

ILA DAS – ICON OF OLD SPINSTERS OF POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

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Literature is universal, it speaks and affects. It gives the retrospection of life. It is as old as the human species and it evolves through the human journey. It can broadly be classified as before and after world war-II. An obvious shift in writings can be marked between these two eras. Before the Second World War it is more like Pan-literature, more society centred and public oriented. It speaks about the meaninglessness and hopelessness of the society. It advocates that each person should create own meaning of their life. After the world war – II the themes shifts to more individualistic, personal searches, problems of social identity and cultural dilemmas. This paper portrays an old spinster Ila Das, a secondary character in Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain". She represents the community of the old spinsters who lived a life of repute in the past but is literally nowhere now.

Characteranalysis helps in understanding the human attributes like physical, intellectual, emotional, social and philosophical which in turn helps in understanding the social impacts of the particular period. Anita Desai crafts all her characters whether it is primary, secondary or minor, in detail which makes her audience feel the sentient presence of them. IlaDas has a direct role in the plot and has a heavy impact on the story line.

Fire on the Mountain wonderfully portrays the Indian life and the isolated life of the old age people. Nanda Kaul is the protagonist and her life projects the intricacies of relationship and the problems that arise due to kinsmen. Nanda is projected as a proud wife of Mr.Kaul, the vice chancellor, living a royal life, ruling the household with a legacy. But in reality she never feels that she ever belongs to this ambience as she is betrayed by her husband and his secret mistress. Now at the age of ninety she leads a life of recluse in Kausali, at the foot hills of Simla. She wants no one around her and her stoic life is disturbed by two people, Raka her granddaughter and Ila Das her friend. The novel is divided into three parts and each has a special impact to three main characters of the novel Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The third part of the novel 'Ila Das leaves Carignano' talks about the pathetic plight of an old destitute woman Ila Das. She is murdered by Pareetsingh as she tried to sop his girl-child's marriage. The most pathetic part is her rape before she is murdered. Even death does not occur to her normally. IlaDas' death affects Nanda and at the same time Raka fires the mountain, the fictive world of Nanda is shattered.

Nanda is so ascetic at the age of ninety two that she treats a phone call as great intrusion; she never wants to meet any of her old acquaintances. But for Ila Das her meeting with Nanda is blissful as it gives her pleasure to think of their good old time, when she flourished and lived with respect and hope. Ila Das projected as a social worker but is actually a poor character caught

between life and death. Ila Das follows Nanda throughout her life, it is only through Ila the regal image of Nanda shatters through which one can probe into the hurt heart of hers. Ila Das also adds details to her story as Nanda narrates it to Raka. The story is spun all in glory and intermittent light to make the child happy and interesting but only towards the end of the second part the real awkwardness behind Nanda's life is publicised. Nanda knows very well that Ila is no more prospering, has problems on bread winning but by no means she wants to take her into her custody. Nanda was so stubborn and is not ready to offer her a stay with her atleast for that night which Ila expects. That night turned out terrific and fatal.

Ila Das is a character depicted with comic physical structure but actually a pitiable character. It is normal that she is psychologically affected as she is not sure of her next dinner or lunch. Nanda's search for individuality comes to a close with death of Ila Das. Ila Das is introduced as a social worker and an old acquaintance of Nanda. Though Ila belonged to a reasonably good family, the fortune of the family is divided among the brawling brothers and the two adult sisters are made to work hard for a mere existence. Ila Das could not find a job because of her inadequate studies and her nervousness to face the world.

By the time Ila Das had come to the university campus as lecturer in Home Science, at Nanda Kaul's suggestion and Mr. Kaul's invitation, those flowery, tinkling years were already over. Her mother lay rotting in a bed with a broken hip that would not mend, and her father was dead of a stroke. The family fortune, divided amongst three drunken, dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it either of the two clever, thrifty, hard-working daughters, Ila and Rima, (FOM 135).

Her physical attributes are detailed comically but through her the society is mocked at. She is depicted comically with her outfits, hooting topknot, rusty old umbrella, uneven rushing walk and a shrieking voice but tragically she is cast out of a normal society. All her life, she is accustomed to a 'jeering Mob' and she could not escape one every day. Now she is out of the college and is a social worker, barely gets any salary and starves continually. Her intellectual attribute is seen when she discusses with Nanda and is very true in stating that how their education has made them useless, she opines that instead of giving them book education, if they have been provided with world education and an art to live on, it would have been good.

'how helpless our upbringing has made us, Nanda. We thought we were being equipped with the very best – French lessons, Piano lessons, English governesses - my, all that only to find it left us helpless, positively handicapped.' She cracked with laughter like an old egg. 'Now if I were one of the peasants in my village. Perhaps I'd manage quite well. Grow a pumpkin vine, keep a goat, (FOM 139)

Nanda knows very well that she is not able to meet her ends up. She feels like telling, 'Come and stay with me Ila,' and then clutched it tighter still to keep herself from saying what would ruin her existence here at Carignano. She simply shook her head." (FOM 139)

Nanda does not want even to keep her that night and Ila Das returns to her place and where she is brutally raped and murdered by Pareet Singh who is enraged by her ways of obstructing his daughter's marriage, in reality a child marriage. The death of Ila Das is so pathetic,

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Her eyes still swiveled in their sockets, two alarmed marbles of black and white, and quickly he left the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shriveled, starved stick inside the wrappings, and raped her, pinned her down into the dust and the goat droppings, and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. (FOM 156)

Even an old woman like Ila Das is not spared from being raped, that is because the patriarchal society has allocated it with the modesty of a woman and tries to control women's mobility. Many critics and feminists have talked about this sexual violence against women and unfortunately, Ila Das is punished for getting indulged in the sexual transactions of men community, here the indulgence is stopping the child marriage. The social evils of Child marriage and rape affecting only the women community is wretched behind IlaDas's death. Ila Das, an old friend of Nanda, the protagonist of the fiction *Fire on the Mountain*, captures attention with her highly animated features and movements. This character, rendered with all unfortunate episodes, moves a reader and her death causes a tragic effect on Nanda Kaul. Similarly young girl Raka also suffers from the disharmony of her parents. Her father is a drunkard who abuses Raka and her Mother Tina. Both Nanda and Ila passively submit whereas Raka acts violently against the oppression. Ila Das with an abnormal physique and piercingly screeching voice serves as an image of single, poor, old and destitute women community.

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