

Emotional Bonds: Social Barriers for Women in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyse Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* how it depicts the social barriers to the growth of a woman. It analyses the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter, Raka and the intervention of Ila Das, the childhood friend of Nanda. Further, the paper explores how Anita Desai projects female freedom as only a myth.

KEYWORDS

Social barriers; Alienation; Feminism; Anita Desai.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Her father was Bengali and mother German. She was educated in Delhi where she received an AB in English literature from the University of Delhi. She started writing at the age of seven. She married Business Executive Ashvin Desai on December 13, 1958. They had four children. She has published twelve novels and many more short stories and articles to date. Her growing popularity is seen in the increasing number of researchers taking up critical studies of her works in the universities in India and abroad. She has received various prizes and awards.

The Sahitya Akademi winner *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai explores the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter, Raka and the intervention of Ila Das, the childhood friend of Nanda. It is the story of emotional bonds –matrimonial as well as filial love.

The first part of the novel depicts the lovely, solitary and alienated life of Nanda Kaul at Carignano in Simla Hills. She has passed a very busy life as the wife of the Vice-

Chancellor of Punjab University and as a mother of many children and hence now she wants to live peacefully, without being disturbed by her relations or by anyone else.

Nanda Kaul's self-imposed withdrawal underlines her alienation from her husband's death, who did not love her and carried on a lifelong affair with Miss. David, the mathematics Lecturer in the University. Nanda's husband has not been loyal to her throughout life. Their marriage is based solely on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for the husband, who lives his double life without any commitment either to his wife or to his mistress. Nanda becomes the victim of forced motherhood, producing umpteen numbers of unloved unwanted children. Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner 'self'. Till his death, she led her life according to his dictates not because of any love or regard for him; but out of a sheer sense of duty. Although she mechanically performed her duties and responsibilities towards her children and husband, she was not happy and satisfied in

her real life. She was twice alienated. Her very busy and pleasure-loving husband had nothing to do with her 'private self'. Her relationship with her children was not intimate even... and her children – were all alien to nature. She neither understood nor loved them.

After her husband's death, her children came to help her to vacate the Vice-Chancellor's house and to move to Kasauli. However, soon her children went away, and none of them could stay with her because 'she no more wished to add to them that she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radiantly single life'. She feels that she has achieved this privacy, only at the end of her life.

R. S. Sharma considers her a totally withdrawn and detached woman when he says "her withdrawal stands for an emotional society, a kind of psychic frigidity and refers to take note of any movement around" (Sharma 118).

Her life, for almost three decades, has been full of disappointments and betrayals. Nanda has been leading an alienated life at Carignano in Simla Hills expecting no intruder there. One day she sees the postman carrying a letter for her and she feels that he is coming to create 'ripples' in her tranquil limped life. It is from her least loved her daughters, Asha. She informs her mother in the letter that she is sending her granddaughter, Raka to Kasauli and it is necessary for her to take care of great-granddaughter. Bewildered, Nanda questions herself, "Have I not done enough and had enough.... Can I not be left with nothing? (17). While Nanda was feeling that she is free from all obligation of daily life, she is once again compelled to shoulder the responsibility of tending Raka. As Nanda has been deeply alienated from her children and the members of the family, she does not want to welcome anyone of them because her heart is deeply hurt by their indifference and selfishness. She feels that she cannot be free in

the presence of Raka. Much more than this, the old lady feels so miserable for she has to take care of the child. So her conscience is quite unwilling to keep her great-grandchild, Raka in her house. She wishes to live like a free soul.

Nanda does not feel peace within, in spite of her escape from the world of duties and relations. She seems to be a resigned individual. Her escape from mental, emotional and social conflicts is only a semblance of peace. She overlooks the basic principle that the past cannot be shut by running away from it. One should not run away from life at any stage of life. We should live life fully. Emerson argues that at any stage, under any circumstances, it is difficult to get out of ourselves; "it is easy to live after the world's opinion, it is easy in solitude to live after your own, but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd, keeps with perfectly sweetened the independence of solitude" (Emerson 64). The seclusion of Carignano does not shield her from the haunting sense of failures and meaningfulness. She is not even in her solitude.

Raka's love for isolation is the result of her traumatic experience of her childhood. Mother's ill health and the excessive drinking and aggressive behaviour of her father turn her against all human connections. Raka has not been a recluse. She becomes an introvert due to abnormal circumstances around her. She is the victim of a broken home. Raka has witnessed enough of the ambiguity of life in her eight years of existence. Her grandmother Asha is worried about Tara's relationship with her husband, Rakesh. Their marriage has been on the rocks all the time. The father has no time to look after the well-being of his child. Consequently, Raka's traumatic experiences deprive her of a child's innocent trust and feeling of joy in the company of others. Like other normal children, she is not interested in the stories about people, about relations.

Raka arrives at Carignano. Nanda regards her arrival as an unwelcome intrusion. Raka is much more attracted by the beauties and delights of Himalayan Hill Station and goes for long walks on her own and avoids human company and conversation. To Nanda, Raka is an outsider. But Raka never feels alienated as she is 'a recluse by nature by instinct'. She is basically a child of solitude. She identifies herself with the desolation and barrenness of Carignano. Raka strikes as an undemanding child who has 'no needs'. All she wants is 'to be left alone' and pursue her own secret life. Nanda Kaul herself admits: "Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Among them she appeared freak by virtue of never making a demand, she appeared to have no needs.... Raka wanted only one thing - to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (48).

