

Isolation in Wilderness: A Protest against Social Norms in *Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Anita Desai is the pioneer of the psychological novel in Indian English in which she portrays the inner conflicts of her protagonists to highlights their individuality and hunger for freedom. She presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within; the existential predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. She not only highlights the silent miseries, pain, agony and helplessness of women who are tormented by day to day problems, but very silently makes the analysis of the situation thus simplifying it for the readers to reach to the root cause of the problem. Her protagonists are rebels who question relentlessly and their limitations bring them fresh pain.

Key Words: Hunger for freedom, man and woman relationship, seclusion, disillusionment, rebel

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is recognized as the first Indian author writing in English who delineates feminist themes seriously, focusing on the conditions of women in India. The conflict of her characters is noted to be as one, between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. She is deep rooted in her native culture that is evident from her themes, style, landscape, images and of course, in her successful experimentation with English novel. Her novels raise many issues of universal relevance and its beauty lies in the fact that it can be interpreted from various angles.

All her novels have themes chiefly exploring the human psyche to its deepest depths. Anita Desai's exploration of female domains historically, the family and the home, as well as her focus on female characters and feminine dilemmas of marriage, child

bearing, care-taking and widowhood provide insight into how Indian femininity and, more specifically, Indian motherhood is constructed and maintained within the society. Among the Indian writers in English *Anita Desai* holds a peerless status due to her unparalleled ability to unfold the human psyche of all her characters, more particularly the woman protagonists.

Fire on the Mountain, the story of *Nanda Koul* who has spent her life for the welfare of her family, catering to her husband's needs, bringing up her children and exhausting all her energy in performing her duties as a wife and a mother respectively. This can't be stated as something unusual or extraordinary for this is expected of all women to perform all household chores in Indian context. Every woman who marries has to shoulder responsibility of her household, husband and children. She ignores her desires, crushes, ambitions, and

sacrifices her friends; relatives etc. and merge with the family losing her identity.

Anita Desai is not only presenting an extraordinary woman to us but also her presentation is on ordinary person. Her protagonists are rebels who question relentlessly and their limitations bring them fresh pain. According to Madhumalti Adhikari:

In her novels, the moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their 'objects', 'possession' to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and social discourse.¹

EXPOSITION

Nanda Koul, the protagonist is a wife, mother and a grandmother yet struggling for her identity and wishes to satiate her quest for life. Nanda discharged all the roles assigned to her with utmost sincerity and devotion. She led a very busy life as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University; she was supposed to enact dual duties at home and in society too. Like *Clarissa Dalloway* in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, her life as Vice-Chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activities is meaningless and unsatisfying. Due to the rush to fulfill all her responsibilities she failed to get mentally involved anywhere and consequently every act became a routine. Her trauma as housewife is presented as;

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had

stifled her....too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's duty, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after.

Unfortunately her relationship with her husband was scarred and a source of agony throughout her life due to his extra marital relationship with *Miss Davidson* –a member of the teaching staff. Her husband did not love her as a wife but treated her as a decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. Though she enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary, but she felt lonely and neglected inside. She was helpless and couldn't revolt to show unhappiness. Emotional deprivation is the root cause of *Nanda Koul's* disillusionment with human bonds. Nanda was tied up with the upbringing of her children and couldn't probably provide the required attention demanded by her husband. Possibly things would have been on the brighter side if *Mr. Koul* would have not restricted himself to his official and social duties. The traumatic married life of *Nanda Koul* is sketched in these lines;

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David...And her children were all alien to her nature... She did not live here by choice-she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.

Externally everything appears to be free from harshness but internally Mrs. Koul burns with a fire of frustration. Mr. Koul even invited *Miss Davidson* for badminton parties, and compels her to stay at night and later secretly moves to her bedroom. In spite of all this, she appears smooth and free from heart-breaking agony. Now she distrusts all attachments and affairs. *“After the death of her husband she has been so glad when it was over. She prefers seclusion not because she favours it but to rest her pain-filled psyche, her stagnated pulses, bits and pieces of identity that she attempts to get in the shelter of Carignano doubtless need that rock-like exterior to give them a wholesome structure a hopeful destination. “Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?”* Probably, Nanda doesn't enjoy her motherhood too, because of the mechanical life devoid of human feelings. She could hardly save any time to show her affection towards her children and as a result of which they were not attached to her.

