



Escapism in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

It has been unanimously accepted that of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Desai is perhaps the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life. The theme of the Desai's novels like that of the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf is human nature and human relationship. We can see that escapism, alienation, despair, frustration, anxiety in the emotional life of the individuals evident in her novels. Escape - withdrawal and a denial of reality - seems to be prominent primitive survival strategies among the protagonists of Anita Desai. The protagonists of her novels are torn between their search for authentic existence and the limitations of the human situation that prevent them from such realizations. Anita Desai herself states.

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“My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaning-less mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths then illuminating those depths till they become more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.”¹

Anita Desai discards the traditional form of realism and focuses on disintegration in the inner and outer lives of her characters. Her writing is an attempt to portray the complexities of human existence, the inherent contradiction in the individual human being and the disintegration of personality. Her novels reveal her persistent concern with frustration, loss of identity, alienation, and anxiety and despair. Almost all her characters experience psychoneurosis, feeling of isolation and insecurity. For majority of them, the real world is indeed harsh, unpleasant and complex. One of the common neurotic symptoms is a state of continuous fear. Abraham Spering says:

“Anxiety is a symptom of repressed emotional excitement, a sign of repressed frustration. At one time or the other the victim of such anxiety represses the memory of a motive, an obstacle, or an impulse to fight or flee. One or more of these elements of frustration frighten the individual and the entire situation is repressed.”²

Anita Desai's fifth novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is a study of loneliness – the loneliness that takes refuge in fantasy. The protagonist Nanda Kaul is aware of that fantasy and fairy tales have their place in life. But problem arises only when fantasy becomes life itself. The novel deals with the tensions and struggles of Nanda Kaul who lets fantasy overtake reality to such an extent that ultimately reality has to assert its position. The choice of peculiar characters gives Anita Desai immense freedom for exploration and scope to probe into the depths of feminine psyche.

Nanda Kaul, having been dissatisfied with life, leaves all attachments behind and decides to enjoy her life alone at Carignano. She experienced frustration and agony in her unfulfilled interpersonal relationships. In the very beginning of the novel, we come to know that she is completely disillusioned with all emotional bonds whether matrimonial or filial. Her life has been full of disappointments and

betrayals. After arrival at Carignano to live life of isolation, she remembers her life as a wife of vice-chancellor and also a mother of large number of children :

“Looking down, overall those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamoring about her.”³

However, at the seclusion of Carignano, the haunting sense of failure and meaninglessness continue to torment her. Even in her solitude she is not happy, and that’s why she cannot think of any creative work to keep her gainfully occupied. She does not even want to receive letters or messages. Even the sight of the postman fills her with annoyance and she only hopes that the postman will not stop at Carignano, because the postman suggests a connection with the world below the mountain, along with its various demands, impositions, botherations, which she thinks she has left behind forever. The novel opens on this note of renunciation and withdrawal:

“Nanda Kaul pasused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of pine needles when she saw the postman slowly winding his way along the upper Mall. She had not gone out to watch for him, did not want him to stop at carignano, had no wish for letters.”⁴

In her self-imposed isolation, Nanda Kaul is pitted against Raka, her great grand-child. Though there is a vast difference of age and experiences, Nanda Kaul and Raka understand each other. According to Usha Pathania.

“The conversation between Nanda Kaul and Raka reveals that Nanda’s need for belongingness is stronger than her desire to enjoy her loneliness and quiet desolation without any intrusion forms the world outside. Unconsciously, she invites Raka to destroy her unquiet desolation.”⁵

However, Raka ignored her so totally that it made Nanda breathless. Raka wanted to be left alone. She desired to pursue her own secret life amongst the Rocks and Pine of Kasauli. Her curiosity about people and what they do had been blunted. When Nanda gave her the sad news of her being in a nursing home in Geneva, Raka did not comment. After all she had known her mother ill for most of her life. It was no new shock. Her father had no time to look after the well-being of Raka. Consequently her traumatic experiences deprive her of a child’s innocent trust and feeling of joy in the company of other’s Raka’s emotional deprivation makes her a detached individual. She withdraws herself form the world of human beings and develops a strange fascination for the ugly and lonely aspects of nature.

In spite of her escape from the world of duties and relations, Nanda Kaul does not feel at peace within. In fact, her escape from the mental, emotional and social conflict is only a semblance of peace. She overlooks the basic principle that the past cannot be shut by running away from it. Normally a person should only find pleasure in the achievements of the past but for Nanda Kaul the past is frustrating. She feels relieved after her husband’s death because now she is free to live life according to her wishes and desires.

