

IDENTIFYING ESTRANGED RELATIONS IN ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, one of the greatest novelist of the Indian English fiction was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station near North of Delhi. She is a daughter of a Bengali father D.N. Mazumdar and a German mother Toni Nime, her mixed background has enabled Desai to view India from something of an outsider's perspective, to see India both as Indians and as a non-Indians. Many of Desai's protagonists are portrayed as single women. Desai does not neglect the institution of marriage or support alienation from society. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai explores the effectiveness of escapism as a coping mechanism. The novel shows the clash of generations between Raka and Nanda, the division of classes between Nanda's isolated hill community and the nearby village, and the conflict between the educational programs sponsored by the central government and the traditions of the local villagers. This paper is an attempt to explore the theme of alienation in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*.

Keywords: Alienation, perspective, portrayed, society, institution.

In Anita Desai's novel's telling a story is less important than creating characters. Free from political enthusiasms, Anita Desai makes each work of hers a marvel of construction. The world of Desai's fiction is largely a domestic one. She is interested primarily in the lives of women in India since independence, the lives of women in the modern Indian nation state, rather than the history or politics of the subcontinent on a more extensive scale. Anita Desai won the Winifred Holtby prize of the Royal Society of Literature for the novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1978).

Alienation means a feeling of separation or isolation. In social science, alienation is associated with the problems caused by rapid social change, such as industrialization and urbanization, which has broken down traditional relationships among individuals and groups and the goods and services they produce. Alienation is most often associated with minorities, the

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poor, the unemployed and other groups who have limited power to bring about changes in society. Alienation which means emotional isolation or dissociation has been a very common theme among modern writers.

Fire on the Mountain explores the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her great grand daughter, Raka. The loneliness and isolation of the two have been presented in detail. Nanda Kaul is a wife of Late Vice-Chancellor. She has had a life cluttered up with children, servants and guests all of whom has continual claims on her. After her husband's death, she moves to Carignano, her villa in the hills. She is crazy because she is trying to attain complete withdrawal which is not attainable, but she is well planned and generally under her control. Neeru Tandon opines:

“Nanda Kaul had prepared herself for a long time to enjoy the peace and beauty of this lonely place.”(*Anita Desai and Her Fictional World*, P: 125)

Nanda Kaul lives alone in Carignano with a cook Ram Lal. She has a feeling of failure in not having been able to have a life of privacy, individuality, freedom and meaning. Her only wish is : “ to be left to the pines and cicadas alone ” (P : 3) She has been living all these years all alone : “ It was the place and time of life, that she had wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction.” (P : 3)

One day the postman comes and brings a letter from her daughter Asha. Asha finds it difficult to look after her daughter's daughter, Raka, her parents being required to be in Geneva on a new posting. Raka is sent to Carignano. Nanda Kaul has to embrace her. Fawzia Afzal-Khan remarks:

Nanda is obviously unhappy at having the yoke of responsibility thrust around her neck once again.(*Cultural Imperialism And The Indo-English Novel*, P: 79)

The letter disturbs Nanda Kaul emotionally and she has to make particular efforts. She feels: “All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain.”(P: 18)

Nanda Kaul's life has been an endless story of suffocating weariness. As the Vice-Chancellor's wife she is the pivot of the busy world. She is immensely glad when there comes to an end to her relentless responsibilities. In her real life she is not happy and satisfied. She is alienated twice in her life. First her busy, pleasure-loving husband has nothing to do with her private self and her relations with her children are not intimate either. Second time, in her life, she remembers bitterly cursed: “her failure to comfort children, her total inability to place herself in another's position and act accordingly. Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in life.” (P: 97)

Nanda Kaul performs the duties of her married life very well, for her husband and children never bothered about her inner feelings. This indifference of her husband and children made her pine for a privacy which could be hers only. This is the reason why she guards her privacy in Carignano and does not like the idea of Raka's staying with her.

Raka, the little girl has seen the harsh realities – the cruelty of her father beating her mother and embittered childhood. Hence the girl suffers from an unnatural fear of cruelty and insecurity. Nanda Kaul thinks it is difficult to take care of Raka. But Raka is not interested to listen to stories about people and relations before going to bed like other normal children. Raka

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does everything so silently and secretly that Nanda cannot discover what she does with herself all day long.

Devindra Kohli & Melanie Maria Just opines:

Raka continues to suffer from the echoes of her tortured childhood, the endless quarrels of her parents which had left a scar on her tender sensibilities. (Anita Desai *Critical Perspectives*, P: 124)

Raka wants to be alone. As long as Raka is out of view, Nanda Kaul waits for her arrival. But when she comes, Nanda turns a look on her “that was reproachful rather than welcoming” (P : 52) But Raka never stops to take notice of it .

“She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and willful rejection of the child.” (P : 52)

Raka is not born recluse. The abnormal circumstances around her make her an introvert. Raka wants only one thing that is to live alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. Nanda Kaul is a recluse out of vengeance for a lifelong duty and obligation. But Raka is a recluse by nature and by instinct. N.R. Gopal pointed out that:

“Raka is attracted towards the unpleasant aspects of nature like, the barren spaces of the valley. This attraction is an externalization of her sub-normal nature.” (A *Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai*, P: 86)

Another intruder in Nanda’s isolated life at Carignano is Ila Das, her childhood friend. She telephones Nanda and Nanda is forced to invite her to tea. Ila Das has always looked to Nanda Kaul for support and guidance. After conversations with Raka and Nanda Ila Das leaves Nanda’s house. But unfortunately she is raped and murdered in that quiet sleepy place. Ila Das is an unselfish person and dedicated herself to the service of her fellow human beings. Sujatha Rao opines:

Even though to provide herself with the bare minimum is difficult for her, she seems to be happy, loves life and people both, and tries to maintain the dignity of her father who was a rich well established man. (Postmodernist Approach To Anita Desai A Socio-Cultural Study of Her Novels, P: 73)

Alienation has been the thematic motif that organically connects Anita Desai’s fiction. This makes her an exceptionally unique novelist.

conclusion: Anita Desai has presented a realistic picture of life in its varied forms through different characters and situations. The human relationships are given top priority in all her writings . Anita Desai deals with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant agony and anguish in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul, a great grandmother. Nanda Kaul’s lifelong frustration caused by an unhappy marriage is a theme of *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda Kaul feels comforted after her husband’s death, because she is free to live life according to her wishes and desires. Anita Desai, in her novels gives a perfect focus on the theme of alienation in different angles such as self imposed alienation and the alienation of racism, class and society.

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