

## A Feminist Approach to Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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### ABSTRACT

*A feminist reading involves a close examination of the way the female characters are portrayed in a work of literature as the feminist critics consider literature to be an important tool of socialisation. Looking at *Fire on the Mountain* from a feminist perspective, one finds that Anita Desai has scored indeed high in the creation of her female characters. The tale starts with Nanda Kaul living alone at Carignana, joined by Raka, her great granddaughter and Ila, her friend. The novel ends with the rape and murder of Ila. Instead of creating female stereotypes that fit into the social mould of perfect women, Anita Desai has created real women, complete with their strengths and weaknesses, virtues and foibles. The three protagonists are all women of substance who face their life with grace and dignity. They are the ones that the feminist would not mind as role models for the society.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, socialisation, isolation, marriage.

Anita Desai is one of the most widely read Indian novelists writing in English. Her *Fire on the Mountain* caught the critics' eye as soon as it was published in 1977 and won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1978. Anita Desai herself considers it as her most satisfying work. She says that "the work in which I have come closest, to what I set to do, and I don't think I very often do, is *Fire on the Mountain*"<sup>1</sup> The novel has been analysed from various angles. It is interesting to have a close look at it from a feminist perspective. A feminist reading of any work basically entails looking at the way the author has projected the female characters in her work and the predicaments that they face in their lives.

All civilisations have assigned women a secondary role throughout history. Since the ancient times, women have had to fight for the smallest of rights that are bestowed upon men right from their birth. Women had to wage a long battle for the right to vote in the western countries. Equal pay for equal work is still an unrealised dream in many countries. Feminism rose in the West as a reaction to the open discrimination against women. Though it started as a socio-political movement, it soon made inroads into other areas including literature. Feminist critics share a deep concern about the depiction of women in literature, since they consider the representation of women in literature as "one of the most important forms of 'socialisation' since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations.'"<sup>2</sup> The feminist critics, therefore, raised serious questions on the depiction of women in literature as docile, submissive and selfless beings. This kind of awakening in women has brought about a change in the depiction of women in literature. Now a large number of texts depict women who refuse to fit into the mould that has been cast for them by the society.

*Fire on the Mountain* has Nanda Kaul as its central character. The novel is divided into three parts. Part I "Nanda Kaul at Carignano" deals with her secluded life in a sprawling house called Carignano. Part II is titled "Raka comes to Carignano." Raka is Nanda's great granddaughter and this part depicts the initial hostility and the subsequent rapport that develops between the two. Part III "Ila Das leaves Carignano" shows Nanda Kaul's meeting with her childhood friend, Ila Das. This part deals with the tragic rape and death of Ila Das.

Nanda Kaul is one of those protagonists who have suffered a life-time of unhappiness caused by a loveless marriage. At one time, a University Vice Chancellor's wife, she had been the "hub of a small but intense and busy world."<sup>3</sup> Throughout her life, Nanda has conformed to the wishes of her husband and has fulfilled the requirements of his social status. However, she has never received any affection from her husband. Rather, he has always treated her "as some decorative yet useful mechanical appliance needed for the efficient running of his household."<sup>4</sup> Like all the patriarchal societies the world over, Indian society has also developed a whole series of feminine characteristics like obedience, submissiveness, modesty and piety etc. Nanda has always fitted into this mould of an ideal woman. Instead of appreciating her, her husband has gone ahead and has had a life-long affair with Miss David, a Christian lady.

When we meet Nanda Kaul in the beginning of the novel, her husband has died and she is living a secluded life in hills. She seems to have outlived her utility, as she has fulfilled all of her duties as a wife and

a mother. All her sons and daughters have families of their own and she is left at Kasauli to live alone. Thus, Nanda Kaul faces isolation, thrust on her by the patriarchal society. Now, she wants to disconnect herself totally from the outside world. She even avoids the arrival of postman as he is a symbol of the world she has left behind. The peace of this retired grandmother is again disturbed when her daughter Asha wants her to shoulder the responsibility of her granddaughter, Raka. A letter communicating the same comes to her from Asha. Nanda feels like asking "Have I not done enough and had enough? ... Can I not be left alone with nothing?" (17) Nobody bothers to ask whether she is willing to take the responsibility of a young child.