The novel deals with problems of man-woman relationship as a basic component of dissatisfying family life. It deals with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow *Nanda Koul* retreat's to the mountains of Kasauli is not 'withdrawal' but can be termed as 'forced' seclusion. In desolate and haunted house in Kasauli, away from the world *“Of bags and letters, messages and demands...she had wanted to be left to the pines and cicadas alone... Whatever else came or happened would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction”* During the descending phase of her life she becomes lonely and her life sets

to be taken off by various fantasies of life. She absconds all realities of life and wishes to escape with the fantasies to live a new life. Only when reality knocks the fantasies break down, Nanda Koul acknowledges the reality.

Even after marriage, *Nanda Koul* had no one to share her responsibilities and she craves for some lonely time to celebrate it with herself. Initially she abhors Raka's presence and ignores her completely, but their relationship develops on the basis of the childhood fantasy stories and they become companions. Observing Raka and mingling with her gives *Nanda Koul* an opportunity to accept the stark reality of life. Thus, Raka enables her to confront reality and review her life. Ultimately, when Nanda faces the reality of life she is not able to bear it and leaves this world forever with its complexities.

Nanda Koul is a typical protagonist of Anita Desai's novels. She had everything, now she wanted no more. What she wishes for is her privacy, *“To be left alone and pursue her own secrets of life among the rocks and pines.....”* The hypocritical situation in which she spends her life and the bitter experiences of marital life concedes her to live in seclusion.

Due to lack of warmth and true affection with her husband *Nanda Koul* desires of a rebellion to break free from the shackles of forced relationship. Her isolation is a rebellion and protest; she longs to spend some time of her life for herself, in peace and solitude. Usually at this stage of life women/men are contended with life, children and wish to cherish the time with their grandchildren. Contrary to this *Nanda*

wishes solace of tranquility because she could not attain any kind of gratification as a wife and a mother. For her there was no dearth of finances or luxuries of life, but definitely her desires, longings were never attended to, probably no one, not even her husband, paid heed to her. Probably, *Mr. Koul* was not concerned about her wish to fight the isolation brought about by the social conventions.

Nanda Koul is further shattered by the tragic death of her dear friend *Ila Das*. The two had a despised marriage and *Ila's* death brings *Nanda* back to the reality and the fallacious world around her breaks down. She realizes that life is not meant to escape the reality but to face it. Like other novels', *Fire on the Mountain* too embodies exploration of *Nanda's* feminine psyche to the optimum level. *Nanda Koul* too faces identity crises and she fights reconciliation between illusion and reality. The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve her wholeness and sanity and her involvement in the painful process of life is shown vividly in the novel. *Nanda Koul* is drawn out of herself by *Raka's* effortless withdrawal who seems to be totally absorbed in a world of her own and she ignores *Nanda Koul* completely when compared with the latter's flawed experiment. *Raka* wants to be left alone to pursue her own secrets of life amongst the rocks and pines of *Kasauli*, but *Nanda Koul* wants to penetrate *Raka's* secret world. *Raka's* total withdrawal is a challenge for her because withdrawal does not come naturally to her. Mrs. Desai calls her a natural recluse and this way compares her with *Nanda Koul*:

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.

In her desire to win *Raka's* affection and attention she builds an imaginary world around her but of no avail. This action of *Nanda Koul* also shows the unsatisfying condition of her own childhood and family life. The contrast between them was that *Ila Das* fought to survive but time crushed her physically and she died in terrifying circumstances, while *Nanda* had a secured financial status.

