

ISSN 0970-2830

POETCRIT

Vol. 34

No. 1

January - June, 2021

This issue dedicated

to

Dr. H. V. Reddy

(1943-2020)



Prints Publications Pvt Ltd
New Delhi

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*Fire on the Mountain: A Study in Cultural
Ambivalence*

Anita Desai is one of the top seed novelists, writing in English today. In almost all of her novels main focus revolves around her central female characters that almost belong to upper middle class of Indian social set up. Almost all of her female characters are presented having proper formal education and are depicted struggling against social norms, almost unable to cope with in their married life. In her earlier novels like '*Cry, the Peacock*', '*Voices in the City*' and '*Where shall we Go in This Summer*', her central female characters, like Maya, Monisha and Sita, are deviant to social norms overtly, well reflected in their relationship, almost resulting in emotional and psychological imbalances explicitly available at the surface level. These female characters are depicted estranged at family level as well as from social set up and social norms as whole, worstly affected at psychic level, causing even abnormalcy and restlessness in intimate personal relations. There appears complete discordance at family level explicitly available, claiming sympathy for these characters and abhorrence to patriarchal social set up. '*Fire on the Mountain*' appears thematic and psychological extension of these earlier novels with a sharp difference in dimension. Unlike the earlier heroines, Nada Koul shows deeper level of tolerance at familial level and at the level of personal denigrations, almost like a passive volcano, conforming strictly to social and familial norms in part one of the novel whereas in the part two she reflects the temperament which is almost paradoxical to former one, causing deep emotional and psychological ambivalence. The present paper is an indifferent attempt to explore the cultural ambivalence, resulting in the emergence of the new woman, confronting with the social values, adding new dimensions to social and cultural arena.

Anita Desai, though a champion as feminist delves deep and explores the psyche of her central character in '*Fire on the Mountain*' to focus the turmoil and restlessness, causing the emotional dryness and cultural ambivalence. The novel can be divided into two major

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on the feministic issues in high placed Indian society. Their relationship, especially conjugal relationship, appears jeopardized in lack of communication and proper understanding as Prof. Koul keeps himself busy with academic and administrative responsibility and Mrs. Koul with her family responsibility so much that they don't care for the feelings of each other which crushed not only their personal life but also the probability of entire generation of bright family has been spoiled in lack of proper reciprocation of feelings. It's again very strange that she has children with Prof. Koul but she is not transparent and interactive in conjugal relationship though she does neither belong to middle class of Indian social set up nor to lower middle class where such inhibitions are apparent, as a result of it she prefers negation of self, and suffers with loneliness and chaos from inside but from outside plays the role as demanded, completely paradoxical to each other. Usually marriage in Indian way of life is considered blissful, eternal and soothing not only for two persons but at least for two families and society as a whole, appears spoiled in lack of transparency, clarity and amity, leaving numerous invisible scars created by unhealthy married relationship. The following lines competently record the traumatic married life of Mrs. Koul:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen. He had only done to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affairs with Ms. Davidson And her children were alien to his nature She didn't live here by choice. She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. (FOM, 145).

Nanda Koul is completely different from other heroines in social, academic and intellectual perspective in the contemporary society, especially, at time when Indian women have been subject to complete annihilation of selves, merging into the larger family selves, might be ignorantly. Women in the contemporary society have rarely dreamt of identity and equality and were content with serving their family against any individual dream and aspirations, even though they also have been subject to denigration and humiliations at numerous counts in the patriarchal society. Mrs. Koul appears to be a pleasant incarnation, especially at times, when women are not aware of what she has vociferously registered, within the family code of conduct and, perhaps, it is for the first time that she gives voice to feminine aspirations lying passive so far. Mrs. Koul observes family norms superbly even at difficult times when her husband is busy in relishing

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enlightens the quest for individual existence whereas in the modest and little educated social set up of India of 80's feminine counter part were happy with collective identity, were torn into so many responsibilities and challenges of family life one rarely thinks about as it is by Mrs. Koul.

It's very strange and paradoxical that Mrs. Koul in spite of all the resources of fulfillment available is empty at Vice-Chancellor's house, which is beyond the dreams and aspirations of majority of women not only in India but in the female species as a whole, reflects emptiness in the wholeness, and she is not happy with her status of wife and mother who has almost all the opportunities of being happy but in this auspicious family Mrs. Koul is depicted working as caretaker, completely devoid of feminine emotions as if it is not a real but reel life. Her marital and maternal life appear devoid of emotions and she appears flowing against the currents of contemporary trends and terrains, laying down the foundational seed of almost a new woman for she is unable to realize herself being torn into so many, probably her happiness lies in her sufferings and she appears 'a radiant perspective on masochism' (Kristeva, 144) eagerly waiting to embark upon the real life, away from active and fastidious life where roots and shoots are crushed. Nanda Koul's attitude in the novel appears not only awkward but also perplexing; especially to oriental reader for whom marriage is lasting bond at least between the married couple and eternal with the family. Against such Indian ethical provisions, she considers her marital and maternal life so temporarily as if she is herself a 'soul' cramped into mortal body and is waiting to jubilate at its freedom, at the perish of corporeal body. She gathers all the rages, denigrations and humiliations, socially as well as emotionally to ignite in Carignano, she appears eagerly waiting for the reel life to come to an end as if we are ethically told about soul and just as it jubilates merging into over soul. Nanda also jubilates at freedom from bondage: "She has suffered from nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess ... she had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like great, heavy, difficult book that she had read and was not required to read again" (FOM. 29-30).

