



ANITA DESAI AND *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN* : A WOMAN'S TREATISE ON WOMEN.

BUCHUPALLI SREEDEVI.

Research Scholar
Department of English
S.V. U. College of Arts
Tirupati (AP) INDIA

PROF. P. USHA RANI

Research Supervisor
Department of English
S.V.U. College of Arts
Tirupati. (AP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The matrix of Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai curiously deals with almost only women characters. Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are portrayed as figuring it out in three different ambits of life that allow Desai the author to explore three different possibilities to the existentialist mystique of life. In doing so the novel skims over the efficacy of multi-perspective towards life that considers weltanschauungs like 'Hopeless Passivism' and 'Desperate Quietism' and 'Contemplative Bourgeois Philosophy', 'Disappointing Negativity' and 'Individualistic Isolationism'. The novel, through the portrayal of a slice of the life of Nanda Kaul, tries to figure out a solution to the baffling task of merging existence and happiness in a seemingly inexorable ontological crisis.

Keywords:- *Hopeless Passivism, Desperate Quietism, Contemplative Bourgeois Philosophy, Ontological crisis, Individualistic Isolationism.*

INTRODUCTION

Fire on the Mountain is all about four women—Nanda Kaul, little Raka, Ila Das and—Anita Desai herself as the omnipresent *ex cathedra* factor that shapes and moulds every single aspect of the matrix of the novel. *Fire on the Mountain* does not really venture beyond the inner lining of a very sequestered, gendered feminine space that is a secret storehouse of a

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Prof. P. USHA RANI

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welter of often conflicting emotions born out of a breathtaking oeuvre of experiences that is life. *Fire on the Mountain* introspects. *Fire on the Mountain* contemplates. *Fire on the Mountain* tries hard to sort out the riddle called life. *Fire on the Mountain* tries hard to figure out a solution.

All of the characters in *Fire on the Mountain* are in a relationship with solitude—a relationship that is fraught with love, hate, bitterness, longing, attraction, rejection and resignation. Sick and tired of just ‘existing’ in a life that slotted her out as the ‘wife’ of the Vice Chancellor of a university who was seated and busy with his own sweet life of office and adultery, and the ‘mother’ of a pack of irritating, irritable kids whose demands never seemed end, Nanda Kaul retreats to Carignano, nestled among the hills of Kasauli, to at last be able to turn her back on the insensitive, gross world that had wrung her ‘*Dasein*’ out of her all these years. Carignano offered her the satisfying lack of people to breathe down her neck. Carignano offered her the peace of not having diverse people to deal with in diverse ingenious ways. Carignano offered her solitude—pure, balmy, unobtrusive, in ostensible and soothing solitude.

When Raka steps into the novel, Nanda Kaul balks in alarm at this potential intrusion into her castle of indolent solitude. But as she scrutinized Raka, whom she initially detested as the ‘mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry’, it dawns on her that this child with her precociously thoughtful mien and her yen to keep quietly to herself, lost in her endless exploration of every nook and cranny of nature, was not here to drive her up the wall in annoyance. Raka, her name meaning the ‘moon’, was certainly an outsider, but an intruder, she was not.

The third woman in the novel Ila Das, is lonely—terribly, pitifully lonely. Yet, with her husband dead, she is not left with much of a chance be a chooser from life’s vagaries. So, willy-nilly, she makes herself come to terms with her solitude. Yet life deals out a very raw deal to her when she loses her life after losing her modesty and dignity and life to a bunch of beastly tribes whom she wished to deliver from the muck of an illiterate, primordial existence.

Nanda Kaul jealously treasures her solitude and peace, so much so that any hint of intrusion into the same annoys her beyond measure. She flares up in rage when Raka comes to stay. She winces in irritation when Ila Das’s high-pitched voice screeches at her from the other side of the telephone. Even the sight of the postman, hunched up and slowed down by the weight of letters, trudging up the hillside to her place irks her, both with his own intrusion and with the intrusion that whatever familial correspondence comes to her from the other part of the world.



