

# Feminine sensibility in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

**Prof. Keshav Pralhadachar**

Assistant Professor of English, Sri. K.H Patil Government First Grade College,  
Hulkoti, Dist: Gadag, Karnataka

## ABSTRACT

The Paper focuses on an elderly widow's isolation and loneliness, as it tells the story of Nanda Kaul who lives in Kasauli and leads a solitary existence. In this novel, Anita Desai deals with the theme of loneliness, illusion reality, and domination of females in patriarchal Indian. The paper highlights the solitude and loneliness as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow. Nanda Kaul is old. She has chosen to spend her last year's high up in the mountains where she can arrange her thoughts into tranquility. She fights back to understand the news, Raka beats on the windowpane, summoning her great-grandmother to observed the wildfire she has started in the ravine.

**Keywords:** Feminine, Against, Inner, Crisis, Isolation, Despair, Illusion, Reality And Identity

## INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* was published on London in 1977. It was the royal Society of literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the 1978 national Academy of letters awards. She is a novelist of human heart, and artist shaping the inner crisis of her characters. She is hardly infected is social life, political events and mundane aspects of the characters; she explores the interior layers of her protagonist's mind and bring to the surface various shades of inner crisis. On the part of the individual she avoids unimportant things and presents thoughts with razor-like sharp awareness of the internal crisis of existence of her characters. Thus most of them are overcast by shadows, half-shadows, half revealed and half-concealed. In this novel Desai describes Nanda haul's motherly feelings of humiliation and desolation for life time alienation.

*Fire on the Mountain*, This is one of the best-written novels of Anita Desai. It follows in ironical juxtaposition of the actual and the aesthetic. Nanda Kaul, is depicted as the great grandmother who has performed all her duties as a woman, mother, grandmother etc. Now in her 80's, she decides to live peacefully at Corrigan, a hill station, discharging her duties "She fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. She like the bareness of Corrigan" (Desai, 3) We can see the traits of escapism in Nanda Kaul. But Tara, her great-granddaughter enters into her life and the peace is shattered.

Tara holds her emotionally. The light of escape comes to a grinding haul for Nanda Kaul. Anita Desai is at her best in nature's description- just a few words and the readers get the slice in their plate.

After the death of her husband, who was a vice-chancellor, she has been so glad when it was over, she is happy to leave it all behind in the plains like a great heavy difficult book that has being read through and was not required to be read again. This is how she laments "discharge me she groaned, I have discharged all my duties- Discharged.

This novel is all about Nanda Kaul who has withdrawn herself from the world of Bags and letters, message and demands, requests, promises and queries" (Desai, 3) in to Corrigan to a haunted house Kasauli. She is seeking an absolute isolation here "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever came or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion and destruction." (Desai, 45) Her withdrawal stands for an emotional stativity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses to take note of any movement, animate or inanimate. In fact the novel grows out of a contrast between several patterns of movement and stillness. These patterns involve both the human and the non-human. Corrigan minimizes human movements, the movements in nature continue to remind the reader of a reality where attempts at an absolute stillness appear to be completely unnatural. The unexpected arrival of Raka, her great granddaughter, further restricts Nanda Kaul's desire for isolation. The interaction between the two provides the major focus of the novel. Together they posit a world where the canker of loneliness spares neither age nor innocence.

Anita Desai uses the flashback technique. Nanda Kaul remembers her past days as the dignified wife of the vice-chancellor. The beginning of the novel gives the setting and depicts Nanda Kaul's anxiety to meet the intruder in her private world of

self-willed isolation. The second part deals with Raka's experiences in the "Bareness and stillness. In contrast to her great-grandmother, Raka, is alive to the movements around her. Nanda Kaul shuns all movements. Raka loves it. "She had a gift for disappearing suddenly, silently, she would be gone, totally, not to return for hours" (Desai, 145) Nostalgia for a lost innocence and awareness of a decaying life are recurrent themes in Anita Desai. In this novel the contrast between the two is made evident in the two characters of Nanda Kaul and Raka. It leads us to the theme of withdrawal.

The third part of the novel picks up the story of Ila Das, who dies in very tragic circumstances. Here, Anita Desai has shown a rape case. The news of Ila das's death over the phone, shatters forever Nanda's world of reverie; "But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone with her head still thrown back, far back she gasped; No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be - - - No, she wanted to tell the man on the phone, no, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head then hung it down, down, let it hang." (Desai, 145)

Raka's final utterance, against the death of two sensitive lives, "look, nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look nana, look-the forest is on fire acquires tremendous symbolic significance" (Desai, 148) . It expresses Raka's resolve to destroy a world where women cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural. Anita Desai's feminist sensibility is as broadly reflected in this, as it is in her other novels. The tragic contrasts that she presents in the growth of women are primarily psychic, but also reveal a social reality which moves us and appalls us at the same time. Very few writers since Saratchandra have penetrated so deep in the female psychic to unravel those forces that destroy her within.

