

FEMINIST FACES

IN

INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

-: Editor :-
Dr. Sandip Pandurangrao Chavan

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A Study of Feminist Perspectives in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Fire on the Mountain is Anita Desai's well-known work of art. First published in 1977, the work is one of the pioneering texts in exploring the female lived experiences not just because it's from a female's point of view but as it is presented through a prominent female protagonist. The novel has received several awards and it is also critically appreciated. The novel is awarded with Sahitya Akademi Award. The novel deals with various issues like feminism, absurdity, existential crisis and resignation from life of responsibility and care.

The plot of the novel revolves around the three female characters--Nanda Kaul, her granddaughter Raka and Nanda Kaul's friend Ila Das. The novel is rich in the description of nature and symbolism. As it is put on the blurb of the text, critic in The Times wrote about the novel and the novelist, "beautifully accomplished and memorable... She has the ability to shape and refine a piece of her own intense imagination into an independent work of art". (Fire on the Mountain). Whereas, the front page of the text also records what Daily Telegraph wrote about the novel, "One of the finest English language novelists of modern times" (Fire on the Mountain). As such, the novel is an important document of the exploration of female psyche and Indian social conditions.

Besides, the three major female characters in the novel the fourth character is a male cook Ram Lal. The rest of the characters are only reported or talked about by these three

characters. Nanda Kaul is a widow of a university's vice-chancellor. She has taken a decision to lead a life in complete isolation at Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh of India. Tired with responsibilities and cares of her life and dear once she has cut all the connections with the past life and relationships. In defense to the Indian traditional dictum that in Sanskrit "Striyam na hi swatantryam arhati" which means that women are not entitled to freedom. In her childhood she be protected by her father, in her young age she will be under the protection of her husband and at her old age, her children will guard her freedom (Ohira 136). In contrast to this age-old practice Nanda Kaul is living separately at a house called Carignano.

A general representation of the female characters in the novels is such that the female characters are mostly compassionate, emotional and always maintaining cordial relationships. Nanda Kaul does not want any such relationships with the past and is also hesitant to have any attachment in the present too. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (Desai 3).

The novel opens with the description where Nanda Kaul is at peace with herself and enjoying nature in consummate intensity through all her senses. A long awaited room of once own is finally received by the female protagonist. "Nanda Kaul paused under the pine tree to take in their sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mess of pine needles where she saw the postman slowly winding his way along the upper Mall" (Desai 3). The arrival of postman heralds an intrusion into her blissful solitude. She doesn't want it. However the postman brings the news that her granddaughter Raka is joining her for the vacations. M. G. Vassanji writes, "Thus begins the story of Nanda Kaul's retreat, cool and relentless dissection and exposure of her silence" (Vassanji 3). She thinks that her retreat in Carignano is "the place and the time of life that she had wanted and prepared for all her life — as she had realized on her first day at Carignano,

with a great, cool flowering to relief— and at last she had it"(Desai 3). Her unison with the nature is so complete that "She fancied she could merge with pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake"(4).

Though the novel doesn't take an overt stand against the patriarchal order, it points out the evils of it through its impact on the female characters. For instance, Nanda Kaul bears the humiliation and pains of her husband's extra marital life. She doesn't protest it outright as she doesn't want to bring embarrassment to her husband. Her role in her past life is of complementary and supportive nature. She prepares for his parties and takes care of all the children in the family solely handedly. She plays all the roles assigned to women in the traditional Indian society without much ado. Even though she performs all these duties with vigor and enthusiasm still she doesn't want these to be a part of her permanent routine. Her entire life she has only played different roles at different situations. "Indian women also internalize the suppressive idea of womanhood or wifehood, namely that women should be submissive to men based on Hindu The Laws of Manu (Ohira 136). However, Nanda Kaul is fed up with this life of traditional Indian women and wants to lead a life of her dreams, far away from people and bonds. In a way, she gets a room of her own.

Anita Desai takes on the general narrative that a male is a major character and females are subsidiary and auxiliary characters in the fiction. Here, Ram Lal is the secondary, non-significant and auxiliary character in this novel. Anita Desai attempts to turn upside down the traditional gender roles assigned by the patriarchal social order. Even though the three characters in the novel try to lead a life as per their opinions, the male patriarchal order intervenes in it. Raka's secretive and solitary behaviour is the result of her abusive, turbulent past at home. The traumatic memories of her father's addictive behaviour are also at the backdrop of her present life. She remembers her father

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“...coming home from a party stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating her mother with hammers and fists using harsh and abusive language that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattresses in fright” (Desai 78-79).