This extreme amount of vexation at the world outside could indicate the serious signs of 'hopeless passivism' and 'desperate quietism' that results out of what the Marxist critics called 'contemplative bourgeois philosophy' in accordance with Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach which advocates that philosophy should change the world - not only look at it. The word 'bourgeois' here, more than any socio-economic aspect, stands as signifier of the luxury of having the relaxed leisure to stand and ponder about the evil in the world, without really doing much to remedy it. Nanda Kaul saw injustice being done in her life, to her life, but all she could muster up courage enough to do was to make an escape into the nebulous protection of an obscure existence in Carignano. She never had pluck enough to protest against what she thought wrong in her lifetime.

Nanda Kaul's exclusive yen for the sequestration from human habitation was unnatural and almost a sign of what in Existentialist parlance is called 'Disappointing Negativity' which often ends up in highlighting the 'dark side' of human nature, so much so that one finds oneself at a loss to find anything positive to figure out in human nature. So avid is her aversion to human nature that she jumps to the foregone conclusion that the very sign of another human being in her life would mean trouble and bother for her. Yet, more often than not, she found herself rectified in her ideas of initial abhorrence. It happened with Raka. It happened with Ila Das. She slowly grew so used to the silent presence of little Raka that the child almost seemed like an alter ego of hers. And when Ila dies, her horrifying death, Nanda is stunned beyond measure. Stunned beyond measure and unable to bear the shock, she gasps to her death herself.

By taking pure subjectivity as the starting point and by treating man as an isolated being existentialism disregards the social character of man and his innate inclination toward solidarity. Following the Cartesian ideology, which preconceives human existence in terms of an isolated the thinking mind engrossed in subjective consciousness, existentialism excludes or rather, precludes the possibility of a societal role in the individual ontological *Dasein*. Nanda Kaul is a classic case of this kind of Individualistic Isolationism.

In fact, all the women epitomized this Individualistic Isolationism in some way or the other. An exile of sorts is what *Fire on the Mountain* is all about. The very paradigm of exile entails three inter-related ideas: the displacement and dislocation associated with the act of exile, the locus from which one is exiled and the place to which one is exiled. Nanda Kaul lived in a self-imposed exile in Carignano with nothing but the tall, gaunt pine trees to keep her company. She reads a lot—Sei Shonagan's *Pillow Book* being one of her favourites while *The Travels of Marco Polo* caught up soon enough as a storehouse of anecdotes to draw from while trying to impress Raka with tales.



When the novel begins, it slowly unfurls the life of Nanda Kaul, in all its quiet solitude. It seems that Nanda hates human company. It makes her feel cheated out of her right to some quiet time with herself after all the years of duty towards the family. She loves her solitude, treasures it and guards it with jealous relish. Nanda, with her tall, upright, stately gait, her somber dignity, her austere quietude, strikes one as a very strong, individualistic, assertive woman who knows her own mind inside out, and had thus chosen this hermit-like lone life as an almost rebellious means of asserting her own supremacy in Carignano—which, contextually, gets epitomized as a gendered space of female *jouissance* that, in its acknowledgement of female mastery, quietly subverts the socio-psychological logo centric paradigm of hegemonic masculinity. In all her years of devotion to a family that never cared to understand or requite, she at least got to create her own world, her own domain, her ‘space’ in Carignano.

The first signs of suspicion of this theory of Individualistic Isolationism show up when Raka turns up with her thin stick-like little legs, insect-like bulging eyes and wisps of dry, undernourished, browned-up hair. Nanda resents her arrival—and we readily understand her resentment as it fits in snugly with our theory of seclusion-for-domination theory on the part of Nanda Kaul. If Nanda Kaul chose to turn her back on the irritating pull of family and household chores and long hours of mothering for good, it was just normal that she should wince in annoyance at the arrival of Raka.

But the readers begin to get a wee bit baffled when Nanda shows traces of irritation at the fact that Raka is extremely, terribly, seclusive—she keeps to herself, roaming and exploring the hills and bushes and birds and insects—never even caring to come back to her grandmother for company, or solace or love or togetherness. Now this did not really fit the bill as far as the chosen solitude of Nanda Kaul was concerned. As far as Nanda is concerned, her initial consternation at the threat of Raka intruding into her privacy should have given way to a huge sigh of relief when Raka was found to be a loner who did not have any intentions of breathing down her neck. Yet, Nanda feels a pang of vexation at Raka’s habitual nonchalance towards her. Notwithstanding all her love of privacy, Nanda surprisingly feels a tongue of what suspiciously felt like a jealousy flame up inside her heart when she watches Raka following the cook around, chit-chatting the way she never did with Nanda. Nanda tries surreptitious ways of winning Raka’s attention and attachment by telling her tales of her (Nanda’s) father’s expeditions to Nepal.