In comparison to her other novels, the action in this novel is evenly distributed in the three major characters and does not remain focused on any one of them. The novel also suggests an adroit manipulation of the point of view, for the denouncement comes as a surprise to the reader who is inclined to accept Nanda Kaul's projected childhood as a reality. The grim reality of Ila das's rape and murder completely shatters the unreality of Nanda Kaul's projected reverie. The contrast between fiction and reality comes as a shock to the reader and the moment he looks back to recollect Nanda Kaul's unreal world of fantasy, he is confronted with the fire on the mountain.

The fire consumes the fictive world of Nanda Kaul and leaves the reader smoldering under the impact of a tragic awareness that he had never anticipated. The only reality he is finally left with is the reality of fire that symbolizes the funeral pyre-the ultimate consummation. Though pervaded with a sense of doom, Anita Desai's dark and dismal fictive world is redeemed by her deep intuitive awareness of a reality that eludes average human sensibility. In it lie her greatest strength and perhaps her greatest weakness. It surprises the reader with its quaint fatalism.

The poor Raka is bewildered when she finds her home completely shattered as her mother visiting various nursing homes and she herself suffers several nervous breakdowns. She finds no mother to speak and to nurse. Though Raka solitary but self-sufficient girl to work like an explosive to set fire to the maintain side. *Fire on the Mountain*, the two main characters in this novel, Nanda Kaul and Raka are mountain and fire respectively. Nanda Kaul's husband had held high position of the Vice- chancellor. She worked hard to run the household. After her husband has died and children settled in their homes. Nanda Kaul retires to a secluded place to get a life peace and tranquility. But one day she gets a letter from her daughter Asha informing her that she will send Raka to live with her. Raka's mother, Tara , is going to Geneva to make up with her husband and Asha herself is going to on an important assignment. Nanda Kaul accepts the responsibility of a small child reluctantly. For sometime Nanda kaul fails to imagine where from she will get toys for Raka. She has the responsibilities of giving food and sending this child to bed. " she would have to urge her to eat eggs and spinach, caution her against lifting stones in the garden under which scorpions might be lying asleep, see her to bed at night in the next room, wandering if they could have slept, straining to catch a sound from the bed room, their opposing thought colliding in the dark like jittery bats in flight" (Maini, Darshan Singh, 101 )

Nanda Kaul had so many fears, but Raka proves to be of different sort. She is fascinated by hills, charred house at the top, stormy winds, forest fire and such other aspect of nature. Rakha is the child of nature. Nature lure her way for hours Nanda Kaul is surprised by Raka's indifference to all those things which generally entice children. She further notices that Raka is interested in human society and its affairs at the tender age. Raka has strong and intense emotions for animals. Ram Lal, the servant, is going to hurl a stone at a langur mother, holding her infant to her breast, but Raka holds his arm with all her force and begged him to leave her. She is moved to see hoopoes collecting dragon flies and other insects for their young ones with great effort since Ram lal had collected all the apricots, left none for the hoopoes. Nanda Kaul realizes that Raka is not an ordinary girl. Raka is a recluse by nature, a step ahead of her grand-mother Nanda Kaul made an all out effort to bring Raka in the line with other children of her age, but to no avail. She asks Raka gives the expected negative reply. Nanda Kaul comes to believe that raka deserves a home like carignano because ambience here fully responds to Raka's

nature. She wishes to make a will in favour of Raka, but the ideas of bringing a lawyer, a worldly man, in the affairs of a recluse and lover of nature will be monstrous.

Nanda Kaul and Ila das are school friends. Ila das is ill-fated, short size with squeaking voice and horrible gait. Therefore, she has suffered embarrassment all her life. Her strong brothers are sent to the foreign countries for education but they cut classes and borrowed money from everyone for their enjoyment to such extent that their father has to tell his horse, carriage and even the house to repay the loan. After the death of the father they pestered their mother and two sisters, Ila and Rama, for jewellery left with them. Ila and Rima are left to earn their bread and butter and look after their ailing mother. Rima begins to give lessons in Piano and Ila gets a job in Home science College with the help of Nanda Kaul's husband. But after some time Rima fails to get students since they are interested in pop music and Rima loses her job. Under the advice of Nanda Kaul, Ila does a course on social service which gets her a job Kasauli where most of the people are illiterate and conservative and reactionary. People go on fast if cows dry up or evil destroys their crop. Their miseries are enhanced by priests who misguide the poor and ignorant people. Priest says to Mayadevi that her son has died due to anti septic injection given to him the injection given t him. . Mayadevi is advised by Ila to get her son to the doctor who gave him the injection. Priest said that 'the injection were the work of the devil'. Preet sigh, wants to marry off his minor daughter to a rich landowner. Ila tries to dissuade him from doing so. Ila's attempt to help the people gets her not the love of the people, but their hatred. Preet Sigh is so much annoyed with Ila that he waylays her, rapes her and kills her. This is the rewards that Ila gets for the social service she has rendered.