Moreover, Ila Das has also suffered heavily due to the same system. Nanda Kaul has also been through a relationship of inequality and suffering. The tragic end of Ila Das also elaborates on the same fact that the confines around a woman are invisible and at times seemingly non-existent but the moment a woman tries to make changes to it, they become strong and concrete. Any attempt to make changes to the existing social order is answered with violence.

The issue of unpaid house labour of daily chores and housekeeping is also taken for discussion by Anita Desai. The patriarchal society teaches and preaches the womankind that keeping the house clean and tidy as well as caring for the babies is the sacred duty of women. The same ideas are propagated through religious and cultural preaching. Resultantly, such ideas are accepted as natural and internalized by Indian women. Nanda Kaul, as the mouthpiece of Anita Desai, goes against this belief. She thinks: "I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clean. She has scurried about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate is kept tightly shut" (Desai 29). She misses on a paragraph especially, while reading *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon. "When a woman leaves alone her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water plants" (Desai 29). This is how Anita Desai opposed the idea that a woman should always neatly take care of her home and should disregard her own desires and passions.

Taking care of babies and bringing them up is one of the so-called sacred duties of motherhood. Nanda Kaul has held it to her heart. All her life she has attempted to carry on the duties and

responsibilities of caring for the children. Now she has come to this feeling that all fertility and human relationships are an additional burden on a housewife. She doesn't even want to plant any willows or the grass in the courtyard of her house. "She reveled in its bareness, its emptiness" (Desai 33). The very ideas of connectivity and family were despised by her now. She also likes "the loose pebbles of the gravel pleased as much as rich turf might another. She cared not to add another tree to the group of apricots by the veranda or the group of three pines at the gate" (Desai 33). Such is her disenchantment with the family and crowd that she has completely retreated from the humdrum of life.

All the three characters try to lead a life happiness and peace of mind. However their approaches to the present and the past are not identical. Where Nanda Kaul has tried to retreat from the past memories and right to take solace in the present Ila Das has tried to find comfort and solace in the glorious memories of the past. In contrast to Nanda Kaul, the past for Ila Das is more beautiful and comforting where else the past life of Nanda cool brings back all the unwanted and disturbing memories to her mind. Ila Das visits Nanda to talk of the past and Nanda Kaul avoids the people from the past to escape from it. Ila Das says,

" My dear, you can't imagine. You have no idea what it has meant to me to have you here, to come and see you today. Why, it's been a little bit of the past come alive. As if the past still exists in here and I could simply come and visit you and have a cup of tea with it when I was tired of the present!"(Desai 144). Thus, for Ila Das past is where all the beauty of life lies and Nanda Kaul is in search of beauty and peace in the present and future. Raka on the other hand, is struggling to come to terms with the past and her present is badly affected by the past.

The stories of the families mentioned in the novel are mostly full of female suffering and submission. Most of the human relationships in the novel have negativity. The relationships of male characters with the female characters are of

struggle and abusive kind. The stories of female suffering and domestic violence are brought to the fore by Anita Desai. The stories of women's submission and acceptance are mostly neglected. As a part of giving voice to the voiceless, Anita Desai gives passing references to such types of hidden stories.

Finally, Anita Desai brings all the female characters to confront the truths in their lives which they were so strongly trying to hide. In a world full of pain and suffering and suppression, women are forced to tell lies in order to make it feel like all is fine but the actual truths are something else. The facade made by Ila Das is brought to pieces when she confronts the truth that she did not live here alone by choice. "She lived here alone, because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication" (158). Nanda Kaul also faces the truth that she couldn't love her children well enough. She has always tried to escape from the truth and live in the illusion created by her.

To conclude, Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* deals with a complex web of feminism, existential crisis, and patriarchal social order encroaching upon the rights of female characters. The three major characters in the novel have suffered due to the patriarchal social order as well as the systems of female suppression. The above mentioned feminist concerns are the backbone of this novel. Even though the novel has three major female characters yet, this is not the novel of female valour or the story of a woman's success. Even though Nandu Kaul wants to lead a life on her own, yet her peace is disturbed by the human inter-relationships. Despite the attempts of Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka they fail to lead a happy and peaceful solitary life. All the three major characters are pushed into the corner and have to lead a marginalized life. The male characters in the novel are complementary and auxiliary to the major female characters. Where the story of Nanda Kaul would have been the story of a woman seeking solace in nature after being frustrated by human

behaviour, what the story brings forth is that the women fail to lead a life on their own. The gender roles assigned to men and women are thwarted and a woman's attempts of making changes to the existing socio-cultural order are encountered by violence.

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