



## LOSS OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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### **Abstract:**

The novels of Anita Desai are an exploration of individuals, their passions and emotions. Desai's significance lies in her ability to transmute into art authentically the inner-most feelings, thoughts and emotions of the self. Especially the feminine psyche unrivalled in her novels we find a quest for reality and essential human experience. She depicts the unpredictable nature of life, the conflicting dilemmas and sufferings that are inevitable in a woman's life. Her novels portray the struggles of the female psyche for identity.

**Key Words:** Anita Desai, Loneliness & Identity

### **Loss of Individual Freedom in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain:**

The novels of Indian Writing in English become conspicuous in nineteenth century. The first novel in Indian Writing English is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*. Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* is the first important Indian novel to appear in English before Independence which was male dominated work. A very few women novelists were emerged in this period for example Toru Dutt, Raj Lakshmi, and Swarna Kumari. Some of the significant women writers in the Post-Independence era are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Dasai and others.

Indian writers in English have made their most significant contribution to literature particularly in the field of the English novel. Indian novel has grown considerably in bulk, variety, and maturity. The development of Indian novel follows certain definite patterns, and it is not difficult to trace its gradual progression from the imitative stage to her realistic stage. In the growth and development of Indian English novel occupy a unique position. During this period of 1980 some of the promising novelists published their first works. Some old masters also came out with their works, which shows that their creative powers of writing different genres. It during the Eighties that Indian novelists earned unheard of honors and distinctions not only in India but also abroad. Their works speak eloquently about their originality and unprecedented inventiveness.

Indian English literature is now a reality which cannot be ignored. During the recent decades, it has attracted a widespread interest both in India and abroad. What began as a "hot-house plant" has now attained a luxuriant growth, branching off in several directions. The Indian writers have made the real and remarkable contribution to the sphere of fiction, which as Mulk Raj Anand says, "Come to stay as part of world literature". An idea of the true potential of this form of literature in Indian can be had by comparing the early novels by Indian with the recent arrivals in the field of literary creation.

India has significantly contributed to the development of overall world literature. This contribution of India has been chiefly through the Indian writing in English, novelists being in the forefront in this respect. A number of novelists on the contemporary scene have given expression to their creative urge in no other language than English and have brought credit to the Indian English fiction as a distinctive force in the world fiction. To attempt creative expression on national scale in an alien medium has seldom happened in human history, and it speaks of the prolific quality of the Indian mind to assimilate the newly confronting situations and the complex dilemmas of modern world. The new English fiction exhibits confidence in tackling new themes and experiments with new techniques and approaches to handle these themes. The novelists come to their task without any preconceived notions of what constitutes literary content. This encourages them to focus on a vast and comprehensive canvas and to invest their themes with epic dimensions.

As far as Indian literature is concerned, it has perhaps been easier for these third generation novelists to reflect the new challenges and changes because of the simple fact that its vehicle itself is a globalised language. Again, the writers of the new fiction have mostly been a part of the Indian Diaspora. Living in the west, and using English almost like a mother tongue, they have been thoroughly exposed to significant modern western literary movements like postmodernism, and to various narrative techniques like magic realism. This had enabled them to give a fresh orientation to fiction. At the same time, the best of them continue to have strong roots in India, so that they remain true to the kindred points of India and west. It is significant that the spirit of the age is more pervasively and effectively reflected in the third generation fiction than in other forms like poetry and drama. The novel, by its very nature, is better equipped to deal with social reality, whatever, liberties

it may take in projecting it. It is hardly surprising therefore that the most substantial contribution of the period comes from the third generation fiction.

The fact that Anita Desai is one of the best Indian novelists writing in English is confirmed by *Fire on the Mountain* her fifth novel. In *Fire on the Mountain* her older preoccupation, perhaps obsession, with loneliness, frustration, depression, lifelessness, hypocrisy, disgust leading to near insanity seem to be surfacing more solidly than ever before. From the noises, Anita Desai now moves towards solitude, silence, and Nature of small islands and Landscapes of less frequented hills and mountains. The focused background of *Fire on the Mountain* is a small holiday resort called Kasauli in Northern India.