The fire is highly symbolical as it highlights the mental trauma of both *Raka* and *Nanda*. *Raka's* whisper to *Nanda*, "*Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani – look – the forest is on fire*", is having a symbolic significance. This fire is highly symbolical and highlights the characters of *Raka* and *Nanda*. The fire lying suppressed in her heart is suddenly set ablaze by the shocking death of *Ila Das*, who was raped and later killed. Gradually *Nanda* is there between fantasy and reality, ultimately reality asserts itself and she accepts the reality. *Nanda* wants to destroy the suffocated being within and find a new life by burning in this fire. The fire embodies the violence of feelings and a strong resolution to end such a life. But fire is also a powerful light, used to find meaning in a dark existence, and a strong purifier. It destroys in order to annihilate certain traditions and to leave space for new values. For this purpose, R.S Sharma rightly states that *the Raka's words are expressive of her resolve to destroy a world where a*

woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural.²

Nanda Koul couldn't break herself free from the social taboo of the institution of marriage. But being Anita Desai's protagonist she is able to assert her feelings by rejecting social norms. By withdrawing from society, *Nanda Koul* tries to save herself and to experience a social death and to reach to salvation through it. She wants to be forgotten and left alone in Carignano, to "be a charred tree trunk in the forest". It reveals her desire to fight the isolation brought by social conventions when her husband was alive. Social pressure and social rules lead to failure of marriage but divorce is a big taboo. Though they are forced to live with each other, but there was no fulfillment in marriage too. The incompatibility of personalities leads to trouble for *Kouls* the trauma of which knocks down only *Nanda Koul*. Nanda was totally crushed and suffocating under Mr. Koul's influence. For Nanda, her home became her 'prison' and she was craving for a 'shelter'. "*Fire on the Mountain explores the painful existential problems of Indian women, trapped by society*".³

In Anita Desai's novels the trees, birds, season, hills and gardens symbolize hope, regeneration and freshness as well as the grim reality of existence '*Fire on the Mountain*' is unique in its symbolism. The title of the novel is a potent title that invites symbolic interpretation. Traditionally fire has been regarded both as constructive and destructive force. On One hand it gives warmth and light while on the other it is a devastating force that becomes an object of fear. 'Fire' has great significance here as it becomes the symbol of the masculine

mentality, this devastating fire that burnt out the feminine nobility. In relation to Nanda, 'fire' signifies many aspects of her life. It stands for a strong will of 'recognition' which she shows by abandoning all social ties and chooses to live a solitary life. It is perhaps an urge to destroy all falsehood since *Nanda* also was tired by the hypocritical life which she led for years without passion, love and affection. Thus, 'fire' symbolizes the self-esteem, the feminine ego that is for years surpassed and crushed by social norms, duties, responsibilities imposed by male dominated society. This 'fire' symbolizes effectively the tragic events in the womb of time as Indira (1994-96) rightly says, "The thematic image of 'fire' with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of impending tragedy."⁴

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 contended. Women in Desai's work are "confined within the cyclic parameter of home-womb-tomb".⁵

Thus we find that Nanda like many other characters of Anita Desai suffers from loneliness unfulfilling relationship. She weaves a world of her own, the waste in the landscape mirrors the waste of her life.⁶

We wonder as to how much the people, the society is ignorant about the seething pain and agony a woman bears throughout her life. The focal point in Anita Desai's novel is based on a general observation that women suffer injustice mostly at social and

domestic front. With advancing modernism and growth in education, this injustice was expected to decrease, but it is flourishing and increasing day by day. There are many hollow slogans from government and non-government organizations, from social to political heads to empower women, but in reality women always suffer in home (be it maternal or in-laws) and in the society at large. Anita Desai approaches to explore as how women are grooming themselves to face the problems they are compelled to face. Generations after generations pass, situation and scenario changes but the position of a woman remains the same. Through her efficiency and dexterity in portraying human beings Anita Desai holds a mirror to the society.

Nanda Koul, like many other protagonists of her novels appears to us as our next door neighbor. She is an epitome of a person who bears all pain silently, collecting all agony which builds into a mountain and then she revolts by quitting the same society which forces subjugation. Her garb of pretense of happiness and contentment suffocates her pathetically and she escapes to lead a solitary life into the wilderness.

