

Sexual Depressions and Death in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Anita Desai in fact enlarges to dramatic intensity the scene of sexual violence committed on Ila. Ila's rape is a disturbing event, but a greater disturbance awaits in the death on Nanda Kaul, who dies a most dramatic death as a consequence of Ila's rape. That she meant the rape to be a symbolic expression of something more than mere physical violation is specially evidenced by Nanda's sudden death. Anita Desai exploits the situation of Ila's rape-murder and Nanda's death to present problems that confront women in a male dominated society. Exploration of this theme is the central focus of the novel.

Preet Singh's rape was an act of revenge. It was the only successful revenge that Preet Singh could inflict on Ila, who had steadily refused to submit to either his pleas or his threats. Ila had interfered in the matter of his seven year old daughter's marriage. He had wished to marry this daughter to an old man, in exchange for a quarter of an acre of land. Ila in her capacity of a government appointed social worker had posed problems and defeated his plan. Since Preet Singh had failed thoroughly in winning Ila over to his side, he had resorted to his terrible act of abuse. This nature of aggression was the only way by which Ila could be overpowered, the 'miserable, rickety' Ila. Only through sexual attack Preet Singh could display his power. Preet Singh wanted to humiliate Ila for the injury she had caused to his male ego.

Ila's integrity had proved superior, and brute force was the only weapon with which Preet Singh could satisfy his need for ego-assertion a need that had become unbearably and uncontrollably paramount in him as an echo of centuries of traditions of male dominance and feminine submission.

Rape implies the highest insult and injury to the deepest sense of woman's pride and dignity, otherwise why would Preet Singh rape in revenge a "dry, shrivelled starved stick?", rape a woman the mention of whose name caused him to curse and spit, and use 'coarse, obscene words'. Had Preet Singh merely wanted to get her out of way he could have killed her, but why rape before murder?

The dramatic 'Now it was dark' is pregnant with meaning. It intensifies the tragic effects of the aggressive act of violence, and suggests the inevitability of Ila's as well as Nanda's death. Nanda's death is doubly confirmed in the confirmed in the context of her friend's rape-murder. Nanda as a friend of Ila's dies of shame and frustration, and Nanda as a friend of Ila's dies laden with guilt Nanda ignores the promptings of her conscience which attempts to warn her about the danger that might befall Ila, that same night that she had sensed horror hover about her as she went off.

The rape denotes not merely physical violation, but also the degradation of the essence of Ila's beings as a woman. This act of sexual violence was absurd,

irrational and evil, capable of defiling everything holy, of rendering void every meaning in life. The symbolism of rape refers therefore to the rape of woman's selfhood and self-respect, to the rape of woman's right to freedom and freewill, to the rape of woman's dignity and her worth as a woman. Rape refers to the defilement of womanhood. - hence 'now' when Ila lay 'broken, still and finished; it was dark.' There was nothing left for Ila to live for- Ila's death was something inevitable. She had to die-either get murdered or die a living death, dead in the spirit. With her selfhood raped and her womanhood defiled, Ila has no place in this world of unequal standards. The complex suggestions implied in Ila's rape are reinforced through Nanda's sensitive response to it as already suggested.

Anita Desai's idea of "double death", one confirming the other is intelligently conceived and is there to express the serious non-physical effects of the physical act of rape, and also to indicate death as perhaps the only method of woman's escape into freedom. And Nanda's death, as much as Ila's rape-murder points to the process of disintegration-social-economic-political-emotional-psychological-ethical-spiritual disintegration woman suffers the psychological shock of rape, and feels like Ila, her womanhood defiled, her selfhood insulted, and realizes the difficulty of woman's situation in a world which has become accustomed to expecting compromises from woman. Hence Nanda's agonised ejaculation of recognition: It was all a lie, all ...Ila had lied too". (p.145)

Ila's rape and murder was the final consequence of a life she had tried to live independently, wanting above all to be true

to her. Ila had therefore rejected her lecturership, for she had believed as the senior most lecturer, the principal ship of the college in which she was serving should have come to her- but the new Vice-Chancellor had made a junior lecturer the principal. In protest against this injustice and in support of her belief, she had adventured upon a life of abject poverty, but a life of self-reliance, and had ultimately death of misery, worse than poverty, as a result of her decisive acts of protest against injustice.

Anita Desai like all modern feminists would like to suggest that the myth of masculine superiority is somehow preserved in the area of physical strength. She, through Ila's rape and Nanda's life of compromise shows her conscious awareness of woman's position in society, and this awareness is the only possible link of relationship between modern feminists and Anita Desai as a novelist.

Mrs. Desai is a fatalist who believes woman's fate is linked with her sea, with her being a woman. Any attempt at escape into freedom for realization of one's identity as a person must end in death. Freedom in the context of woman's self-realization, her inner integration is perhaps after all only an impossible possibility. Nanda's recognition of guilt consequent upon the provocative awareness offered by the act of sexual violence done to her friend, expresses very pointedly the futility of any rebellion in search of personhood, in search of life in the context of a society which links personal happiness to social conventions.

