



## INDIAN FEMINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S 'FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN'

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### ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* carries perspective of Ecosophy appropriately. It was published at a time when feminism considered to be an important theory in literary criticism in the west. In this paper, I present Indian feminism in her novel "Fire on the Mountain". Though it deals with feminism, the novel revolves around environmental ecology.

**Keywords:** Alienation, catalyst, composure, exile, hypersensitivity, personal consciousness, pretension, repression, sensitivity and trauma

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### INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977 as the seventh novel in her literary career. In western countries, in the mid of 1970s a new 'ism' originated i.e. Feminism. So there onwards, many theories are coming up on feminism and it became an important genre in literary criticism, especially in the western countries. The scholars' attitude towards women in a given period reflected the status of women in western society. Along with attitude of the scholars, the personification of the author's attitude towards women, feminist point of view of the early theories or ideologies mainly concerned with the subordinate status assigned to women in a phallographic culture.

Women status is set by men and also far from their rights in a patriarchal society. It means man dictated woman. The woman's role has restricted to a dutiful wife and mother. Especially, Indian woman has given prominence to perform or participate in ritual affairs as well as a dutiful wife or a mother. The total morality for a woman was laid

down by men. She became subordinate to man. Thus, a woman remained a prisoner within the façade of a secure and pleasant domestic environment.

The days are changing and societies have reached to modernity. Many theories are coming up to help the woman and their status. She fought for freedom to liberate herself from an incompatible marriage. To some extent, the woman has caught up according to the time change. Yet, the traditional family structure continues to exert its stranglehold over her creativity and sensibility. Even though, psychologically woman's position has not yet changed. It is proved in Marriage affairs. Marriage might become an antiquate institution and it is nurturing garbhaic values.

In Anita Desai's novels, the social and psychological aspects of the construction and deconstruction of the gender of a woman as an entity conditioned by these factors occupy an important position. She claims that women writers are likely to place their emphasis differently from men and that their sense of values is likely to differ

is plausible and convincing. She is primarily interested in exploring the complex psychic depths of her female characters that is trapped within the close confines of an incompatible marriage. Her women characters live in the isolated world of existential problems. Solitary and introspective, they show a marked tendency towards neurotic behaviour. Obsessed with their life of alienation, depression and loneliness, Desai's women characters suffer from an inner torment of the self. They embody the repercussions of belonging to an upper-class affluent society which is rich in terms of material achievement, but absolutely impoverished in traditional values. The position of Desai's women characters in such an oppressive atmosphere is unenviable. They are victims of alienation, and in most cases, suffer because of their hypersensitivity.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya develops a father-fixation and marries Gautama, a man much older than her, and with whom she has nothing in common. Ultimately, she kills him, and then herself.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita is alienated from her husband, Raman, because of their total incompatibility. Her withdrawal to the idyllic island of Manori does not give her mental peace.

In *Voices of the City*, Monisha has given to melancholic proclivities. She cannot communicate with her husband Jiban's self-centred and complacent family. She is isolated and lacks even the religious faith on which she might have depended. She withers slowly, and her suicide is an attempt to seek release from her captivity.

Maya, Sita and Monisha do not compromise or accept the reality of life. Is death through suicide as the only solution to our existential problems? Desai does not portray her characters in the traditional manner. She is concerned only with the solitary self of the individual. K.R. Srivastava points out that Anita Desai's heroes and heroines;

'...are constantly haunted by hidden fears or inhibitions created by their relationship with others or their circumstances of life...their solitary musings add to their morbidity and quicken the process of disintegration'. (Srivastava:32)

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is concerned with the problems of alienation and lovingness in a novel way. Nanda Kaul, the female protagonist, is an elderly lady from the wealthy upper middle-class family, a great-grandmother, and once, the wife of a Vice-Chancellor. The novel opens with Nanda Kaul in her secluded mountain retreat, Carignano in Kasauli, with the Himalayas in the foreground. Nanda Kaul was gray, tall and then, and

'What pleased and satisfied her so, at Carignano was its barrenness'. (FOM: 4)

The starkness of its rocks and ridges and its stillness find a close affinity with her own tightly withdrawn self.

