



ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN: A NOVEL OF SURVIVAL ON MARGINS

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) is the fifth novel of Desai. The novel explores the painful existential problem of Indian women, trapped by society. It depicts the minimal and claimed life of novelist's mouthpiece character—Nanda Kaul. It is also the medium of showing the helplessness of a woman like Ila Das. Here we find extensive human struggle for survival especially in adverse situations. It shows the early tragic life of the protagonist Nanda Kaul whose later life is enjoyed by the second protagonist Raka, who is her granddaughter in general. Furthermore, the text has been divided into three parts representing various things. All of them are inter-connected with each other. Each has various sub-chapters.

Key Words: Existential problem, minimal, struggle, survival, inter-connected

Fire on the Mountain is all about four women—Nanda Kaul, little Raka, Ila Das, and Anita Desai herself as the omnipresent *ex cathedra* factor that shapes and moulds every single aspect of the matrix of the novel. The novel does not really venture beyond the inner lining of a very sequestered, gendered feminine space that is a secret storehouse of a welter of often conflicting emotions born out of a breathtaking oeuvre of experiences that is life. *Fire on the Mountain* introspects; it contemplates. It tries hard to sort out the riddle called life. It also tries hard to figure out a solution.

The heroine of the novel Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul. Her husband is the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University. She does her duty very well. She fulfills the needs of her husband and children. In spite of all these, her married life is not happy because her husband has extra marital affairs with Miss David. She is a teaching staff. Her subject is mathematics. Mr. Kaul has not married with her because she is a Christian. He invites her for badminton parties, drops

her back at night and comes secretly to his separate bedroom. In spite of knowing the illegal relationship of her husband, Nanda Kaul shows the frozen smile on her face. Her husband does not give the love which she deserves. He treats her as a tool. She keeps herself busy in the obligation of her husband and children. She lacks warmth and understanding with her husband. She always bears pain and stress. The situation which she faces upsets her. Due to all these she waits for blessed widowhood.

Even if she is the wife of a Vice-Chancellor, which is a prestigious post, her life with her husband is like a golden caged bird. Her golden cage symbolizes her in-laws house and the bird Nanda-Kaul because here she is not free. She is the mother of many children but does not find the emotional satisfaction from motherhood. She thinks motherhood is nothing except duty and role for which society pressurize us. Her busy life looks like “a box of sweets” (31).

Here, she has to do anything according to her husband and children's will she has become a toy of their hand. She is laden with unpleasant, unhappy and burdened tasks always. She is busy with thankless household work all the time. She is bored with securing, sweeping, cleaning, supervising, cooking, issuing instruction to the servants, taking care of her three children, receiving the husband's guest, streams of visitors and bearing with shameful flattery. In this regards, Walters Kishore, Usha depicts:

Nanda bears all burdens she accepted confinement and domesticity at that stage of life as she couldn't gather courage to stand alone after being shunned by the society. Nanda was in her 'home' but was not contented.¹

Like Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, her life is meaningless and unsatisfactory as Vice-Chancellor's wife. In the view of outer world, she enjoys the comforts and social status of the wife a dignitary but at deep down she feels lonely and neglected. Raiza Sema says:

Nanda like many other characters of Anita Desai suffers from loneliness unfulfilling relationship. She weaver a world of her own, the waste in the landscape mirrors the waste of her life.²

Thus, we find that the life of Nanda Kaul represents Indian women who devote their life for their children, husband, family and society. Therefore their wishes, desires and talents are buried deeply in their hearts. After the death of Mr. Kaul, the old widow Nanda Kaul goes to Kasauli for the house which is at Corignano so that she may live a solitary life free from chains and anxieties. Carignano is the place where death dwells. It is like a burial ground and situated towards hill station. It is a deserted place. Loneliness and barrenness is the quality of this place which she likes most. Here everything is available what she needs. On the first day at Carignano, she realizes the place and time of life for which she has waited for a long time. It has rocks, pines, light and air. In every direction there is a sweeping view – to the north of the mountains, to the south of the plains. Sometimes an eagle swims in the

clear light and air. There are also apricot trees near the house.

