility of her mother and sister. All the brothers betrayed with the family that exposes their dominance in the family.

All the characters in the novel suffer from an identity crisis. It is well observed throughout the novel.

The characters some time unable to recognize themselves. They always search their own identity. And they suffer from it until they find out their own identity.

The protagonist of the novel Nanda Kaul suffers much from identity crisis. Her past life could not recognize herself. She was not of herself. Rather she was the beautiful wife of a vice-chancellor of Punjab University. She did not have her own identity. Better she was known to all as the wife of vice-chancellor. On the other hand she was the mother of her children. In that topsy-turvy circumstances she had lost her own identity and suffered from it throughout her life. But we see that she now in search of her own identity and for that reason she comes and takes shelter in an isolated place Carignano which is at top of hill station Kasauli. Perhaps it's her belief that there she will find her own identity. When she heard the news of Raka's arrival into the Carignano she was anxious. There was a fear to be lost in confusion and it will stop her from her quest for her identity. She is projected in the early part of the Novel as a graceful, self-controlled and authoritative figure, having discharge all her duties unflinchingly and now established in her mountain carignano in Kasauli.

Raka the 'fallen bird' also suffers from that crisis. She could not consider herself as one of her own family member. That is the first thing for which she suffers from identity crisis. After that when Nanda Kaul tried to send her to the school it exposes Raka's mental anxiety and uncertainty. Raka, who had to be close with Nanda Kaul had preferred Ramlal's companion which was a cause of Nanda Kaul's jealousy "Somehow she could not bear to let her slip away. It was as if Raka's indifference was a goad, a challenge to her – The elusive fish, the golden catch" (99)

Illa Das had also detached from her own family i.e. from her brothers. She is an individual, and at the same time she represents a type, the origin of which can be traced back to the colonial past of the country. She was born and brought up in apparent affluence. But eventually all this affluence and the anglicized upbringing proved to be sadly illusory and useless. Even the society for which she was working, she became a subject of mockery by itself. That is why she had to face that identity crisis.

The story of the past life had made all the characters so alienated that they preferred the loneliness. Actually they feel that loneliness in their earlier life that is why they like the lonely atmosphere.

Nanda Kaul's character and situation are conceived in such a way so as to highlight the multiple, iconic dimensions of personality and behaviour. Her action corresponds in a way to the renunciation of the material world as advocated in the fourth stage or ashram of life. She has withdrawn herself physically and emotionally from all involvement in life's processes. But ironically she is far removed from the introspection and self-realization associated with this stage that would lead to a transcendent sublimation of the self and it's demand. This stage of life is considered to be best suited to the living of non-attachment in practice, for attaining "attitude of mind which makes no distinction between mine and thine and which can look upon the whole world as one's own or as belonging to God." (Chakraverty)

Nanda Kaul's close link with nature, the pine trees and the cicadas, her intense disinclination to receive any letters, and her irritation at the very sight of the natural and the human world.

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of the mountain, in this

quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life – as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (Page -3)

Nanda Kaul had reached such a stage in her life- old age, infirmity, resignation, loneliness, withdrawal, non-involvement – that she felt much closer to the trees than to any human being.

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk saree made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake. (Page-4)

Raka is the girl who occupies our attention in *Fire on the Mountain*. It is difficult to say whether the novel centers around Nanda Kaul or Raka. Certainly the novel begins with the focus on Nanda Kaul but in the course of the novel the focus shifts on to Raka. The title also refers to her, for it is she who sets the forest on fire, hence, *Fire on the Mountain*. We see that Raka is an unusual child. She is not like other children. Actually when she was in her family she used to see her drunken father who used to beat her mother. Remaining in the family Raka was alone. So, coming to the Carignano she also prefers loneliness. If Nanda Kaul defends her privacy fiercely Raka too is absolutely independent, satisfied with her own self and never bothering her Nani. She is so self-absorbed that any effort on Nanda Kaul's part to attract her completely fails, even her fantastic tales. She is the most unchild like child. Nothing appeals to her. She was "the child who never played games." Instead of listening to the fanciful tales from Nanda Kaul she prefers to go outdoors all by herself. Once coming from her usual ramblings through the hills and forests she speak to herself, "I don't care - I don't care - I don't care for anything." Her unchild like quality and introvert nature is the result of her traumatic childhood. Once she stealthily goes down to the hills to the club of the Research station on a moonlit night and while she spies on the drunken orgy in the club her mind is flooded with the unpleasant memory of her childhood days, of her drunken father coming home late at night and beating her mother and she hiding somewhere in the room.

"... her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abusive – harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright." (71) It is this traumatic childhood experience that such a dehumanizing effect on Raka's mind that she becomes a pathetic to find any interest in childhood rather she prefers the loneliness.

Illa Das on the other hand is also a victim of loneliness. Though she had well set up family yet she is also the sufferer. The economic support of her family had broken. Her brothers betrayed with the family. She took the responsibility of her family. The public and the children mock her. So, she also suffers from the loneliness.

Fire on the Mountain thus unfolds Anita Desai's tragic vision of life, in which the innocent women are made to suffer and pay a heavy price for their sincerity and innocence. The society plays the role against them.

Ironically Illa who was a social worker was raped and cruelly murdered by Preet Singh as she tried to

prevent him the marriage of her only seven years old girl. Illa Das ended up in a life of hard struggle for bare survival.

Nanda Kaul receives the news of this brutal act with deep shock. The police officer telephones Nanda Kaul to come to the police station to identify the body. "But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone". (Page – 145)

Raka on the other hand set the fire on the mountain. Illa's rape, Nanda Kaul's speechlessness and raka's forest fire all occur in a rapid sequence and all these were the result caused by society. But this movement is quite a mimetic representation of life's processes. Life does not flow smoothly as Bim, in *Clear light of Day*, wonders at it:

"Isn't it strange how life won't flow like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood?" (Chakraverty, 99)

It has to be noted how the binaries of male/female, world/home, public/private, which are present in the already discussed discourses on women, can be unsettled in literary works. Bhaba claims that domestic space can become a stage for history, thus confusing the borders between home and world. He says further that "uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (9)

Thus, the *Fire on the Mountain* becomes reflection of destruction and purification, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda Kauls, Illa Dases and Rakas, of an unequal situation in which women suffer from the slings of misfortunes, social inequities and injustices perpetrated on them by a cruel man-dominated world.

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