



THE FRAGMENTED WORLD IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL "FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN"

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ABSTRACT:

Anita Desai, writer of International eminence has raised pertinent questions regarding the status and role of women in society. The patriarchal stronghold forces restriction on the actions of woman. At times there is resentment that does not surface owing to moral compulsion, at other times there is silent rebellion. The intent of this paper is to analyse the resentment alienation and forced isolation of three of the female protagonists – **Nanda Kaul, Raka** and **Ila Das** in Desai's novel "Fire on the Mountain."

KEYWORDS:

PATRIARCHAL STRONGHOLD, RESENTMENT ALIENATION, FORCED ISOLATION, FRAGMENTED WORLD.

INTRODUCTION

Fire on the Mountain (1977) is the story of Nanda Kaul who longs for a quiet retired life. For the first time, Anita Desai has no broken or bruised young wife as a protagonist. She seems to have been fascinated by the dialectic of age and innocence in this little book. After a breathless rush and hectic life as a Vice chancellors wife, Nand Kaul, now a desolate widow heaves a sigh of relief at the prospect of a quiet solitary retired life and rest in her numbered days in the 'sparse' and 'austere' house of Carignano in the hill station of Kasauli. Carignano symbolises the desolation, lack of fulfilment and barrenness in her own life.

"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 and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her"

(Fire on The Mountain, Pg. 29)

"She had suffered from the nimity, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess."

(Fire on The Mountain, Pg. 30)

RESENTFUL MUTE ACCEPTANCE

After a tumultuous life of commotion, Nanda Kaul yearned for a hushed bull – a serene life. Her marriage had been a farce. She had found nothing but infidelity, callousness and unfulfilled dreams. Overburdened with household duties, her life was lost in performing multifarious activities that tired and exasperated her.

"Life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the, still, fixed eye in the centre."

(Fire on The Mountain, Pg. 24)

As a social symbol she kept up the show of dignity and decorum of her Vice – Chancellor husband's house. All

these years "she has had several heads of children and grandchildren, servants and quests all relentlessly surging, clamouring about her" pg. 17. All her life had gone in "the mending of clothes saving on strings and buttons and letting out hems," or to quieten the vociferousness and the disorder among the children or to inspect the mountainous paraphernalia that each child required. The "unpredictable excess" (p. 30) of the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled, the endless powering of the guests, the preparation of too many meals, too many dishes on the table, several trays of tea for her husband's study and mother-in-law's bed, different children going to different schools at different times of the day had tremendously vexed her.

ALIENATION AND PRETENSE

Nanda Kaul had compromised with a life that abused her existence and exploited her generosity. She could not be a success neither as a wife, mother, great grandmother, nor as an individual. As a wife she was not the Queen of the house – but a mere social symbol. Burning in an agony of feminine jealousy, her life was outward, glamour and pretence but hollow within. Her husband's attentions had been towards a mathematics teacher Miss David "whom he had loved, all his life loved." pg. 145. Nanda mutely accepted her situation. Her life therefore was a mimetic enactment of a traditional role that she had to assume. Her children were all "alien to her nature she neither understood them nor loved them." Her choice for Carignano was a forced one, she was reduced to live there. Life had not respected her sacrifices and rights. Infact, the new role that she created for herself as a strong lonely individual, too proved to be a forced attitude, a poor camouflage.

RAKA: A FRAGMENTED WORLD

The novel opens with the aged Nanda Kaul who has retreated to a mountain resort free from all duties

imposed on her so far. She is now far away from the "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all at Carignano." (*Fire on the Mountain*, Pg. 3)

At this time the arrival of the postman, bringing her daughter Asha's letter, shatters the tranquility that she had long yearned for. Asha, Nanda Kaul's daughter wishes to send her ailing grand daughter Raka to Kasauli. **Nanda Kaul Asha, Tara and Raka** are four generations of mother daughter grand daughter, and great grand daughter in succession. Tara who is ill, cannot look after her, convalescent daughter Raka (suffering from Typhoid). Tara is leaving for Geneva with her diplomat husband Rakesh. Asha in her letter to her mother Nanda Kaul suggests that Raka who had typhoid was advised to be sent to a hill station. Thus Raka is to give company to her great grandmother Nanda Kaul.

Raka's arrival to Carignano is not a welcome relief to Nanda Kaul. Raka had a shattered family background. Her mother Tara (i.e. Nanda Kaul's grand- daughter) suffered an afflicted nervous breakdown, as a result of her marital discord with her husband Rakesh. Raka knows no affection from her father. The brute and harsh behaviour of the father towards daughter and her ailing mother makes the child alienate herself from the disjointed world of her parents. She thus, becomes an introvert due to parental disharmony and lack of love.