In the first part of the novel, Nanda Kaul's life can be compared with the pine tree on the hill. Her inner sensibility to become a tree is symbolic. She looks:

...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 perhaps to undertake.³

In Kasauli she tries to forget her old reminisces and live an isolated life happily. Now she is far from busy plains, chained love of her family members and blaming society and enjoys the loneliness. She embraces isolation of silence and becomes happy to live with silence in nature. She not only enjoys the moment of gentle breeze but also knits her thoughts and loneliness of silence. In spite of all her age,

She is elegant, graceful and a kind of beauty gleams in her. She was introduced as a lady who withdrawn herself the clutches of all duties and responsibilities.⁴

After analyzing above description it seems the central character Nanda Kaul belongs to a big family where she does not get peace, love and care, so she has become disillusioned with her roles as a wife and mother and lives solitary life in Carignano which is free from her old reminisces. Anita Desai describes some beautiful lines in this context which is appropriate to quote here:

She had suffered through the nimety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been so glad when it was over. She has been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.⁵

Furthermore, Corignano is not an ordinary house rather it has its own past. Macdougall, a colonel is the constructor of this house. He has constructed it for his wife, Alice and seven sick

children in 1843. He has written himself the estimation of their lives, death, burial and cemetery also. It is very much pathetic and painful. It ends with the pictorial representation of the house. Suddenly, a horrible tempest blows and its green roofs fall in the valley below and kill a coolie on the spot. Later his house fills with others like clergymen of Church, Miss Appleby and a host of other 'Maiden ladies' unless it is owned by Nanda Kaul in 1947. The house appears as a symbol of Nanda Kaul's isolated self. When we see the selection of Carignano with its bleakness and barrenness which shows Nanda Kaul's later part of life. Nanda Kaul looks unemotional and still just like a tree. She always flames in frustration, disapproval and torture so she resembles herself to a tree. She feels her empty and bare house sunny. She shows her detached attitude to society and its people. She has no need of anything or anybody. She is completely detached. "...whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction." ⁶

At Carignano nobody dares to disturb the privacy of Nanda Kaul except her servant Ram Lal. She likes privacy not because she supports it rather gives rest to her painful psyche. Suddenly the coming of postman disturbs her. After receiving the letter she sits in shaded cool Varandah of Carignano. The chair on which she sits is of cane. The enveloped letter is in her lap. She has no interest in opening the letter, rather in nature. She watches the fighting and playing of birds with one another. She pays attention to the sounds of the birds and fluttering of the winds and remains thoughtful. The rustling of leaves create a poignant feeling in her. Even the sight of a butterfly attracts her.

Lastly, when she opens the letter in helplessness, she comes to know that Raka, her granddaughter is coming here because her mother is suffering from disease so she is unable to take care of her. After knowing all these, she becomes restless and disappointed because the news reminds her of the unhappy waves in her past days of life where she has been very busy like the waves in the sea and forced by her husband and children. Therefore, the coming of Raka is a proof of a throwing stone for her which disturbs her peace and mindset. After observing Nanda Kaul G. S. Balram Gupta says some lines which shows her mental situation.

She (Nanda Kaul) is sick of her past and so she removes herself to a new heaven. But the past-including the memory of her husband's infidelity keeps assaulting her. She craves for peace and solitude but they elude her.⁷

On the whole, we come to know that she had decided to enjoy her rest part of life in loneliness because she thinks old age should be guarded by privacy and seclusion. In Carignano, there is no place of uncalled guests. It is perfect to quote some lines which shows her mental condition which is painted through an image of eagle:

An eagle swept over it, far below her, a thousand feet below, its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished, it occurred to her, to intimate that eagle-gliding, with eyes closed.⁸

Here the eagle symbolizes total detachment. It is a type of soul that is free from all responsibilities. It is detached with any place or person.

When Nanda Kaul knows that her granddaughter Raka has come on taxi stand she does not go to receive her rather sends her servant Ram Lal. After the arrival of Raka she thinks what to feed the child. She thinks about several recipes but fails. After sometime, she makes a list on several bits of papers but tears and throws them. Lastly, she decides to prepare potato chips with tomato ketchup for lunch. All these activities show negative attitude of Nanda Kaul towards uncalled guest like Raka. After coming of Raka her grandmother gives a cold shoulder to her and thinks her nothing except "... an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry."⁹

Here we come to know that Raka is different to her grandmother. She is not an ordinary child rather on extraordinary child. Her imagination is strange so she avoids tenderness. Children of her age take interest in fairy tales, stories of adventure, flowers, butterflies – the colourful and gay aspect of the world but she loves privacy and seclusion. According to the novelist, Raka is a natural recluse so she compares her with Nanda Kaul :

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it simply.¹⁰

But logically, Raka is not a born recluse rather she has become an introvert due to abnormal situation. There is bitterness, distrust and violence around her. Her parents quarrel with each other, so she always suffers from echoes of her tortured childhood, the endless quarrels of her parents which has left a scar on her tender sensibilities. Her traumatic feeling has deprived a child's innocent trust and experiences of joy in the company of other. On the importance of love and care for the beneficial growth of a child William Walsh says some lines which are worth writing refer here:

