



SUPPRESSION AND SUFFERINGS OF WOMEN IN ANITA DESAI'S "FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN"

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Abstract

Anita Desai is a major and prolific woman novelist of modern Indian fiction. She has certainly given a new viewpoint to Indian English novel. She deserves special mention for her treatment of women in her novels, with the focus on her women characters undergoing mental struggle. As a novelist and short story writer, Desai is specially noted for her perceptive representation of the inner life of the female characters in her writings.

The paper highlights the estrangement of middle-class women in Fire on the Mountain and explores their silent voices and defenselessness and explores the face value realities and emphasize upon the various corners of the inner self of Desai's woman characters. The paper also highlights the breathlessness of survival, stereotyped social conventions, dictated roles, unrewarding motherhood, tattered parent-child relationship, suppression of Nanda, Ila and Raka in particular and women in general and how they strive for some final comprehension of life. Their sense of spirit is free in spite of the shackles society has created for them. Desai's novels along with her contemporary writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande have subtly touched upon the sensitizing areas of women's issues. Desai's characters speak of the unavoidable situation and circumstance that society and patriarchal norms impose on Indian women in general.

Keywords: Society, Sensitization, Self - expression, Patriarchal society, Stereotype, Mental violence

Anita, Desai is a major and prolific woman novelist of modern Indian fiction. She has certainly given a new viewpoint to Indian English novel. She deserves special mention for her treatment of women in her novels, with the focus on her women characters undergoing mental struggle. As a novelist and short story writer, Desai is specially noted for her perceptive representation of the inner life of the

female characters in her writings. In many of her works, Anita Desai has highlighted the estrangement of middle-class women and their silent voices.

The novel, Fire on the Mountain written in the year 1977 and awarded with the Sahitya Academy Award in 1978, explores silent voices of female society after independence. The novel

highlights the face value realities and emphasize upon the various corners of the inner self of woman characters. The focus of this paper will be an exploration of the silent voices of the three major female characters of Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*- Nanda, Ila and Raka.

The title *Fire on the Mountain* has many-layered significant connotations. The Fire indicates not only the forest fire or for that reason the ultimate self-expression of Raka but it also specifies the fire burning within the souls of the three ladies three ladies. The fire within them desires to liberate through self-expression, seclusion, apart from family ties and beyond the fringe of the sophisticated world. The fire has set ablaze and possesses a different hunger, for peace, isolation, rules, betrayal, hassles of children, parental abuse and definitely the curses of seclusion. The fire is fed with the inner chaos and hostility added by patriarchal society.

There are also significant sub-themes in the novel. The breathlessness of survival, stereotyped social conventions, dictated roles, unrewarding motherhood, tattered parent-child relationship are all pervading sub-themes in *Fire on the Mountain*. It adds to the suppression of the protagonists. The isolation created by preference and obligation for Nanda state of affairs and autocracy of fate for Ila and cognizance of truth and its dimensions for Raka are all the consequences of various sub-themes in its levered proportion of suffering. Nanda's relationship with her daughters especially Asha is estranged, because of her contemptuous ways and Asha's relationship with her daughter Tara is also in bad shape. Situation worsens when Raka is packed off to Nanda in Kasauli by Asha to settle a marital discord between Raka's parents. Raka is emotionally alienated and without the bond for parental love. The frayed parent- child relationship is also evident and along with it comes the inner trauma to which the readers are the witness. Ila is a victim of society with her endurance of fair share of pain. Her role keeps on being jerky with the final encounter with death. But they are the same characters who display zeal to live their life. May be the motivation comes from the negativities of life only, and transcend to meet their soul and self.

The saying "Childhood is not always a happy and innocent time" can aptly define what Raka is for her great grandmother and to the readers. Worn-out and ragged, with a complete sense of independence, this little child is an example by herself. Her inner chaos is of a different level, not too easily expected at her age. She is overtly independent, reserved, stoic, insolent, and not given to the child's world of daydream. Her world is completely different. Stressed from parental strain, mental violence, physical anguish, unhealthy parental relationship, the hard-core realities of life, Raka understands the bare facts of life very well. She is not someone to play with fantasies and be filled with niceties. Raka is more practical than others of her age. Though too real for her age she is willing to accept the truth as the truth, however harsh it may be.

The sketches of images that abound in the novel simply give the readers a feeling of subjugation, restraints, departure and an unhelpful nature that remains uninvited in social circles. The history of the house of Carignano has a colonial history suggestive of the interior colonization of the mind of Nanda Kaul.

