



Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

Vol: 3(3), 2021

REST Publisher; ISBN: 978-81-936097-3-6

Website: <https://restpublisher.com/book-series/ellrm/>

A Thematic Study of Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain

* Julia Persis S

St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science for women, Hosur, India.

*Corresponding Author Email: persis.julia@gmail.com

Abstract: Man lives in close communion with nature and hence every change of mood in nature affects the mood of man also. Man's relationship with nature has been expressed beautifully in the poems of Wordsworth, Keats, Frost and Shakespeare. In the new age literary theory eco-criticism has found a prominent place which examines and explores the bond between nature and man in literature. Classics in literature like Shakespeare's plays and romantic age poetry are being re-read in this context and eco-critical perspectives gives a new dimension to the critique. This paper explores the Indian writer in English Anita Desai's novel Fire on the Mountain in an eco-critical perspective and examines the way Desai brilliantly manipulates nature imagery in her novel in the depiction of the alienation of her protagonist Nanda Kaul who lives alone in her house Carignano situated on the mountain ridge of Kasauli.

The matrix of Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai deals with almost only women characters, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Illa Das are portrayed as figuring out in three different ambits of life that allow Desai the author to explore three different possibilities to the existentialist my statue of life. In doing so the novel skims over the efficiency of multi-perspective towards life that considers changes among characters.

Key Words: Withdrawal, Alienation, Indian Femininity

1. Introduction

One of the themes of Fire on the Mountain is surely withdrawal, with its associated theme of loneliness, especially as embodied in Nanda and Raka. In Nanda's case the fixed results from a failed, if enduring, marriage, while in Raka's case the fixed is from domestic violence, for both, a man causes alienation. The violence of a predatory world cannot, however, be to get away, as Illa Das's fate so forcefully indicates. Nor is the retreat without its symbolic violence, which is played out in nature. As Nanda anticipates Raka's visit, she sees a white hen drag out a som until it snaps in two: "she felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation, Nanda also sees herself as a predatory cat in pursuit of the lapwing, and later she sees the hoopoe bird feeding its young with insects. While Anita Desai tends to depict the ravine as blighted by civilization's waste and polluted by the smoke from the chimneys of the Pasteur Institute.

The Institute serves as an appropriate symbol for the antipodal nature of civilization or progress since it serves people through its production of serum, but at a cost: the smell of dogs brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs guts of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white. Anita Desai does not however seem to be in a way that Involves thinking about things that happened in the past with happiness and also slightly feelings. The colonial past is also marked by violence, which the postman traces with black humor in his account of a Carignano corrugated roof blowing off, decapitating a coolie the pastor's wife attempts to poison him and then stab him; Miss Jane Shrewsbury pokes a fork into her cook's neck and he dies.

2. Fire on the Mountain

In Anita Desai's fictional world, one simply cannot escape violence by difficult from e's obligations to others. Nanda's failure to connect with Illa Das and with Raka indirectly causes the former's death, and Raka's refusal to connect with her great-grandmother leads to her decision to destroy a world she can neither accept nor tolerate. 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, childbearing, caretaking, 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 unmatched to unfold the human psyche of all her characters, more particularly the woman protagonists. The fire is highly symbolic as it highlights the mental trauma of both Raka and Nanda. Raka whispered 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 symbolic and highlights the characters of Raka and Nanda. The fire lying suppressed in her heart is suddenly set burning by the shocking death of Illa Das, who was raped and later killed. Gradually, Nanda is there between fantasy and reality, ultimate reality, asserts themselves and she accepts the reality. Nanda wants to put down the suffocated being within and find a new life by burning in this fire. The fire embodies the violence of feelings and is a strong purifier.

Nature, as a theme of all popular forms of culture, is somewhere down the line, inescapable. Sometimes nature has been to praise or honor something or someone to an extreme degree and cherished and also at times it has been neglected. Literature swarms with works dealing with the representation of the natural environment, the mountains, the rivers, hills, meadows, etc. Literature being the most popular form of culture has never remained unaffected by this indispensable theme of man and his physical environment, human and non-human relations. The settings of the place, environment, and overall ambiance are represented meticulously by writers in their works of literature to bring different and desired effects. Eco- criticism originated as a theory with a predominant purpose of a microscopic view of a cultural text in context to its commerce with nature. Indian writing in English is an area in which Eco- criticism has been applied only sporadically.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) which won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1977 is a novel firmly established in the landscape of Kasauli. The novel depicts the gradual destruction of the ecosystem of Kasauli hills and its eventual destruction by a devastating forest fire. Interestingly the characterization in the novel also echoes this gradual desiccation. The dryness of the hills of Kasauli is reflected in the character of Nanda Kaul. The violation and death of Illa Das are akin to the conflagration of the forest fire. This article explores the theme of alienation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. The theme of alienation is a pivotal concept in postmodern literature. It has been in use in theological and philosophical writings. ngs. Alienation is a state of man's incompatibility with his milieu. It refers to the act of dividing something between man and nature and the disintegration of man's dream of bliss.