Raka arrives in Carignano in the second part of the novel. In the beginning, both avoid each other. Raka does not speak much and is immersed in her own world. Her unusual behaviour may be attributed to the fact that she comes from a broken family. She has a drunkard father and an ever-ailing mother. Raka's mother, Tara, does not appear anywhere in the novel but we are told about her by her mother, Asha. Her mother considers her own daughter to be responsible for the rift in her marriage. Asha writes to her mother, "... he's not really so bad as Tara might make you believe... although it is true that he does drink." (15) Contrary to what she had feared, Nanda's world is not at all disturbed by the stay of Raka. Surprisingly however, this indifference on the part of Raka disturbs Nanda and she tries to attract Raka by telling her fascinating stories of her own childhood.

Nanda's old friend, Ila Das, is introduced in the third part of the novel. Ila comes to visit Nanda at Carignano. She had seen better days when her father was alive. But after his death, the family fortune was divided among her three drunkard brothers and Ila, her sister and their mother did not get anything. They even took "the last of the jewellery, and soon had them driven out into the rented rooms and boarding houses, finally to whatever roof charity would hold them." (124) Ila has never been well off. However, the difficulties in her life have not affected her ability to stand up in the face of adversity or shake her faith in herself.

Ila meets a tragic end in the novel. She is raped and murdered because she has raised a voice against patriarchal norms by trying to stop the marriage of a seven year old girl to a widower. The male-dominated society cannot brook any kind of meddling with its norms and least of all by a woman. She is consequently, raped and murdered by the father of the girl, whom she has tried to protect. In the meantime, Raka sets fire to the mountain and her shout "Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire" is symbolic of the fact that "a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural, should be destroyed." 5 The fire consumes the fictive world of Nanda. She realises that being utterly helpless is in the destiny of a woman. The reality hits her hard and being unable to come to terms with it, she ultimately dies.

Anita Desai like a true feminist has laid bare the ugly reality of the patriarchal society of India. It is a world where sensitive women like Nanda wither away under the hard glare of reality. It is a place where young girls like Raka fail to blossom as very early in their life, they come face to face with the unfairness of the world, where the blame of a failed marriage lies squarely on the shoulders of a hapless female, her own mother Tara, even though the fault lies with Raka's father who is an incorrigible drunkard. It is Ila Das, however, who suffers the darkest fate of all. She has to pay the price of questioning the mores of a male-oriented society. The ugliest face of male sovereignty is revealed through the punishment that is meted out to Ila Das.

It is an unequal world, therefore, which the female characters of novel inhabit, where the dice is loaded heavily in favour of male species. However all is not hopelessly dark in the world of *Fire on the Mountain*. The simple strength and dignity that the female characters exhibit do illuminate this dark world. These characters counter the ruthless might of a world governed by patriarchal laws in their own way with courage and dignity. No doubt, the tragic end that Ila meets is very depressing. In the words of a critic, "her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence"<sup>6</sup> and her death "sums up her failure as well"<sup>7</sup> But to say this is to entirely misinterpret all that she stands for. She can never be called a failure for she has faced life at its worst with great courage. If Ila Das has raised a banner of revolt in her lifetime, Raka's setting the mountain on fire raises the hope of the reader that the next generation will not take things lying down and that a change for the better is imminent. Nanda Kaul also holds her own through her quiet grace and dignity. She is definitely not a spineless character. She is a deeply sensitive woman, dignified under all circumstances. Though life has not treated her fairly, it has not succeeded in bowing her down completely. She handles her husband's extramarital affair with a rare grace. Another instance of her assertion of individuality can be seen in her keeping an hour in the afternoon for herself, even as a young wife and mother. After settling down in Carignano, she again tries to live independently, on her own terms. All the three portrayals are such which no feminist critic can have any objection to.

To conclude, *Fire on the Mountain* will always be remembered for her powerful female characters that leave indelible imprints on the memory of the reader.

### **Notes**

1. Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai*. Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987, p.12.
2. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Chennai: T.R. Publications Pvt. Ltd. , 1995, p.122
3. Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1997, p.29. All subsequent references to the text are from the same edition and are indicated in parenthesis after each quotation.
4. Dubbe, P. D. *Feminine Consciousness in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain* in *Critical Essays on Anita Desai's Fiction*, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya. Delhi: IVY Publishing House, 2000, p.117.
5. Jena, Seema. *Voice and Vision of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Sunil Printers, 1989, p. 54.
6. Asnani, Shyam M. "The Theme of Withdrawal and Loneliness in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*" *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, vol. IX, No. 1, p.89.
7. *Ibid.* p. 90.