Both Nanda and Raka seem to live separately under the same roof without disturbing each other. One is not a hindrance to other. Nanda is very happy with the nature of Raka. In the beginning, Nanda considers Raka as an 'uninvited mouse or cricket'. Later it is revealed that Nanda thinks of making a will in favour of Raka.

Raka is not a normal child by any standard. As there is no domestic bliss in her parents, they cannot fulfil her basic needs. Consequently, she developed anxiety. Raka's dream world is shattered when she peeps into the club where the drunken orgy was on, one evening. She sees people dancing in the ballroom. There is violence in their dance. She cannot tolerate this violent world's cruelty towards women and so she runs towards Carignano. The scene in the club reminds her of her father's violent behaviour towards her mother due to his club life. The scene shocked her deeply and reminded her of the tragic life of her mother. It has been the daily habit of

her father to come home drunk at night and beat her mother. Perhaps this is the most fearful outcome of a marital maladjustment, the vicious twisting of child's personality due to abnormal circumstances prevailing in a broken home. This shock brings about a change in Raka which Nanda also senses.

Raka's detachment shows that she does not care about the duties of life, obedience and discipline. She says, 'I am shipwrecked I am shipwrecked and alone' (Desai 61). Raka's indifference was 'a challenge' to Nanda Kaul. When she goes to the Pasteur Institute where she sees a vulture one evening, she runs back terrified. She is badly frightened by the cruel ugly side of life and feels insecure. For the first time, she sees fire on the mountain which means violence to her. She is extremely upset and cannot sleep throughout the night. She wants to see the scene of the fire again to know how it can be extinguished.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's friend intrudes in the life of Nanda at Carignano. Nanda and Ila have been friends since their childhood. The meeting of Nanda with her old friend, Ila Das describes the painful present of her friend and regretful past.

Ila Das was always treated inferior to her brothers in her house. She is a fatty, short-statured lady jeered and laughed by children and others. She is not loved by anyone in spite of her involvement in life. This makes her feel lonely and alienated. She has a very shrill voice. It is also a reason for her alienation from the maladjustment with the society. Ila Das views Carignano almost a paradise, a fairyland. After the death of her father, she has to struggle with the realities of life at every step. She faces boldly hunger and poverty. Most of her problems are of course due to her honesty, self-respect and service mindedness. Ila takes utmost care of her bed-ridden mother and needy sister. She resigns her lecturer's job because of her principles. Later on, she becomes a welfare officer and comes to the

Himalayan foot Hills to discharge her duties amongst the poor. Just for identity, she prepares to work as a welfare officer. She narrates to Nanda quite a few hair-raising stories of her experience as a welfare officer. Before taking leave, she relates to Nanda how she had tried to prevent a villager named Preet Singh from marrying off his seven-year-old daughter to an old widower having six children, a quarter of an acre of land and two goats. Saying goodbye to Nanda, she starts rushing to her place in a hurry with a view to getting there before dark. As she walked alone towards the village, that last of the light had left the valley. On the way Preet Singh, who has been laying in a bush for her, angrily assaults and rapes her and consequently murders her. This treacherous and brutish act expresses man's cruelty and woman's helplessness to save her honour and life from animal-like man-made society.

On receiving the news of Ila's death, Nanda's self-hate operates in several ways. She is overwhelmed by a feeling of worthlessness and inadequacy. A loving individual and close friend of Ila as she has been should have thought of asking her old friend to stay on at Carignano. So, Nanda condemns herself as a murderer of Ila. Yet she could not believe the murder and rape of Ila Das. It finally causes her psychic death, followed by a sudden physical demise. The silent-annihilation of Nanda is immediately followed by a more violently destructive act of Raka by hearing the news of Ila. She came whispering, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire..... look, Nani - look-the forest is on fire. She raised her voice, then raised her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the telephone wire dangling" (145). The title of the novel refers to the words of Raka. Setting the forest on fire shows Raka's regret against

the violence of man – dominated society. She cannot face the hard realities of life and therefore she isolates herself from everything and every person.

By this novel, Anita Desai explodes female freedom as a myth. She likes to suggest that the myth of masculine superiority is preserved in the area of physical strength. Ila Das has ultimately died a brutal death of misery, worse than poverty as a result of her acts of protest against injustice. Anita Desai is a fatalist who believes that woman's fate is linked with her sex. The condition of women in the pre-independent India was worse and more pathetic than in the contemporary period. With the dawn of independence, the position of women underwent a little change. However, in social life, the status of women has not improved. Modern Indian women are not completely independent. They are still made to depend on men, whatever be the relationships. A woman has no escape in this male-dominated patriarchal family system which sanctions security to women who choose to live by slave morality losing identity as a person. The situation of Ila's sexual violence, Nand's death and Raka's plight in the life, bring this into focus. It is a hint at our culture which has permitted a woman to be and to remain essentially what is euphemistically feminine. The feminine refers to the acceptance of roles which makes a woman just a household slave, a social ornament or a sexual convenience. What Henric Ibsen, applies to these women very appropriately, "Home is Girl's prison and Women's workshop" (*A Doll's House*).

Through this novel, Anita Desai depicts the plight of women in a male-dominated patriarchal, matrilineal, father dominated Indian society.

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