Nanda Kaul's self-imposed expatriate from family, society, and life itself raised an interesting question. Is exile a negative and self-defeatist attitude to live or might it be re-defined in terms of the awareness of the feminists? Exile to existentialists was a male prerogative allowing him to live for a time in a soothing world of fantasy and illusion. It gave him the liberty to free herself from the stifling bonds of 'reality', to withdraw from the intolerable pressure of existence itself. Existentialism takes the view that the universe is incomprehensible, futile and a threat to the individual's existence. Everyone has the responsibility of making choices that determine his existence. Since life is full of possibilities, the freedom to choose puts man in a constant state of anxiety. He is aware of only the present, whilst the future remains tenuous. All he knows is that life is finite and that it will end as it began in nothingness.

Is it possible to transcend the limitation of existence such as? In *Fire on the Mountain*, it is possible to interpret the concept of exile as a feminist motif. Desai delves deep into the psyche of Nanda Kaul, who, apparently, prefers stillness to movement, aridity to creativity, and solitude to society. This mental tension had culminated and atrophied over the years into an almost fanatical desire to be left alone. As Nanda Kaul recalls,

"Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and

grandchildren, servants and guests, all restless surging, clamouring about her.” (FOM: 17)

Nanda Kaul’s family life had, obviously, not given her any sense of fulfilment or happiness. Her grim realisation of all those wasted years when she was compelled to ‘act’ out her role of the ‘envied’ and ‘gracious’ wife of the Vice-Chancellor chilled her even now. When her husband’s minions complimented her, her eyes:

‘had flashed...like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them, despising them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet’. (FOM: 18)

But this was an aspect no one had ventured to catch or interpret. Caught in a vortex of familial bond, responsibility and the hypocrisy of social decorum, Nanda Kaul’s world was one of emotive and creative deprivation. She was the coveted wife of the Vice-Chancellor to the others, but what about her own relationship with her husband? Desai leaves this crucial question unanswered until the last few pages of the book.

The reader has to believe that Nanda Kaul’s exile is a voluntary choice. Exile creates the deliberate assumption of self-sufficiency. It is considered as antidote to the sense of alienation that one might experience. Nanda Kaul believes that the stability of her inner life has been restored, after all, those years of frustration, in these barren mountains. But her self-sufficiency turns out to be an illusion with the advent of her young great-granddaughter, Raka, into her solitary existence. The pain of neglect, the sorrow of emotional sterility become real once again with Raka’s indifferent attitude towards her overtures of friendship. Nanda Kaul finds a strange affinity with Raka, though she had, at the beginning, fiercely resented her intrusion into her well-ordered existence. She tells the child, in what must have been an unnatural burst of emotion for her,

‘Raka, you really are a greatgrandchild of mine, aren’t you? You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka’. (FOM: 64)

But Raka’s;

‘...small face balanced and she pinched her lips together in distaste’. (FOM: 65)

To one who loved secrecy and solitude, Nanda Kaul’s hesitant attempt to establish an emotional relationship was at once too blatant and too obvious. The first cracks in Nanda Kaul’s edifice of self-sufficiency appear at Raka’s rejection of her as a person, and as a possible companion.

Nanda Kaul now attempts to win Raka with fabricated tales of the exotic adventures of her own father. She tries to create an illusory substitute for reality needing; as all do, the security and fulfilment of love. For

‘... who wanted the truth? Who could stand it? Nobody. Not even herself. So how could Raka?’ (FOM: 89)

Nanda Kaul’s illusory world of peace and contentment collapses in a frightful way with the rape and murder of Ila Das, an old acquaintance of hers. Ila Das, an elderly and financially impoverished spinster, had come to Kasauli to educate the villagers. She had been sent as a Welfare Officer by Government. Ila Das is a perfect foil to Nanda Kaul. Ila Das, in spite of her ceaseless struggle for survival, was still undefeated, and her zest for life was very evident in her behaviour with Nanda Kaul. Nanda Kaul’s defences against her were not strong enough. Finally, she was even moved to protect Ila Das from the terrors of an uncertain and insecure future.