The child's consciousness, which is partial and successive, does not include a sense of past or the future.... It is love intensifying the delight in the present and correspondingly bringing discomfort in absence –which introduces an element of permanence into the child's experience .¹¹

To a child its environment plays very important role. In respect of this very observation Coroll Davis points out "In psychological term Raka gets no room to grow." Raka has lived lonely and solitary life since her childhood. Perhaps, this is the reason she has become premature serious and enjoys with servant Ramlal who is of her grandfather's age. She is unlike other children of her age. Since, Raka is a new comer in the hill so she feels herself caged like tamed wild. She goes outside to see the scenery so that she may entertain herself. Thus we see that she takes interest in nature which shows the realities of life. She wants to live alone and conceals herself from the society. Her estrangement mentions her over obedience, discipline and the duties of life. But now, Raka's grandmother feels herself similar to Raka temperamentally. Gradually, she develops a fascination with Raka and question, if this was the one child with whom she could actually identify herself. To keep her engage and happy Nanda Kaul

tells stories and fairy tales. She also tells a fanciful story about a past in Kashmir. At that time her father owned private zoo in which exotic animals like monkey, peacock, bear, dogs, horses etc. were available. One of them went to Tibet and brought back stuff. After that, she depicted her own married home. The story affects Raka but for a while. After sometime, she desires to escape. Then both of them go for long walk but it is disturbed by Nanda's unstoppable talks and they return in silence. Here we see that Nanda Kaul has begun to take care of her granddaughter Raka but she does not mind.

Furthermore, when a letter comes to inform that Raka's mother Tara has another breakdown and she is in nursing home in Geneva and also her grandmother Asha is going to Switzerland to take care of another grandchild, Nanda Kaul does not take interest and hides it because she does not want to disturb her privacy.

For Nanda Kaul, Raka is the only child who prefers to stand apart. The children, Nanda Kaul knows, want love, care, attention of their parents but Raka does not. Raka is the only child who understands and values Carignono. She also knows what Carignano stands for. Nanda kaul knows it very well about Raka. So she says:

I never saw a child less like a Raka- a moon', smiled Nanda Kaul with a smile that was meant to be sweet but which Raka's expression has rendered tart. 'You little jumping thing, you don't come up, calmly and shine, do you?'¹²

Raka is always allusioned with on insect, a cricket, a pet insect which shows her oneness with nature. Now, she is very much excited to set the forest on fire. Lastly, she sets the forest on fire.

Internally, Raka feels herself alienated and unprotected. She does not take sound sleep at night because she is always upset. When she sees there is nothing but fire there, she becomes restless. She is very much distressed with fire. She thinks how to stop the fire. The fire symbolizes violence and cruelty in the world. Due to all these, she does not sleep at all. Her very sense signifies that bright light which she sees on the hill for the first time. Now she feels that wild animals are not so dangerous as human being.

Since she is concerned with nature, she realizes darkness intimate. After analyzing we come to know that Raka is the catalyst of this novel. She is the leader of the discovery of truth for her grandmother Nanda Kaul. She may be considered as a substitute to the protagonist of the character, Nanda Kaul.

Except the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter Anita Desai shows the relationship of husband and wife through some sub small plots. She also tells how a woman Ila Das is harassed by a man Preet Singh in this patriarchal society. The minor characters are Tara, Ila Das, Preet Singh, Asha and Prakash. Tara and Rakesh are the parents of Raka. They quarrel with each other. So Tara's mother Asha is worried for them. There are many ups and downs in their conjugal life. So, she writes some lines which shows the helplessness of her daughter Tara

Asha, the beauty, had dedicated her life to the cultivation of long, glossary hair and an unwrinkled skin and had had little time left over for her unfortunate daughter the one who married a diplomat and as a result of his ill treatment of her the affairs he had, his drinking and brutality was reduced to a helpless jelly.... pull herself together.¹³

For a long time, Tara is suffering from a disease which is related to nerve. It is the results of her marital incoherence. Here Asha's letter clears the obsessional thoughts of Tara. It seems she is also like Monisha in the novel, *Voices in the City* whose husband is a practical, wordlywise rich man who always cares for name and fame not his wife like Jiban. In this context, It is right to quote the line which shows how immoral conduct of her husband supposed moral in a polished society:

he is not so bad as Tara might make you believe, she simply doesn't understand him, doesn't understand and men and she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him,... it is true that he does drink.¹⁴

Tara's husband Rakesh comes home from a party stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth is full of rotten stench. He beats her with hammers and fists of harsh and fithly abuse. She lays down on the floor, shuts her eyes and weeps.

