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Fire on the Mountain: Cultural Ambivalence

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Abstract:

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.

Keywords: Deviant, Social norms, Paradoxical situation, Cultural Ambivalence, Cross-Culture, Identity Quest, Ascetic's renunciation of the world.

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 explore 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 parts which centers around three major characters that have so many aspects common amongst them, with a sharp difference, reciprocating and reflecting the temperament of one another. It is very strange about Nanda Koul that there appear reflection of cultural ambivalence in her personality which is pole apart from one another. The part one of the novel depicts the most traditional woman in Nanda Koul, who is utmost busy in rearing up the family and preserving the social status as per the expectations of the family accompanied with aura of social status reflected in almost all the walks of life, at social as well as personal levels, so much so that she probably breaches the faith at the most the intimate personal level. Her routine personal life can be well versed as follows:

The old house, the full house, of that period of life when she was the vice – chancellor’s wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had trifled her... too many strays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband’s duty, her mother-in-law, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too on the table, too much to wash up after.(FOM, P.29-30)

It’s very strange about Mrs. Koul that apparently she appears living a very dignified life as wife of the vice-chancellor and maintains her status meticulously in spite of the fact that her husband does not love her and has been maintaining illicit incestuous relation with Mrs. Davidson, a member of the teaching staff of the University. No doubt it is commendable that Mrs. Koul ensures and justifies full observation of Indian cultural ethos on the one hand and on the other contrary to it swallows all the denigration at the level of her husband who considers her object of antique decorative item in the family which she calmly and coolly tolerates subjugating completely to responsibility towards the family. She does not interfere and interact with her husband regarding her own pleasures and displeasures which an educated woman like she might have registered, which depicts her dubious nature cramped with morality of traditional Indian set up jeopardizing not only her life but sacrificing the interest of the entire family, that could have been packed up for the betterment of all but contrary to it she kept on gathering the rage, anguish and pain to ignite in the second part of the novel. Had she been a bit interactive and reactive probably the situation might have been different for such a high profile and upright family and this fiction could have succeeded in catering the most balanced saga of life rather focusing on the feministic issues in high placed Indian society. Their relationship, especially conjugal relationship appear 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 one another 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 middle class of Indian social set up nor to lower middle class where such inhibitions are apparent, as result she prefers negation of self, and suffers with loneliness and chaos from inside but from outside plays the role as demanded, completely paradoxical to one 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 whole, appear spoiled in lack of

transparency, clarity and amity, leaving numerous invisible scars created by unhealthy married relationship. The following line competently records 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 hear by choice. She lived hear alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.(F O M p.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 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 extra – marital relationship. As a staunch Indian wife she swallows all the anguish and humiliation for her protest might have dishonored and disgraced her husband and family reputation, hence paralyzing her personal life and safeguards family against the odd situation but her role as wife and mother appears mechanical rather than emotional and seminal. She keeps tongue tied for morality and modesty and what she tolerated and obliterated did not pay back duly rather appears heavy for family and relationship. We did not get any information regarding the well being of the family, no landmark achievement of children of the family to console and compensate the emotional perturbation that she has deliberately undergone for the family's sake. At this juncture one rightly expect that it would have been more comforting and soothing if she could have raised protest against her husband's illegal preoccupations for it might have safeguarded her personal interest on the one hand and on the other family might have also made some notable contribution to feel at ease as it is usually desired. But everything personal and related to family is sacrificed for the disintegration of both family and self on account of wrong perception as revealed in the following excerpt:



Is she not splendid? Is she not like a queen? Really, Vice - Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does, and her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them, despising them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. That was the look no one had dared catch a return. (FOM, p.18)

Some portion of part one of the novel appears representative though discovered only in high placed families where as large sections of Indian society at that time was completely unaware of the facts been crushed by the family and social responsibilities and part two of the novel is utterly fictional and unrealistic applicable only to a very small section of society which is socially, educationally and economically upright. The deceit at the level of husband -wife relationship bears common trait where as the rest portion of the novel like gathering the rage passively reflect an art of a very small section, that explodes in the second phase, and unfolds the seclusion from family and all the relations, all such phenomena is concern of a particular section of society, especially of upper middle class of Indian social set up. Individual identity in the contemporary society was an issue that specially belongs to society where beside affluence there is moderate status of education as well. It is only education that 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, been torn into so many responsibilities and challenges of family life one rarely think 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 empty 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, p.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 Carrignano, 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 nimity, 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. (F O M, p.29-30)

It is a question of humble regret and also of great concern against the distinctions and denigrations of women but modern women equipped with education should act more competently in managing the oddities of life to make it blissful than what Nanda Koul does for emancipation justifying '*life is but a walking shadow, poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.*' (Macbeth, Act 5, Sc. 5, p.2)

It appears as if it is not her own life rather she is a character and her role is over after her husband, nullifying and negating her maternal responsibility, she moves to Carrignano revolting not only against patriarchy but also against culture and tradition as whole, which is not only rare but also land mark, for emancipation and realization of 'self' amidst the non interfering and natural atmosphere, replicating the emergence of new woman, far beyond and perception of Indian femininity, a precarious and perplexing blending of tradition and modernity intended to fulfillment. It's not only startling but also paradoxical that so long she was surrounded with relations, she was disintegrating and feeling alienated but away from human world of relation i.e. Family relations into the company of mountains and pines, away from human contact, provide her the opportunity of integration and unification, almost metamorphosis of Indian ascetic and saints.