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* gives a positive message. She tells us to strike a balance between reality and illusion as our illusion is the result of our inner crisis. Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are such characters whose existential problems are unsolved. They hand between undiluted reality and undiluted illusion. Nanda Kaul, and old woman, has hand too much of the world with her and so desire for a quiet, retired life. Her busy past now looks like a box of sweets' positively sickening and as such the desperately wants to avoid familiar obligations around her. She likes to be free from all stifling and irritating involvements and withdraws decidedly into carignano, her hill side home, Kasauli was where she hopes to live a parted, reduced and single life. In her agony she says " Have I not done enough and had enough ? I want no more I want nothing. Can I not left with nothing? " ( Desai, 17)

Nanda Kaul's cry is nothing but a cry in despair, a prayer which goes unheard and unanswered. She has withdrawn herself physically from her duties and responsibilities, irritations and annoyances, dubious joy and sadness. She can neither escape her past, nor help present, nor predict her future. Her past keeps up babbling in her mind and the memories create a series of pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Her present is also not free from disturbances. There is her great grandchild, Raka and an old friend and class mate Ila Das. The arrival of Raka does not make any difference to Nanda Kaul as she looks upon as an unwelcome guest .Raka also feels no less miserable than a caged bird, a wild animal tamed and domesticated, though they live under the same roof but separated. It is strange that they live together resenting and avoiding the presence of one another. Both love to live alone yet Raka's arrival at carignano has created a wild situation for Nanda Kaul. The novelist describes the situation: "If Nanda Kaul was recluse out of vengeance for a long line of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was recluse by nature, instinct" (Desai, 48)

Ila das is a piano teacher turned social worker who breaks in Nanda Kaul's solitude. Her voice is enough to disturb Nanda Kaul. Ila Das's inner crisis has now turned into her capacity to face the odds of life and therefore she always keeps smiling. She is assaulted and raped for his good intention trying to stop the disastrous marriage of Preet Singh. At her sad death Nanda Kaul reaches the climax of her inner crisis and reveals the hidden reality.

"It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her like a queen he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, who he had loved, all his life loved and her children, the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice. She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduce to doing. All those grace and glories and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only fabrication. They helped her sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills. She lied to Raka. And Ila had lied too. Ila too, had lied, had tried"( Desai, 145)

Nanda Kaul' s attempt to detect the scheme of events in human existence seems to be an exercise in futility. She finds a senseless compromise between inner and outer experience. She is sick of her past but the past including the memory of her husband's infidelity keeps assaulting her. She resent Raka but is unable to do so. She detects s Ila Das's voice but not dismiss her. Taking pity on her she feels she should invite her stay with her but fails to do so. Nanda Kaul hangs between

her decisions and indecisions when Ila Das dies and unnatural death and she succumbs to the shock of this news and Raka remains the sole survivor.

The inner crisis in Nanda Kaul's life is not doubt dismal but it is the truth of life. The crisis serves as mirror of the hollow-self has created in worldly terms she has been a given all her life holding back only the hour of stillness every afternoon. Here is a love impoverished heart, or rather a heart burning with feminine jealousy against Miss David, the mathematics mistress, with whom her husband lead a life of sanguine full blooded romance in her knowledge and she is and idle spectator of the scene; rather an a going victim. Whatever she got in her marital life as children and security of social status is gone with her husband's death, she is now unwanted. The hollowness of all the so called glamorous life of a vice chancellors house is laid bare by the presentation of psychological defense through phantasmagoria. Even the mountains provide no escape.

The inner crisis is also there in Raka's personality. The following incident narrated by the novelist is enough to through light on Raka's inner crisis resulting into her lonely, the shadowy, dark, gloomy embodiment of privation. "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, the mistress 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. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it" (Desai, 148)

Being a purely subjective novelist, Anita Desai deals with internal states of mind of her characters. Therefore, she describes the interior selves of her characters. Her problems are not physical but psychical. They originate and exist because of the incompatibility of their temperaments. Maya is hungry for love, Gautama is cold. Nirode, Manisha and Amla are also not ordinary characters but sensitive artists having feelings of individuality and self-respect. Nirode would like to starve and would not accept money from his mother. Monisha failing in her psychic problems commits suicide. Adit, dev and Sarah have their own problems. Sarah is psychologically lacerated. She is a silent volcano, not dead, yet not brushing. Sita suffers from her inner crisis to check the delivery of her baby. Nanda Kaul languishes in her soul for her personal reasons. Bim lives in her dreamy world.

## CONCLUSION

In this novel most of the woman characters are sensitive and male characters are not so they often aggravate the problems of women characters Gautama is detached and inconsiderate. Adit is insensitive to the sufferings of Sarah Raman fails to understand Sita. Preet Singh rapes and kills Ila Das raja is inconsiderate to his sister Bim. Hari's father is more interested in wine than his sick wife. Some of Desai's characters carry complexes and psychic disease. They have some traits in their temperaments which develop out of proportion sometimes and check the usual growth of personality. Desai shows her depth in human nature by portraying such conversion of a trait into a psychic block which forms as disease and makes her characters neurotic. Maya has father fixation and cannot be on equal basis with her husband. Norode has claustrophobia with his mother because she is in love with major chadha. Dev has caliban avoid an complex while Sita has her possible ideas or retaining childhood in the womb. Bim perpetuates the romantic past and ignores the changing realities

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