detached life, though partially, in the mountainous surroundings:

... Bloking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she wanted to be done with them all, at Carrignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone She wants no one and no thing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction.... To be a tree, no more or no less, was all she was prepared to undertake. (FOM, 3-4).

The more one tries to run away from one's past, the more one is chased and dragged into and that, in turn, becomes the predicament of Mrs. Koul, who, while discovering completeness, inner peace and quietness, is more disturbed by the memory even in her notional victory after rejecting the patriarchal system. Nanda Koul has now attained the state of emotional dryness, her obsession with 'self' has lead her to alienation and seclusion where she discovers detachment from all the human as well as non human activities, though partially she is drawn to her past after the arrival of her grand-daughter Raka, her alter-ego, one like whom she wanted to become unsuccessfully. Now leaving all her relations behind, she is engrossed with selves and does not want to be disturbed least, for she fears to be distracted so much so that the news of her grand-daughter's arrival is intrusion to her. This shows that she is not only disgusted with patriarchal system alone, but also with entire human race. Even Ramlal, a unit of patriarchal system, is her companion, as a servant, might serve paradoxically to her mission and vocation who might remind her of her past. Raka and human relationship is intended to be obliterated highly, turns to be possessive:

Hanging her head miserably, it seemed too much to be that she should now have to meet Raka, discover her as an individual and, worse, as a relation, a dependent. She would have to urge her to eat eggs and spinach, caution her giant lifting stones in the garden under which scorpion, might lie asleep, see her to bed at night and lie in the next room, wondering of the child slept, straining to catch a sound from the bedroom, their opposing thoughts colliding in the dark like jittery bats flight. (FOM, 35).

It is only at Carrignano, away from Kasouli, that Nanda Koul came to realize that she bears close proximity to Raka, who is natural fighter against the patriarchy and oddities of society, contrasted to her practical and physical experience. Raka unlike her grand-mother has naturally developed the emotion of loneliness has now become the concern of all irrespective of age, there appears to be the difference of degree not of kind amongst them. Carrignano, as historical background of anchoring and safeguarding the lonely English maiden

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, beating at her mother with hammer and fists and abuse harsh, fitting abuse that made Raka cove under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like 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 squelchy and quivering, so that she did not know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. (FOM, 71-72).

Ila Das is another woman who is living a life of self-seclusion in the mountainous region, exploring the needs of life and peace of mind amongst the objects of nature with deep sense of social responsibility that she has opted herself. She, also as woman, has discovered the distinction and differentiation in masculine society like Nanda Koul and is very much abusive of her childhood rearing and bearings. It's her superior '*life force*' that compels to live and work for the people and society where she and her potentials are not duly recognized. She is also compelled to live a life of alienation and once she rejected the life that caused pain, she did not look back, unlike Nanda Koul, who lives a life of reverie and imagination. But as welfare officer, Ila firmly sticks to responsibility which her past reckons, even at the cost of her sufferings and torture, as she is firm in belief to enforce social reform and she doesn't surrender to repressive social system, which causes pain and sufferings even at physical level and while protesting against the child marriage that threatens her own life also, and that she accepts setting a tough parameter to a woman like Nanda Koul who doesn't only feel overwhelmed at the rape and murder of Ila Das but also feels awakened over her sense of duty and responsibility, at least something over and above to one's own petty considerations. The reverie of Mrs. Koul is broken when she comes to know about the rape and murder of Ila Das and she also succumbs to symbolic and notional death with appreciation and glorification of Ila Das for the realistic approach to life contrasted to hallucinatory life of her own. Nanda Koul now takes into account the life of three women - herself, Raka and Ila Das, and to her great surprise, her own is considered the worst, for it's far away from reality and she is appreciative of both Ila and Raka for their perception and dedication and to assure her grand mother with positive approach Raka attempts to destroy the imaginary society where women are not so venerable as should

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as married couples are two wheels of life and other relations together with children are valuable supports to carry it forward smoothly, pleasantly and blissfully. However, the novelist succeeds in creating two unimpassioned characters, who carries forward the mission at the cost of victimization of the central character with judicious tempering of biological and social trappings, for she is unable to coordinate between feelings and selves.

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