



EXILE AND ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai does not easily fit into traditional moulds, and the scholarly criticism written in reference to her body of work illustrates this by its variety of themes. Topics and opinions. Her forte is the quest of sensibility and her writings expose the inner realities and psychic echoes of her characters. The most current themes of all her novels are the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the nurturing of individuality and the self. Desai had been identified with a new kind of literary tradition of Indian Writing in English. This research paper would like to examine and analyse the question of identity and alienation in her novel *Fire on the Mountain* which have been aptly depicted in the novel. The story revolves around the lives of three female characters and their struggle to form relationships and bonding.

Keywords: Alienation, Exile, Identity

Fire on the Mountain, Anita Desai illustrious novel was published in the year 1977. It is another award winning novel of the novelist. The novel presents a psychological exploration of various facets of loneliness through its three female characters: Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ella Das. Like the earlier novels, in *Fire on the Mountain* too the tragic dimension has been highlighted through the life of individuals. The undercurrents in the characters of psychological depth are fathomed. The subjects in all Desai's novel are the individual and her forte is the exploration of the inner psyche. In *Fire on the Mountain*, she holds a mirror to the crisis in human values and a lot of the lonely woman as she struggles to assert her lost identity. As a novelist Desai is concerned with a very challenging task it is a search for the hidden meanings underneath the apparent meaninglessness of the so called real life around this.

Fire on the Mountain projects a conflict between the need to alienate in order to retain one's

identity and the wish to be involved in the process of life. Nanda Kaul the protagonist of Desai's fifth novel is unique among the protagonists of her other novels. The novelist has skillfully explored the emotional state of Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter Raka. Basically the novel is all about the story of the oppressed soul of Nanda Kaul, the wife of a former vice chancellor of the Punjab University. Nanda Kaul is a highly sensitive and an introvert woman. Her desire for withdrawal and continuous calls for involvement in life are the dilemma of her existence. The title of the novel is in itself symbolic. The word fire in the title symbolises the fire which burns in the heart of an old lady. The intense awareness of loss privacy in a busy world is subtly presented in the novel.

Fire on the Mountain deals with a fascinating female character Nanda Kaul and her female psyche. Desai explores the problem of disintegration of family life, loneliness and the resultant anguish in the

marital life of Nanda Kaul. In the novel we can see that Nanda Kaul leads the life of emotional deprivation, of unfulfillment with her husband, teaming with plenty true love. Her cause of weariness has resulted from the fact that her husband had developed an extra marital love affair with teacher of maths Miss David. Mr Kaul always remains indifferent Nanda Kaul. On the other hand, he prefers to spend more time with Miss David it by ignoring his wife Nanda. Nanda's husband is too immersed in his extra marital affairs to notice the self sacrificing devotion of his wife. As a wife or respectable person, she was enjoying a high social status but, she was sick emotional starved. Desai has skillfully depicted the trauma, the sufferings and alienation of Nanda Kaul with a rare poignancy. Narendra Kumar says:

It conveys... an image of emptiness and sterility an image of nanda calls loneliness in our inability to make contact. The novel is a striking image of the difficulty of communication between Nanda Kaul the protagonist and the milieu you in which she exists. 2

Anita Desai has employed the flashback technique in delineating the inner suffering and traumatic life of the main protagonist. All that female protagonists of the novel suffer from emotional deprivation and identity crisis. Like Maya Nanda Kaul was also leading a life without true love from husband. She lacks the marital harmony which every woman expects from the spouse. A deep psychological study of the novel reveals at the indifference and betrayal of her husband is the root cause of Nanda Kaul's frustration and limitation which turns into a lonely figure. As a wife of the top class executive of a renowned university she received nothing but humiliation. In Desai's novel the theme of alienation is very vital with the characters especially with female characters.