The quest for life and peace, for selfhood is a fundamental moral need; the search is the real goal of life, and in the fulfilment

of a moral need there can be no moral option. The realisation of the goal is moral obligation. Peace, however, is not found in external circumstance, but within oneself, and the discovery of peace within oneself is possible only when one lives a life of self-conscious awareness of one's being, an awareness that stimulates the growth of inner resources and inner strength. A life of social pretences destroys inner resources and the search for fulfilment can end only in death; hence Nanda Kaul who has suffered a long courtship with society's conventions that trapped her in negative situations of compromise, must die in her positive struggle for escape from the stranglehold of the net of destructive responsibility cast by tradition. Cast by a social and religious culture dominated by patriarchal value-system, a culture which has permitted woman to be and to remain essentially what is euphemistically called 'feminine', where the feminine refers to acceptance of roles which makes woman just a household slave, a social ornament or a sexual convenience.

Anita Desai explodes female freedom as a myth. In almost all her novels from *Cry the Peacock* to *The Clear Light of Day*, the heroines, after an unsuccessful attempt to fulfilment through search for personhood, either die, like Monisha in *Voices in the City*, or compromise their search like Sita in *Where shall We Go this Summer?* Or even stake their sanity like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Woman has no escape in this male dominated patriarchal family system which sanctions security to women who submit to 'escape from freedom' and choose living by slave morality losing identity person. The situations of Ila's

sexual violence and Nanda's death bring this into sharp focus.

Had Preet Singh only killed Ila, the situation of murder would not have yielded suggestions beyond the idea of Preet Singh's desire to get Ila out of his way. Again, had not Nanda exclaimed in agony and disbelief "No, no, it is a lie! Now, it cannot be. It was a lie- Ila was not raped...." And then blurted out a confession of her life lived by lies, deceit and hypocrisy, the rape would not have seemed as complex as it does in the context of Nanda's self-delusion and regret. Nanda, touched to the core, by the terrible news confesses;

Nor had her husband loved her and kept her like a queen- he had only done enough to keep her quite. While he carried on a life long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children- the children were all alien to her nature. She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.... She had lied to Raka.(p145)

Why does Nanda Kaul feel involved in Ila's rape, and Ila's death by murder? That she feels responsible is amply clear by the fact of Nanda's coaxed recognition of her own self-deceptive lifestyle, as seen. Her awareness of the deception, the very moment she hears of the heinous crime, signifies Nanda's sense of guilt in the matter. But why, we ask again, should Ila's rape sting Nanda's conscience? Nanda suffers pangs of guilt because she had exaggerated her desire for loneliness, when "she did not live here alone by choice- she

lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing it was all a lie, all” (p.145)

In an attempt to secure this false desire, Nanda had desired to avoid Ila. The Ila who brought horror with her, ‘the Ila who was a ‘tiresome dreary old friend, the Ila with an ‘anti-social voice,’ the Ila who ‘filled her with disgust,’ the Ila for whom Nanda had resented waiting tea, for of course Ila would be late, when was Ila not late?’ the Ila whom she had thought presumptuous for her references to Nanda Kaul’s wifehood and motherhood, in the presence of Raka, whom Nanda had fed with fantastic lies about her status as wife and mother, the Ila who had clung to Nanda Kaul’s hand and happily declared how she felt “As if the past still existed here and I could simply come and visit it and have a cup of tea with it when I was tired of the present” (p.132) and the Ila about whom Nanda had sensed ‘the horror’ that had ‘hovered about her as she went off.

Nanda had felt about Ila, “there had never been anyone more doomed more menaced than she... her rickety existence seemed so precarious,... horror hovered about her... she ought to protect her. She ought to fight some of her battles” (p133), but Nanda had ignored this sense of responsibility, and had placed her self-interest higher than this moral demand, her

self-preservation had seemed far more important than moral heroism and true self-respect. Her self-love and the consequent self-deception had blinded her. Her lack of self-awareness had rendered her totally incapable of “placing herself in another’s position and act accordingly.” (p.88)

Nanda’s exaggeration of her desire to be alone, was somehow an attempt to betray Ila, the Ila who had loved and trusted her friendship, that Ila had been killed, the very night Nanda had felt “her rickety existence looked so precarious, she felt that one stone throw, one stick tipped would be enough to end it.... She, well and strong and upright, she ought to protect her. She ought to fight some of her battles” (p133) Nanda could have helped but she had not, what was worse-Ila had been raped, humiliated and degraded. Nanda had indirectly participated in this defilement of womanhood, in this provocative insult woman’s selfhood. The rape enhances Nanda’s sense of guilt. Nanda had become a party to this oppression of woman, by abdicating her moral understanding and by her attitude of irresponsible indifference, which was almost apathy. This shocking realization overwhelms Nanda, and she dies under the weight of her guilt. Her death however is a redemptive death. She dies aware of her guilt, and as if to affirm this Anita Desai had Raka set the forest on fire.

References:

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