Part two of the novel appears to be part of hallucination, completely imaginary and fabricated takes into account what might happen, almost away from gross realities at least in Indian social set up. Usually people in India irrespective of their gender become more obsessive with their children, completely merging their individual selves into family selves and sometimes people become so much possessive that they never think about living away

from their family members. Nanda Koul under the impact of western individualism cherishes the lonely life away from her children, discovering herself amidst natural atmosphere in a way ascetic and saints in Indian subcontinent do in almost final stage of their life in search of blissful company of God. It's one of the rarest of rare incidence that Mrs. Koul searches for completeness from inside, though apparently incomplete in absence of her husband and family members from outside, but succeeds in discovering long cherished isolated and detached life, though partially, in the mountainous surroundings:

... Blocking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she wanted to be done with them all, at Cargnano. 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, p.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 become 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, p.35)

It is only at Carignano away from Kasouli that Nanda Koul came to realize that she bears close proximity with 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. Carignano has historical background of anchoring and safeguarding the lonely English maiden ladies has now projected to anchor the lonely, dejected and alienated, and as result we see that two other characters like Raka and Ila Das also move to the buffer zone of Carignanao though two later characters are different to Mrs. Koul in dimension of their experience. Nanda Koul after spending her life as wife and mother developed the feeling of victim hood and abjection where as Raka's abjection is against the adult world which she has derived from her childhood experience of unfulfilled relationship between her parents and so she develops abjection against grown up world unlike her grand mother whose abjection is directed against patriarchy and now she loves solitary world of cicada and pines without allowing it been interrupted with past experience, standing true to her name :

Watching her wandering among the rocks and agaves of the ravine, tossing a horse chestnut rhythmically from hand to hand, Nanda Koul wondering she at all realized how solitary she was. Solitude never disturbed her. She was only child Nanda Koul has ever known who preferred to stand apart and go off and disappears to being loved, cared for and made the centre of attention. The children Nanda Koul had known wanted only to be such centre: Raka alone did not. (FOM. P.79-80)

Raka though presented as 'alter ego' of Mrs. Koul is pole apart from her grand mother and has willingly rejected the grown up world fully whereas Mrs. Koul is dubious regarding self imposed seclusion. Nanda attempts to discover some similarity and closeness with Raka but she stands aloof, away from patriarchy, amongst the rocks and mountains at Carignano, even least reciprocated by her altered ego:

But Raka ignored her. She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Koul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering now, wondering at this social rejection, so natural o instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and willful rejection the child. (FOM, p.47)



Raka does not reflect regret over her refusal where as her grand mother' s refusal is partial and probably it is her failure against the success of Raka as she '*discovers herself in Raka, because Raka is what Nanda always wanted to be*' (Dubey,p.118) where as Raka once rejected never looks back rather explores alternatives to love and be loved in the natural world of rocks, mountains, flora and fauna, is probably perfect in Carignano, after rejecting the grown up human world whereas Nanda Koul has retreated to seclusion, away from demands, dominations and denigrations though both are in look out to obliterate their bleak past :

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, p.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 cost of 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 feel 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 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 woman are not so venerable as should be and thus attempts to create a society of mutual trust and honor demolishing the society of distinction and denigration and so awakening her grand mother from hallucination and stoicism pointing out death as inevitable phenomena of human life :

But Nanda Koul had ceased to listen, she dropped the telephone: with her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped: No, no, it is lie! No, it can't be. It was a lie. Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet. He had bought the little Buddha from a traveling peddler. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen - he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life long affairs with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress... No she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, and then hung it down, let it hang. There was a scratching at the window that turned to a tapping, then a drumming. 'Nani, Nani,' whispered Raka shivering and crouching in the lily bed, peeping over the sill... Nanda Koul on the stool whisper head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling. (FOM, p.145)

In *Fire on the Mountain* Anita Desai has narrated a saga of life which was not current in the contemporary society rather it appears imported from western world of individualism and is projected upon a class of Indian women who appear closure to that European social set up but Nanda is not supported by inherited and inbuilt cultural system, so she doesn't succeed in becoming the mouthpiece in catering the traits of the European women envisaged rather appear struggling and wriggling with past and present i.e. eastern inheritance and western dream, most pathetically and she doesn't appear joining 'a world where women can't hope to be happy without being unnatural' (Sharma, p.145). If we take her life indifferently into account, it is full of trial and tribulations and is painful and pathetic at individual level, and

she appears unnatural on so many counts yet fails to relish the life which females in European countries do for being pulled back doubly in the reverse direction, jeopardizing her present for brighter prospect of Indian femininity though succeeds in laying down the foundation for emergence of new woman in Indian perspective but appear stalwart to ' explore the painful existential problem of Indian woman, trapped in society' (Coussy Demise, p.250). Probably her sacrifice would have been more fruitful if she could have succeeded in altering her husband's nature and attitude towards life and so safeguarding the interest of her individual family accompanied with betterment of her species as well, for life is not meant for lone success and failure, 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 though 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 co-ordinate between feelings and selves.

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