This study is to comprehend and identify the characters who are engaged in quest and the motive of their quest in this novel. This novel projects marital discord, withdrawal and alienation, substantiating the novelist's conviction that all human relationship is inadequate and that loneliness is an inescapable human predicament. This malady affects the child, the young and the old. In this novel, the two old ladies, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das and the child Rama suffer from isolation and alienation in varying degrees for different reasons. The personal experience of these three characters induces them to quest.

The noteworthy point Nanda Kaul is her boldness rather her stamina to enter into self-quest at the ripe season of her life. Normally, women despite suffering continuously from extreme low self confidence and mental detachment, fail to lead a voluntary exile away from everybody in a desolate place. Her decision of a self-willed exile was her escape from panoptical masculine stare. Her choice was the Kasauli hills, topographically higher than the place where she led her precious life. It was in a true sense her 'home'. This new place was serene and reposeful which gave her a sense of superiority, and even identity. The house standing alone on the ridge embodies the elegant detachment and air of superiority that Nanda Kaul cloaks herself in and is a symbol of her isolated, lonely self. Its sweeping views of regal Himalayas and arid plains around are juxtaposed to bring out her stately physique and withered inner self. The landscape seems to be in tune with the condition of the protagonist in her loneliness.

As a wife there is only one "saving memory" that she cherishes the time when her husband returned after leaving an unnamed guest home and she is standing in the dark shadows, watched the light switched on in the small dressing-room that she had converted into his bedroom. That was a moment of dispassionate observation, without anguish of pain, and perhaps, with unexpressed defiance "a moment of private triumph, cold and proud" (FM 19).

In case of motherhood, Nanda complacently regards the world-weariness and atrophy of emotion that has arisen from a surfeit of the many children and grand children, and the great grand children reared by her, till the thought of them sickened as a box of sweets might sicken. But now in this house she lives in peace which seems threatened only threatened by the occasional intrusion of the postman or the telephone bell.

This loneliness life is disturbed with the unexpected arrival of her great granddaughter Raka. She despises almost everyone who comes her way: her haughty and complacent daughter, Asha, her weak and unhappy granddaughter Tara and her elusive and sickly great granddaughter Raka. The chillingly dry and macabre imagery employed to project Nanda Kaul's quest for identity succeeds in communicating a sense of myopic horror. Nanda Kaul had not been a recluse all her life, she had lived a full life--full of sounds, full of noise, full of children, full of responsibilities, full of heart breaks; so full of everything that now all she wanted was to be empty of everything. A vacant life, a vacant house, a vacant Carignano was all that she yearned for: "Discharge me, She groaned. I've discharged all my duties, Discharge"(FM 30).

Nanda Kaul withdraws herself from the reality of human experience in her self-imposed exile. So she creates an illusory substitute. This substitute aggravates her loneliness. This substitute reality is destroyed by the intrusion of Ila Das, foil to Nanda Kaul. The call from her friend, Ila Das, shortly after Nanda's receipt of the letter sounds more shrill to her ear than normal and her friend's 'hideous' and 'screeching' voice grates on her nerves. No, she explain, she cannot visit her at this time since her grates granddaughter is coming to stay with her and she will be too busy. Both desires to withdraw from the social milieu and lead a sequestered life, but they hardly succeed in their mission of escaping from one's identity to another in quest of peace and self-contentment in the other identity.

Their loss of freedom leads to their loss of identity. The light of Ila Das's sexual violence and Nanda's death brings this truth into the fore ground. Ila Das was for Nanda Kaul a remainder of her hopeless past, a past of 'rejection' and 'sacrifice,' a past in which she had contracted a marriage which had degenerated into emotional and psychological anemia and atrophy. It is a past in which her husband had only done enough to keep her mum while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he declined to marry because she was a Christian but whom he had all his life loved.