It also reflects a state of man's detachment from himself, with a prevailing sense of loneliness or a feeling of exclusion that accompanies any behaviour in which the person is compelled to self-destructively. The individuals are forced to manipulate people and situations by social demands while feeling incapable of controlling their actions. Alienation is an old phenomenon but it has assumed alarming proportions in the present age. Several factors have brought about this state of awareness. The feelings of alienation are inherent in man as he is prone to almost all the physical and psychological attacks of society and its controllers. The negative effects of alienation lead man either to commit suicide or to consider him not more than automation deprived of any personal ranking or individuality. In the present day, writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, etc. Write about the theme of alienation in their novels. Anita Desai in her novels is constantly concerned with the alienation of the protagonists from themselves, from society and themselves, from society and others. She depicts the dilemma of modern man. She is not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term.

The theme of alienation is treated by Anita Desai with much innovation, that she explores the minute details and analyses thoroughly the motives of her characters. She shows her male and female protagonists in strife. She portrays her characters as they are and not as they should be in her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existential themes such as male/female accommodation, alienation, the absurdity of human existence, quest for ultimate meaning in life, decision making, lack of communication, detachment and isolation, focusing on how women in the contemporary urban setup, bravely struggle against or helplessly submit to the relentless forces of an absurd life. The alienation among her protagonists is the result of the individualistic temperament influence of the past on the heroines and the conflict between fantasy and reality.

Feminine psyche in *Fire on the Mountain* and that long silence Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are women who were interested to represent the human psyche, the study of human beings destroyed within and outside. Both are great artists who portray the characters instilled with real, emotional, natural, and lively traits in them. Mainly they showed the pains and sufferings of the society and family members imposed various

responsibilities and restrictions on them. The life of women is like a prison, they trap in various responsibilities and duties throughout their life. They work without any rest for the welfare of the family and to complete all the demands of society. She also used the technique of flashbacks in her novels. These are the various themes that she portrayed in her books and also in her most famous *Fire on de Mountain*. The story sets in Kasauli, a hill station focused on three women who faced harsh experiences in their life. Starts with Nanda Kaul who is the protagonist of the novel, she fulfilled all his duties now at this age she just wants peace in her life so she isolates herself from everything

She undergoes psychic pressures such as conflict, confusion, dilemma, and struggle with illness due to the effects of the unsympathetic forces of society. These forces are nothing but the primary problems that all women have to face in their life like male domination, the evilness of patriarchal society, and responsibilities towards families. When the novel opens we find she is the great grandmother in the novel who suffers from mental problems. She only had a desire for respect, recognition, and love in her life. She wants to fly away from all emotional bounds and wants to get peace by isolating herself from everything. She did not find any delight in anything. We get to know about her through the flashbacks in the novel. She lived to forget and be lonely all her life. Her husband had an extra-marital affair with

Miss. David was a source of suffering in her life. She was just the homemaker. She did what her family demanded. She focused on marital relations. However, she uses a different way to show the feminine psyche. She presents the social reality as it is experienced by human beings, specially women. Her modern heroines stood against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. In all her novels she shows to make strenuous or violent efforts in the face of difficulties opposition struggling with the problem. Her most famous novel *Long Silence* is the best sample of showing the psyche of female, it presents the suffocated life story of Jaya who plays the role of wife, and mother but felt lonely. She hates the character of Sita and wants to break down that role. Jaya was liberated and modern but she was the victim of traditional rules, she was an unsuccessful writer. Her truthfulness or work and love have never been appreciated and she has no one to share feelings so she ultimately adopts silence. Deshpande also uses the technique of stream of highest authority in her novels like in this novel. There are so many flashbacks in the novel which gave detailed information about the life of Jaya.