Slowly it begins to dawn on the readers that there is still a streak inside Nanda Kaul that reaches out for company. Underneath the camouflaging veneer of the austere recluse is a very normal human being with the normal yearning for human company, companionability,



gregariousness and most importantly—love and attachment. The readers and Nanda herself too, begin to realise that Nanda’s reclusiveness is not a choice out of ‘Free Will’ after all; she was left with no other choice. Given to her, she would probably love to be at the centre and helm of a loving, caring family all her life, controlling with love-laden firmness a dependant and dependable husband and doting kids. Instead of that, life had saddled her with a bunch of irascible, demanding, uncaring kids and a husband who could not care less about her, busy as he was with his life-long affair with Ms David, the Math’s Teacher. The readers realize that Nanda did not reject her past to begin afresh. Her past had rejected her. She was in exile. Carignano was her retreat—not her resort.

Ila Das’s violent rape and death were the last straw. Nanda broke down. ILA’s futility opened a vicarious floodgate in her mind for the pent-up pangs of futility in her own heart about a lifetime of bitterness and grudge and mortification that she had all along is trying her best to mask in a façade of austere and disciplined dignity, to gush out. Pretences become impossible to keep up any more. All her life that is what Nanda had been doing. When in the Vice Chancellor’s house, she kept house in spick-and-span order to keep up the pretense of a happy, dignified, ‘proper’ household while all the time her inner feminine self was smarting inside from being intolerably humiliated by a husband who crushed her very *Dasein* by rejecting her for another woman while still in matrimony with her. Later she kept up the pretense of ‘wanting’ and opting for the seclusion of Carignano, though reality was that she had no other choice. She was lonesome - awfully, tearfully lonesome inside. And it all gushed out with the rebounding vehemence born out of strict repression in her mind down the years. She could not take it anymore. She died.

The novel ends with Rake setting fire to the mountains. Raka is the only one who emerges strong. She is the only one who is a loner by choice. She doesn’t try to ‘belong’. She makes up her own bit of feminine ‘space’ wherever she is. She thus explores the mountainside, turning nature inside out for the benefit of her own empirical satisfaction, and when her wanderlust reaches satiety, she sets fire to it, destroys it. She emerges in complete control of her surroundings. She makes it. She mars it. She establishes herself with effortless aplomb as the mythical ‘destroyer and preserver’ of her environment. She doesn’t let her environment shape her existence. She makes her own essence shape the environment. Raka—the ‘moon’-girl, like an other-worldly creature is the epitomisation of feminine ‘jouissance’ of feminine volition to the extreme.

Sartre defines existentialism with two bottom lines:



(i) Existence precedes essence, and (ii) subjectivity must be the starting point of human essence. Anita Desai defines feminine existentialism in *Fire on the Mountain* with two bottom lines:

Raka's absolute ontological assertion that emerges in quiet vehemence in her total socio-psychological nonchalance to her surroundings thereby establishing a firm negation to the possibility of being influenced and moulded by them and (ii) her natural yen for volition in every single move of hers, that so glibly ensconces her essence over any other outer force of social construct over her existence.

But it is not everyone that can be Raka—Raka the emancipated, Raka the young, Raka the carefree, Raka the independent, Raka the willful, Raka the indomitable. Nanda Kaul would like to be Raka. But, snared in all the socio-psycho-somatic trappings of societal honour, dignity, propriety, dutifulness and appropriateness that the age-old social panoptical vouches for Nanda Kaul could never quite become Raka, however much she would have longed to in her secret heart. She remained her old staid self—calm in appearance on the outside, but torn apart in the angst of futility on the inside. She died, taking with her, her secret baggage of a life wasted—a life spent in earnest but pitifully futile yearning for a bit of love and respect and dignity to make her feel human for once.

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