Nanda's yearning to be alone, to alienate herself from the milieu, was an attempt to beguile Ila who had cherished and trusted her friendship. Hence, the news of Ila's rape and murder stupefies and dumbfounds her. Ila's rape intensifies her sense of guilt. She had partaken and shared the gross crime against womanhood. She views the sexual assault on Ila as a defilement of womanhood. She had become a party to this humiliation and mortification of a woman by abdicating her moral judgement and obligation. Nanda Kaul's chief concern is for

her loneliness whereas Ila's was for the welfare of the people. Ila dies for the people and Nanda for herself. She realizes that all her life she was neither a housewife nor a woman. This drives her into guilt-conscious death. The fire becomes the symbol of her guilt-ridden, traumatic passions which are ultimately annihilated. The fire on the mountain is the symbolic projection of her pent-up emotion which erupts into volcanic flames.

Raka's setting the forest on fire is expressive of her resolve to destroy a world where a woman can only be happy by being unnatural. The fire lying dormant and suppressed in Nanda Kaul's heart is set ablaze by the ghastly tragedy of Ila Das. In setting the forest on fire, Raka sets ablaze Nanda Kaul's heart. The natural fire finds its human equivalent. It is the fire that redeems and purges in a world of reverie and make-believe. The fire on the mountain is reality but the fire in her heart is an illusion. It is a spurious fire. Ultimately, with the death of Nanda, this illusory world is obliterated. Her crisis for identity is resolved. The fire is the desire within Nanda and her death is the symbol of wish-fulfilment of self-assertion.

The last among the three women characters Ila Das; Nanda Kaul's childhood friend is a forced spinster. She represents Desai's "New Woman" In our society a spinster is looked down upon as a burden but Ila Das, a modern woman is keener at establishing her own identity than seeding an identity through a husband. The vulnerability of unmarried women to incidents of sexual harassment reinforces entering into marriage as the only effective remedy. Ila Das's rape and murder reveals the gender ideology of women as dependent and men as protectors. Her attempts to challenge the existing gendered structure of the society are seen as potentially disruptive of social order. Ila Das was always treated inferior to her brothers in her house. She rather was least bothered about her future. Rather he concentrated deeply on his sons' education and made huge investment over it. She is a fatty, short statured lady jeered and laughed at by children and others. Ugly and unattractive with a shrill voice and funny gesture she is not loved by anyone in spite of her involvement in life. This makes her feel lonely and alienated.

Through Ila Das, Desai again brings in physical violence used against women. Ila Das's rape is not an isolated incident. It has become the prerogative of men to oppress women. Rape, the most humiliating and horrifying experience for women, is used as a powerful weapon to silence them. This also stems from the stereotyped belief that for a woman honor is more valuable, perhaps than life itself. When violated physically, women are put on the precipice of fear. It is by creating fear in the minds of women, that the patriarchal structure controls them. Continual suffering, physical and mental oppression, shakes her identity out of shape.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* clearly shows the protagonist Nanda Kaul and her friend, Ila Das's sense of being. Both the women have no problems of identity. They know who they are. Nanda Kaul was not just Nanda the woman; she was also the wife of an important man. Her problem arose as she could not forever don that role and be virtually a part of it. Similarly, Ila Das too clearly knows who she is but her constant hankering to be like Nanda, to be considered important, to rise in social circles lead to her tragic end. On the other hand the great grand-daughter of Nanda Kaul, Raka has a problem identifying her. In her attempt to know who she is, she is like a nomad constantly wandering wildly on the hills and dales. Finally caught within this dilemma she sets fire to the mountain. Here, identity takes three different positions. In the case of Nanda Kaul identity knew herself, while for Ila Das it was establishing herself amidst others. On the other hand, Raka had neither a sense of being nor could she locate herself in any other in any other sphere. Thus establishing their identity based on their knowledge of themselves has become a quest for Desai women.

#### **Conclusion:**

Anita Desai describes the cruelty and callousness of urban- life in *Fire on the Mountain*. It marks a return to the autonomous world of inner reality. The novel is a pointer to her anguished soul; her character consists in her inwardness, introversion and the resultant psychic odyssey. The crisis of this introvert woman who is bored and frustrated by her humdrum life and tries to escape into purposeless loneliness projected in her novel.

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