Nanda Kaul’s defence mechanism against the oppressive role of wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother was exiled into the house in the mountains. She retreats into herself, falsely transforming her alienation into an ‘agreeable experience’. If the novel had ended with Nanda Kaul transferring the emptiness of her past life into the barrenness of the Kasauli Mountains, the motif of exile would have been negative and self-defeatist. The adventure of spiritual loneliness might have ended in a nihilistic acceptance of the self. To live in an artificial and self-deceptive world of fantasy is to invite spiritual annihilation. With the advent of Raka and Ila Das-familial bonds that she had wanted to erase-Nanda Kaul’s painful awakening begins. Ila Das’ pointless death shakes Nanda Kaul out of her ‘complacency’. The illusion of her ‘independence’ is

dispelled to reveal the stark unpleasant reality of her own existence. Ila Das was physically dead, killed hideously. But Nanda Kaul had destroyed her own being a long time ago. The agonising truth that she had shied away from now pierces through her consciousness.

'She had lied to Raka, lied about everything'. (FOM: 145)

Her husband had not loved her or cherished her. His marital infidelity had tormented her, but she had been too proud to protest. Her children were alien to her,

'She neither understood nor loved her' (FOM: 145).

But the most painful cut that she now inflicted on herself was the agony of accepting the bitter truth that;

'She did not live her alone by choice-she lived along because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing'. (FOM: 145)

Ila Das had been a fellow-conspirator in building up a fantasy world of lies, but now Ila was dead. At this climax juncture, Raka, the young protagonist whispers to Nanda Kaul,

"Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire". (FOM: 145)

The fire on the mountain which destroys the dead wood and the dry grass, clearing the ground for fresh growth, is symbolic of hope and life which is never static. Nanda Kaul had sought to alienate herself from the world she had artificially created in the mountains. She had attempted to exile herself from the traditional methods of family structure by rationalising that she had discharged all her duties, and, therefore, deserved the freedom to do what she desired. It was the defence mechanism she had utilised to shut off the disagreeable reality of her existence. Exile in the mountains appeared desirable and even agreeable.

It anaesthetised her sensitivity for a temporary period. Raka and Ila das unwilling gouge deep into her psyche, releasing all those torments and fears that she thought she had effectively suppressed. But like the forest fire, exile is a positive virtue in *Fire on the Mountain*. It ravages and burns, but in its destructive wake lie the seeds of a new life. Nature rejuvenates and regenerates itself through

this necessary evil. In such a context, Nanda Kaul's exile can be re-defined. Once it was negative, self-fulfilment cannot be reached in exile, in total isolation from life. Fulfilment is never complete unless there is positive social interaction. Raka and Ila Das prove this to Nanda Kaul. To shrink into oneself because the reality is unpalatable is to slowly disintegrate into a void. Nanda Kaul had

'... practiced this stillness, this composure for years...it was an art, not easily acquired' (23).

But this stillness, born out of hatred and bitterness, was self-destructive, and it had slowly destroyed her.

Raka and Ila Das are instrumental in including in Nanda Kaul feelings that are positive. To be conscious is to live again. To be unconscious is to die. Nanda Kaul's acceptance of reality leads to self-understanding which, one assumes, will result in a full and final productive life. With acceptance comes the inward strength to transcend one's ego to attain a state of mental poise. When Nanda Kaul's delusions are swept aside drastically, she arrives, albeit hesitantly, on the threshold of hope and fulfilment. The catalyst is painful, but the suppurating sore of repression and pretention is cleansed, and the process of healing will begin. To let go past thoughts and experience, to free oneself from its constricting hold, is the real basis of life. Because today is the starting point, not yesterday. To live, in the past is to forfeit one's present. In life, the search for happiness in the past is to forfeit one's present. In life the search for happiness will continue, but with an open heart, it is possible to arrive at that elusive state. Nanda Kaul's suffering is acute, but it is suffering that refines and elevates.

It is, therefore, feasible to assume that exile in *Fire on the Mountain* is a virtue through which the female protagonist learns to live with herself in more positive terms. The fractured self-unifies to bring in a new dimension to the feminist concept of individualism.

The transformation of the personal consciousness is the theme of *Fire on the Mountain*. To feminists, it describes the trauma of the emerging self, liberating itself from the pressures of

feminine role-play, to attain a state of free, creative individuality.

Thus, the novel *Fire on the Mountain* revolves around Feminism and Ecosophy.

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