Nanda like other Indian woman is supposed to be an embodiment of sacrifice and suffers silently. She like all other woman accepts and easily fits into the social framework. Her primary concern is her family with husband as priority. With so much of burden and responsibility on her head a woman tends not enjoy motherhood, but as it happens with Nanda considers it tedious, tiring and monotonous.

Quite ironically a man never needs to go through rarefaction on personal, familial or

social level. Whereas a woman, within her constricted confines cheers her past and establishes herself firm as a rock. In the beginning of her married life, she puts all efforts to keep her partner happy. But when she faces dejection and rejection of her emotions and feelings, it gives her a set back and this results a crevice which becomes deeper and deeper as life goes on.

She even suppresses her emotions before her husband in spite of the socio-economic and educational awareness; Indian women are still hesitant to express themselves freely. There seems to be no parity and equality in human relationship and treatment. Only a few women are committed to the assertion of their womanhood, still many are subordinated to the masculine world of their patriarchy. A woman's domestic happiness, joy and contentment in life are directly linked to her children's well-being and progress.

Courage and not escape in is what woman of today requires. She should have the courage to uphold what is right for her and adhere to it with firm determination and tenacity. A headlong plunge into the social milieu with pertinacity can above bring harmony and fulfillment in her life".⁷

Anita Desai has depicted a perfect tragedy in Greek format in *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda Koul represents a noble character who is a true embodiment of Indian wife and a mother who sacrifices every bit of her being for her husband and children. But at the later stage of life she wishes to retreat to the solitude of her own imagination. Nanda who had been a wonderful host and entertained people at her home for years,

restricts herself to a place where no one can approach her. The fact is she is tired of her life spent earlier with her husband, children and other people.

Nanda is betrayed in marital relationship and for this reason she believes that all the love and sacrifices made by her are not valued, it is a waste and she is used. Her husband has children with her to keep her engaged while he himself enjoys with his mistress. Nanda appears as a victim, who envelops herself with a feigned indifference solely to protect herself from being hurt any further.

Nanda Koul arrives at Carignano for self-discovery for she feels that in the rust of family empty. Somehow she tries to hide her hollow interior with her solid exterior. She enjoys the perfect peace and tranquility of the hills and finds desired time for retrospection.

She becomes so engrossed with the beauty and serenity of Kasauli that she doesn't even wish to have the company of her great granddaughter, Raka and her childhood friend, Ila. The intrusion of both these characters links her with the past. P.D. Dubey has rightly commented that;

The garden of Carignano is a projection of Nanda Koul's yearning for loneliness and privacy. Nanda like many of us portrays to be an assertive, strong personality whereas inside she was totally shattered by her husband's infidelity. Nanda discovers herself in Raka, because Raka is what Nanda always wanted to be.⁸

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* presents the plight of hypersensitive women. Anita Desai explores the psyche of Nanda Koul, Raka and Ila exposing their social and personal issues. Desai focuses on the fate of married woman in Indian Society. Like Nanda Koul, the female characters of her novels fail to bear the oppression of society and family that finally breaks off from the oppressive forces.

Conclusion

This way, *Fire on the Mountain* deals with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow. It presents Anita Desai's the tragic view of life, in which innocent people are bound to suffer endlessly and pay price of for their goodness. The novel becomes the emblem of destruction and purgation, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda Kouls and Ila Dases, of unequal situations in which women suffer from the slings of misfortune, social inequalities and injustices committed on them by a savage society of men. Desai's protagonists like today's modern women explore their relationships in a quest to seek meaning in their life. Evidently it shows that modern Indian woman have also embarked on a quest to find the true meaning of life.

The character of Ila Das gives us the message of making untiring efforts for human welfare. She is herself in abject state, yet she has pity for the poor people of that village, Kassuli. She was fighting against the reactionary religious forces at the risk of her life and met a martyr's death.

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