The house seems to have chosen its chain of forlorn dwellers, hungry of love and affection. Phrases like --- corrugated iron (uneven graph of her married life), rusty grey (age and bitter experience), worst gales (fallacies of fate), stony soil (hard exterior she kept in her Kasauli days), auctioned off (bid of life to husband, husband's mistress and daughters), thrashed and whipped (the harsh realities of life accumulated) all taken from the text, in some way define Nanda Kaul in various shades. House imagery poignantly symbolizes the inner self of the protagonists:

It was only the charred shell of a small stone cottage. The veranda roof was already torn off and flung onto the hillside: the paving stones of the floor were cracked and gaping. The doors swung open, the window-frames hung askew, shattered glass lay amongst the cinders. The stairs were a stumble of rocks and weeds. (90)

The above passage reflects the burnt selves and the words seem to mention the stony lives the

characters have dealt with and lived. The abandoned building is a mirror to Raka, Nanda and Ila. And so are its features of stillness, lightlessness, dampness cracked and gaping' like an invincible wound.

The predicament of women is well understood in Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, which tells:

She [the woman] can never find salvation in her work itself; it keeps her busy but it does not justify her existence; she lacks the means requisite for. Self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition. Among the Arabs and Indians and in so many rural populations a woman is only a female domesticated animal, esteemed according to the work she does and replaced without regret if she disappears. In modern civilization she is more or less individualized in her husband's eyes; but unless she completely renounces here ego, engulfing herself ... in a passionate and tyrannical devotion to her family, she suffers from being reduced to pure generality .." (Beauvoir1998:541-42)

The above quotation is made to show the hopelessness, hostility, disappointment accumulated over years of authority and tyranny and the stereotypical role-playing as dictated by the patriarchal mores and manners of the society. Nanda Kaul exemplify marginalizing of women because of the imposed patriarchal principles and the depressed bourgeois class rampant in the both pre and post- Independence time in India of which Nanda Kaul is a burning example.

It would be apt to understand the real nature behind Nanda Kaul's departure and being an outsider and the unnoticed suppression that she went through. She ultimately realized the senselessness of care and foster for her children and grandchildren which is a man-made instinct that women have to internalize.

The household tasks in its whole was too weighty for Nanda which she dragged all along and society crowned her with the title of womanhood and the happy family' tag. But is she really content?

The best answer is evident from her interior monologue as, it was in Carignano ... the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared all her life.. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (3)

In case of Ila, her English upbringing is void with just the show of affluence. All the money is spent on son's education and she is left for herself. She does not In case of Ila, her English upbringing is void with just the e show of affluence. growth. prepared all her life intrusion and get a right education to earn a living, and her pennilessness. Ila is of unlikable outlook with her gross voice and absurd gestures. social welfare worker to support herself. Her cause is dignified: to stop hild A split life with a broken self, penury-stricken, Ila finally takes up the job of a social welfare worker to support herself. Her cause is dignified: to stop child marriage, but only to be doubly rewarded, at first, with rape and murder by Preet Singh, a local lout who want to sell his daughter of in a child marriage for a piece of land, and, second, by patriarchal conventions. The news of Ila's death in turn kills Nanda because of the professed shock and mercilessness associated with the former's death. The cruel murder of Ila Das identifies with the defenseless of woman, the cornering of woman in society with the glamour crown as Nanda had, and the loneliness and hostility of women represented by Raka, Nanda and Ila. These women are the nuances of fatalities of psychological and physical boundaries, and the cap of androcentric rule, thereby stunting their growth.

The agonies of colonization, the physical suppression along with tyranny, remained unaltered even after India made itself free from English rule. With freedom comes liability, but it was the forced and dictated responsibility that was taken for granted for the Indian women. Biological motherhood, rearing of children, taking care of husband's needs was the restrictive conditioning that society defined and fell in pattern with other feminine responsibilities. If colonization is a physical and mental phenomenon, decolonization has also left its mark by silencing and marginalizing women at times in untold abject misery under the weight of norms and institutionalism. Desai's novels strive for

some final comprehension of life, but the wisdom is all in the striving. This is evident in the following lines of Woolf:

As summer neared, as the evenings lengthened, there came to be wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff sea, cloud and sky brought purposefully together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. (Woolf 1987:150-151).

The characters' search for individuality is somewhat comprehended in the last lines of the above extract. They stand apart and not with the current of social conventions. They challenge the norms with a silent objection. There was silent protest by Nanda who chose to lead an alienated life, that of a loner. Ila chose to undefine the defined parameters of patriarchal tradition, by being a part of the social help group to stand against child marriage. Raka is an individualist; perhaps the harsh realities of life have made her so at such a tender age.

To conclude, in *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai has highlighted the estrangement and silent miseries and defenselessness of her female characters. Their sense of spirit is free in spite of the shackles society has created for them. Desai's novels along with her contemporary writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande have subtly touched upon the sensitizing areas of women's issues. Desai's characters speak of the unavoidable situation and circumstance that society and patriarchal norms impose on Indian women in general.

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