Anita Desai's characters symbolize the alienation of women under patriarchy and of postcolonial identity in India. Nanda Kaul is the top example of this. She endured most of her life in a barren, loveless marriage and projected a socially acceptable image of marriage to maintain his status as vice-chancellor of a university. Despite devoting herself to keeping his house and raising their many children, neither he nor the children respect her or seem to care about her. Remembers her life like she was a prisoner and has been so thoroughly alienated from herself and her potential, that she becomes barren and incapable of connecting with others.

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 the act of explaining interpretation. Traditionally fire has been regarded both as a constructive and destructive force The very title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* reveals the theme of the novel and expresses Anita Desai's point of view. The Mountain is symbolic of Nanda Kaul and the Fire of Raka's wild nature. Nanda is the rocky belt, dry, hardened by time and age while Raka is silent, wife, and threatening like the forest fire. The novel may be considered a story of the ability of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another's position. For Raka, the forest and the hills are a source of refuge and solace that enables her to realize herself. The return in a state of nature helps Nanda and Raka to preserve them untouched and reanalyse their convictions. The dialectics between human nature and the natural environment are of great significance to reflect the cultural and social conditions in which humans live. The title also refers to the last act in the novel by Raka when she sets the forest on fire.

The pyromania of Raka is the result of her maladjusted personality because of her unhealthy upbringing at home where there was no parental love or affection. The title *Fire on the Mountain* also symbolizes the fire which burns in the heart of Nanda Kaul whose married life goes on doing hospitality to her vice-chancellor husband's guest and a good mother to children born out of loveless marriage. The language employed in *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai is marked by three characteristics: sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness, and a love for the sound of words. The story elements are very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end, the story revolves around the inner lives of the two female protagonists, Nanda Kaul and Raka. The small interactions between Nanda Kaul and Raka are insightful, and a few short conversations foretell the events to come.

This minimalist approach throughout the novel is one of the finest examples of the show and tell style of storytelling. The conflict between the need to withdraw to preserve one's wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in *Fire on the Mountain*. This oscillation between attachment and detachment reflects the need for meaning in life. The last few pages of the novel catch the reader by surprise. All the signs of the end were present in the novel, in the descriptions, in the tone of the narrator, and the few chosen Words of the characters. This is the strongest feature of the novel. There is never a word uttered about the oppression that these women have suffered throughout their lives. The book is a simple Portrayal of three women who have found a way to live in contentment albeit in seclusion. The justices and oppressions are for the readers to derive. The protagonist's quest is represented symbolically by a lyrical progression, produced by elaborate picture scenes. The whole novel is interspersed with references to the past, in the fun of the history of Carignano, life at Nanda Kaul's husband, the vice-chancellor's house, scenes from Nanda Kaul's childhood, history of Raka's parents, and the history of Illa Das.

The shift in the theme towards the end is from intense inner to the larger social issues present in the country. *Fire on the Mountain*, the self-destructive fire in the heart and mind of Nanda Kaul, juxtaposed with the bare physical surroundings caused by forest fires, decides the lyrical point of view. She is occasionally referred to as an explorer of the inner life of her female characters. *Fire on the Mountain* is sparsely populated with only three females, Nanda Kaul, Illa Das, and Raka. These women characters are detoxified through imagery to reveal their inner consciousness. Other characters are introduced by dialogue or memory devices. The conflict between the need and withdrawal to preserve one's sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life is contiguous in the novel. The oscillation between attachment and action reflects the need for a meeting in life. Nanda Kaul is in the midst of her busy life, tired to harden an hour of stillness every day, but stillness eluded and now she has arrived at it through her forced isolation.

3. Conclusion

The existential choice between, alienation and involvement, attachment and detachment prove equally fatal and futile. Excessive involvement and alienation both prove disastrous. First Raka, then Illa Das, and finally death creep into Nanda's world, unwanted and undesired and now her world is a cracked one. One after another, the novelist piles up incidents of greater Corrosiveness in emotionality and enhance the poetic appeal of the book. This particular novel is also a good illustration of the fact that women in colonized societies are often marginalized not only because of their race but also because of their gender. In her novel Anita Desai provides a clear for the disconsolate condition of subaltern women in postcolonial India, the novel marks a trajectory in which subaltern women are completely controlled by the first is a system of relationships.

Anita Desai challenges and subverts traditional and masculine forms of writing by making her characters speak. Writing and reading were the most powerful tools through which the system of relationship, hence the empire, articulates and performs its magical super- domination. For doing so, Anita Desai relies on young Raka, who would finally rise from the ashes like a phoenix and set the patriarchy on fire.

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