When the novel opens we find Nanda Kaul is thoroughly disillusioned with all her emotional bonds, whether matrimonial or filial. Being frustrated and neglected by her husband she has transformed into a lonely figure. Having been rejected and discarded all her life by her husband and children Nanda Kaul retires to the mountains of Kasauli. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else

would come or would happen here would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. The old protagonist identifies herself with the baroness and starkness of the surrounding landscape and showing disgust with her reality and life she resigns herself into a different world. But still the seclusion in Kasauli was not able to provide there any relief to her inner mind. She always brooded over her past sufferings which are deeply rooted in her mind. As her original self-effacing solution has not worked throughout her life, she substitutes with the strategy of resignation. As Atma Ram says:

Female protagonist who are not average but they've treated or have been driven in to some extremity of despair and so are turned against or are made to stand, the general current. 3

It is not only for peace that Nanda Kaul has chosen Kasauli. She likes the emptiness of Kasauli and enjoy the starkness of the town. As a conventional Indian woman in Desai's novel she always present the conventional typical women undergoing various sufferings and within the domestic sphere. These females have been assigned a role of a wife, a mother and a daughter and they engage himself busy in the household chores. The traditional image of a woman is confined to only child bearing without any emotional support, attention and care. Nanda Kaul also accepts her situation more readily then other female agonists.

In the novel both Nanda Kaul and Raka suffer from alienation. Only the cause of alienation differs. The former support because she was frustrated over busy life and harmonious matrimonial bond and later by her instinct. The individuality of a character makes her more alone and estranged. Madhusudan Prasad comments:

In fact this novel deals in, in the mainn with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anger and agony in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul who presents an unforgettable pathetic portrait of old age

The female characters in Desai's novels always try to forge a new identity and self for themselves. What differs Nanda Kaul from the other

females that there is the presence of birth pangs of modernism with her. But although she tries to withdraw herself on the traditional constraints, she lacks the volition to do so. Her character exhibits a secret learning to develop one's individuality and also a remarkable stance of Indian feminism. *Fire on the Mountains* reveals a tragic dimension in an individual's life in undercurrents that permeates in the characters. Truth and realization comes to only one when one undergoes the grim realities of life. The characters in situation highlight the multiple, ironic dimensions of personality of behaviour. Both physically and emotionally Nanda Kaul has withdrawn herself from all involvement in life. A significant unconventional note can be traced in her desire of solitude and through this the novelist conveys subtly the suppressed tensions she has left behind.

Nanda Kaul bitterly resents Raka's intrusion because it once again brings her past memories. Her presence makes Nanda aware of the long events which she wants to forget. It is interesting to note the intruder Raka shares Nanda's sense of seclusion. Both the female protagonists Nanda and Raka offer the severe kind of self alienation leading towards neurosis. The inner world of the female characters reflected gloomy side of human emotion in this novel. Desai's later female characters however show radical development as they make every effort to forge a new identity for them discarding the traditional norms. Although both Nanda and Raka shares the same problem with Raka we find another kind of Indian feminism which is strong and aggressive and discovers at Raka's arrival that she is "exactly like me"(64) But Raka is a step ahead of her great grandmother so far as the detachment is concerned. Nanda was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life:

Of duty and obligation her great grandchild was a recluse by nature, by instinct she had not arrived at this condition by a long root of rejection and a self sacrifice she was born to it's simply.(48)

A close proximity between Raka and Nanda fill is felt in their craving for privacy. The traumatic childhood had resulted in Raka's psychological alienation not

only from her parents but also from the world. In Desai's novel the childhood experience left an undelible mark in the lives of the characters. Childhood experiences in the formative period mould the type of person they grow into. In this regard Usha Pathania says:

Their experiences and interactions during this formative period when combined with their congenital hypersensitivity contributes towards their inability to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationship in later years.

Raka is not a normal child. Instead of being attracted to all the beauties of the world in nature she relates to ugliness. She fails on her part in finding the deep roots of her own thrust into life. Raka's false self sees herself as an independent person of all socialising and competitions. If both the characters of Raka and Nanda are compared, it will be found that both of them spring from two opposite ground. Mrs. Kaulcall is not an alien figure by nature or by birth. But her alienation is thrust upon her by herself in her attempt to escape from the circumstances prevailing in the old house. But on the part of Raka, isolation is natural, she seems to be born with it. The root cause of her alienation can be traced back to her unfortunate house where she always felt insecure and isolated. From this psychological point of view Desai's female characters suffer from one or other kind of psychological crises. The cause of the mental imbalance differs from one to another and their ways to come out from such anxiety and mental in difference is also different. Raka's alienation accentuates her desire for the tender bond of love. Thus raka's situation in reality, opens before Nanda Kaul a new dimension of alienation which is in context of the modern theories of feminism empowers women to the process of self actualization and self realization in a much more meaningful life. Nanda Kaul's disturbance is further accentuated by the arrival and meeting of another character Ila Das. A woman can only understand the sensibility of a woman and Nanda Kaul is moved to hear the miserable condition of Ila Das. It evokes Nanda's sympathy for her. The character of Ila Das is presented in a very fascinating way by the novelist. Nanda's apparent rebellious detachment is balanced

with the defenselessness of Ila Das where the latter appears pale by contrast. Both of them belong to the same period, received the same education and we bought up in the same privileged class only to find afterwards:

How helpless are bringing metres we thought we were being equipped with very best French lessons, piano lessons English governess all that only to find it left us helpless and positively handicapped.