"Somewhere behind them, behind it all was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse – harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept."

(*Fire on The Mountain*, Pg. 71-72).

Devoid of love, resulting in insecurity and dissatisfaction, her tender heart is bruised heavily. She loses faith in the world and alienates herself like her great grand-mother. "If a whole life time trains Nanda Kaul to suppress gloomy emotions, a few years apprenticeship to sorrow has taught Raka, the greatest external austerity in emotional matters." (M.F. Patel) Raka ironically sings out a lyric in celebration of her isolation and sorrow –

"I'm shipwrecked, Raka exulted, I'm shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock – my boat, alone in my boat on the sea – She Sang."

(*Fire on The Mountain*, Pg. 61-62).

Neglected, she shows no streak of generosity or sympathy. Still, there hides a burning, drive under a cold, unconcerned attitude. She enquired of her mother's health and on knowing the answer her face was pale but composed. Straight after the news of her mother's illness she with an impetuosity rushes to the burnt house on the hill –

"She would go, she would go alone, no one would stop her, no one would come with her."

(*Fire on The Mountain*, Pg. 89).

Had she been nurtured lovingly, she would have been a different Raka. The violent and destructive tendencies would not have come up in her. The forest fires tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountain side. Having not experienced love (like Nirode and Monisha of "Voices in the city"), Raka finds love and pleasure not in the human company but amidst pines and rocks uninhabited wilderness, dilapidated ruins, burnt houses, solitary hillocks, thorny bushes, charred houses. She is drawn to things uncanny. Her frequent haunts are the ravines with lizards snacks, spider webs bones, rusted tins mealy ashes of bones, bundles of broken China kettles. The cries of the jackals has a Weird appeal for her. Eerie and grotesque things awaken her strange inquisitiveness to explore. Children of her age are usually attracted to exotic things and fairy tales but she is much interested in Ramlal's Chaurails.

BEQUEATHING A HOSTILE WORLD

Nanda's need for isolation had been a forced one, but Raka was a recluse by her very nature, instinct and birth. The great grandmother had bequeathed this gift to her in her heredity traits. "Nanda's compulsive drives and her inability to pattern her life, affect the three generations." (**Usha Bande**) Nanda had failed in her human relations – Asha was her least loved daughter – who in beautifying herself neglected Tara, who in turn grows a weakling and is ill-treated by her husband. Raka alienates herself from the fragmented world of the parents. "I don't care, I don't care, I don't care for anything," she proclaims.

No affection grows between Raka and Nanda Kaul as their solutions of withdrawal clash. All her life Nanda had been living in pretenses, but not Raka. Whatever Raka does is instinctively, there is no fake show of cultivating relationship on her part. She vehemently rejects human company. Raka is the very "finished perfected model" of what the other heroines of Anita Desai strove to achieve. Gradually, emotions thaw in Nanda Kaul. An unloved heart tries to reach out to Raka. "She pouted childishly, one might have said she had arrived at her second childhood if one believed in such things. She looked so exactly like a baby thwarted, wanting attention."

(*Fire on The Mountain*, Pg. 101)

There is an unfulfilled and concealed desire in her to love and be loved. An unsatisfied being she is – there is also a desire that someone would reciprocate her love and be near to her. Nanda is desirous of communication with Raka.

ILA DAS, SHADOW FROM THE PAST

Ila Das, Nanda's old companion is presented in the third part of the novel. Ila calls Nanda on phone and informs her of her proposed visit to Kasauli to meet Raka. She was a

lecturer in the Punjab University. It was Nanda's recommendation to her vice Chancellor husband that she got appointed in Home Science as Lecturer. Later she joins as an officer in the Social Welfare Department at Kasauli. She fights against child marriage by informing the local people about the ills of this practice. This invites a lot of fury of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one. Preet Singh too had a married child daughter of seven years. Ila wages a fearless battle against the evil customs of the society. Ila meets a shocking end. She is raped and murdered by Preet Singh. Ila Das protests against injustice but meets a ruthless death. All the female protagonists counter the rush less, might of a world governed by patriarchal laws. Raka's setting the mountain on fire is symbolical that the coming generations will not stop or accept anything given to them.

CONCLUSION

The women in the world of Anita Desai's fiction do not accept roles which makes woman just a "household slave, a social ornament or a sexual convenience." (Ujwala Patil). Nor do they emerge as bold and courageous as the new role models of Nayantara Sahgal. They stand with

thwarted wishes but cannot speak aloud their desires. The hazards of society are so heavy upon them that their rebellion ends but in resignation they accept and submit. All her female protagonists make an indelible mark on the mind's memory.

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