This is the reason she is unable to adjust herself with her husband. Gradually, she becomes the victim of his cruelty, savagery and orgies. Now, she is under his control like a helpless jelly. Ila Das is a childhood friend of Nanda Kaul. Both plays together like children. They go to school together. By the time, she comes to university campus as a lecturer in Home Science at Nanda Kaul and Mr. Kaul's suggestion. Her mother is always lying on the bed because her hip is broken and it cannot be mend. She has three brothers and one sister. Her sister's name is Rima. Brothers are always intoxicated and their conduct is immoral. They are sent to foreign universities to Heildleberg, Cambridge, Harvard. When their father dies of stroke, none of them come to the funeral. Now they pester their mother and sister. Lastly their mother and sister both die.

Ila Das is the third mouthpiece of the novelist. Nanda Kaul and Raka are the central character of the novel whereas Ila Das is the marginal character. She has lost her job of lecturer in Punjab university. Now, she has joined welfare department as an officer. She fights against child marriage which is a great evil of our society. Suddenly, she comes to know that in her village, there is a family whose daughter is seven years old. They are marrying her with an old man in the next village because he owns a quarter of land and two goats. He is a widower and has six children. But for a bit of land and two goats they are sacrificing their little girl. Her father's name is Preet Singh.

After knowing this, Ila Das raises her strong voice against it. Due to this very reason, she becomes a prey of heinous act like rape and murder by Preet Singh. Here Desai has tried to show the tragic life of women in our society through the medium of Ila Das who is the third protagonist of the novelist Anita Desai. She is an instance of female's courage and strength. She wants to educate womenfolk so that they may prepare for their livelyhood. Inspite of leading isolated life, she fights for the welfare of society. Her life symbolises courage and sacrifices. Even if the end of her life is tragic, her existence is significant because she sacrifices her life to perform her duty, for the cause of the woman's welfare.

Furthermore, the novelist tries to reflect the existential tone through the images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation. All these images create an environment of barrenness and starkness. As pinetree which is brunt and alone attracts Nanda Kaul Mountain symbolises Nanda Kaul's wild nature and fire, Raka's. The jackals symbolises the mystery of life. The image of monkey symbolises Raka's search for something which is unknown, inevitable and indispensable by using conjureous images of insects like lizards and mosquito, Birds like, peacocks, parrots, eagles and animals like, monkey's, bear, dogs, horses and jackals, Anita Desai tries to make understand sheer realities of fatalism and absurdity of the existence of her female characters.

Sethuram compares Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* to Shakespeare's renowned tragedy *King Lear*. The suffering of King Lear is suggested by the elaborate use of animal imagery just like in Anita Desai's novel. The recurrent use of animal imagery is symbolically used to reinforce the tragedy of human life.

Even the title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is also symbolic in itself. All the images and symbols which are used in this novel are natural. The 'Fire' and the 'Mountain' both are natural phenomena. In it, the writer has used metaphor, alliteration and onomatopoeia which enhances the literary beauty of the novel. The house in which Nanda Kaul lives is very much suggestive. The background of the house is simple and white and shining on the bleached ridge. On the north side the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall, the sun glared, scoured and sharp. It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely.

The colour, white symbolizes death and dejection. Death of Colonel's wife and his seven children shows the stained nature of the house. The life of Nanda Kaul signifies a creeper which is hanging on the wooden railing.

... getting up at last, she went slowly round to the back of the house and leant on the wooden railing on which the yellow rose creeper had blossomed. so youthfully last

month but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans agains .

Here the use of creeper exhibits the life of Nanda Kaul. It shows the temporal nature of her young age. In her life, there is nothing but incidents. Even if she has bored many children, nowadays she is old, grey and complete alone.

After analysing the novel, we find that Desai has painted the pitiable condition of women through different characters. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul and Tara are male dominating characters in the novel. In this context, it is suitable to quote some lines in which the novelist has narrated the birth of revolt against man and the cruel world.

With a sudden spring, she rose and went flying down the knowll ,the bright sparks at the end of her dry hair flying like flames in the wind, dashed round the hamam and dived into the kitchen.

Finally, we come to know that the finishing point of the novel is the death of Ila Das and Nanda Kaul. Their death defines their futile existence. The death of Ila Das is related to society but Nanda Kaul's loneliness. Setting fire in the forest shows her mental picture.

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