Initially, in the novel Ila Das has been presented is only female portrayal without any negative streak in her temperament. She was dedicated and she tried to establish love and good feeling with everyone. But it is ironical that the very person whom Ila tried to teach about the undesirability of child marriage assaults her, rapes her and finally kills her. The death of Ila Das stunned Nanda to carry on her normal life. Ila's death is too stark areality for nanda to face and ultimately results in her own death. Ila Das's concern for the welfare of the people can be contrasted with Nanda selfishness for seclusion, neither of them achieve anything with their excessive attachment or detachment. To quote Asnani:

Ila's real involvement in people's welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren and unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul. Yet there is irony in her tragic death, for if Nanda's self imposed withdrawal and alienation was meaningless; Ila's involvement brings only tragic death to her much so that on the way home to her rat infested shack, she is raped and murdered.

The knowledge of Ila's Das's that gives an impetus to Nanda's own psychological own destruction. She is further puzzled with doubts and mysteries outside mysteries of life and the business of living gets further compounded. It finally causes her psychic death, followed by a certain physical death. In this connection Usha Bande has rightly observed:

Metaphysically, the deaths of Ila and Nanda are interpreted is the final reality suggesting the futility of human existence: Ila dies

because of her concern for others, Nanda dies because our concern for loneliness. Both involvement and non involvement signify a tragic sense of unfulfillment.(7)

In the novel, both the major and minor characters are not free from the psychological turmoil. Raka's unconscious desire for violence impelled her to set the forest on fire. Raka's utterance after the death of Nanda and Ila is symbolic: "Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look Nani look ...the forest is on fire."(45)

Raka seems to be more assertive and aggressive than the other protagonists. She tries to raise her assertive voice to come out from the shackles of the ordinary life. Raka's action of burning the fire shows her resolv to destroy the world which promises no hope to women in society where she is always in enslave and ensnared and entangled. Desai's fire on the mountain presents a kind of emotional wasteland in which hardly anything not happy can take place in a rocky background. In the wasteland rains are awaited and hardly ever come. The deep sense of irony employed by the novel also suggests the existential dimension of the modern man in this modern wasteland where there exists a conflict of values. The three female characters in a novel ultimately choose their own value system towards themselves from reality.

Through the psychological explanation of the female characters Desai has also focused a deep sense of marital dissonance in the novel. Almost all the marital disharmony in the novels resulted out of male dominance and indifference towards marriage. In this novel also Nanda's death Ila's rape and murder points to the process of disintegration of social psychological and spiritual values of a woman who suffers in the male dominated society. Desai's world is full of anguish and supporting specially for the women from which there is no escape. Nanda Kaul does not commit suicide but her death wish works on her psyche and finally causes her psychic death followed by a sudden physically death. There are numerous references to unhappy events in a novel which the novelist penetrates through the stream of consciousness with great accuracy, which effects are thinking and makes her more sad than an account for

personal feelings. The novel depicts the severity of human life in isolation dissociated from introspection and reevaluation. It also highlights the self fulfillment is possible only for those who is able to face the meaninglessness of life and cultivate an objective approach of facing problems. With the help of the images like loneliness, death and violence, Desai has pointed towards the imbalance imbalance between illusion and reality, external and internal problems of the human condition. The two protagonists in the novel failed because one is too inflexible. She is unable to accommodate anyone else in a small world. Whereas the other is ready to make all adjustments but cannot maintain her dignity and inspire confidence in either herself or others. The one cannot escape from realities is once again proved by their novel. The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one's sanity and the need to involve in the trivialities in life in a painful process continue in this novel. Thus the novelist, through a very subtle penetration in the inner recesses of the characters mind has bought for many traits of psychological traits. Desai's fiction upholds dignity of individual consciousness and also affirms the undeniable truth that self-fulfillment can be achieved only by going out of the self and establishing bonds outside the self. This is very true for this novel too.

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