“She had been so glad when it was over. She had been g lad to leave it all behind, in the plains. Like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.”⁶

Nanda’s escape to Carignano is an attempt to get away forms the past. But she can escape from it only physically, the bitter reality of her life still has a tight hold on her mind and thoughts. It haunts her even in isolation at Carignano. Even at the last moment of her life. So, physically she has been able to withdraw herself from her harsh life of duties and responsibilities, irritations and annoyances and

certain sadness. She can neither escape from her past, nor help present, nor predict her future. Her past keeps bubbling in her memory and these memories create uncontrollable feelings in her consciousness.

The arrival of Raka does not make any difference to Nanda Kaul. She looks upon her as an unwelcome guest, as an intruder. She persistently desires to be anonymous, and will not mind changing her physical appearance, to merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. For her this strategy is absolutely necessary because she was disappointed by human relationships. Even she ignores Nanda so calmly that it makes her breathless. Ruka also feels no less miserable like a caged bird, a wild animal tamed and domesticated though they live under the same roof but apart. There is a strange living together each resenting and avoiding the presence of the other. If the old lady loves to live to alone, the young Raka desires it no less but with a certain difference. Yet her arrival at Carignano has created for Nanda Kaul a situation which she cannot escape. Anita Desai describes their isolation in the following lines :

“If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct.”⁷

Raka’s silence and withdrawal are the results of her mother’s nervous breakdown and her grandmother’s heartless exuberance. Living with her parents in big metropolitans of the world, she has seen such ghastly pictures of the so called civilized behavior that the hill-top with the burnt house fascinates her with its ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces. This strategy of escape from the past and present surroundings saves her individuality. She does not care for the company of other children. It seems that she and Carignano have been made for each other. But gradually we find that Raka is a recluse neither by natural nor by instinct. It is the domestic violence that has alienated her from her parents and other children for her, every human relationship is dreadful. She avoided company just on account of her deep-rooted fear.

Anita Desai brought out the gradual change in attitude and the reversal of stand point effectively. In the beginning, Nanda hates to even plan the menu for Raka. She does not care to go to the taxi stand to receive her great-granddaughter and even when Raka arrives she shows little warmth:

“Then it was not possible to postpone the meeting any longer and both moved a step closer to each other and embraced because they felt they must. There was a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony, angular and unaccommodating the other was and they quickly separated.”⁸

Nanda Kaul is a fragmented personality who withdraws from all contact. Two contradictory forces, withdrawal and involvement, hamper her sense of relation and totality. Her withdrawal into isolation is in no way a solution to her psychic conflict. Nanda’s life has been a long tale of frustration and disappointments; therefore she is gripped by inner violence. She wants to turn her back from the past and withdraws into isolation, but unconsciously the memories of the past torment her. She does not express her fears and desires to anyone. Indeed, her mental conflicts remain unresolved till her death.

As discussed earlier, Nanda Kaul weaves a charming web of fantasies to survive in a world of bitter truths and cruel realities. Raka’s arrival at Carignano makes her aware of the fact that fantasy and fairy tales too had their place in life.

Raka’s indifference can be overcome, only if Nanda tries to come down to the mental level of a child. She, therefore, makes a laudable attempt at weaving fantasies around her loving and adventurous father and an extra-ordinarily happy and satisfying childhood. She shares her childhood with Raka to win the child’s attention. She describes her father and the way he cared for the emotional needs of the children. She tells Raka :

“He loved to go riding with the children. Another thing he god up for the children was a badminton court and we’d have such games out on the lawn, all of us, at times even by moonlight...we could have anything we wanted of him, anything.”⁹

Self-realization is not the main thrust of fantasy of “Fire on the Mountain”, rather it is used in an entirely different way. Two kinds of fantasy words exist side by side. One which is consciously and deliberately woven by Nanda Kaul to interest her great grand daughter Raka and the other is shared by Raka and Ram Lal. There is also a third world of fantasy of Raka’s imagination, It reflects her alienation from the disjointed world of her parents. The belief of Ram Lal is an integral part of his world and of his background. Raka accepts it because it has a certain authenticity. When she chances to visit the club one evening, she is confronted by a total reversal of her expectations and instead of ladies ‘dressed as queens and men as princes’ all that she finds a group of ‘mad men and rioters’ chasing each other and appearing like monsters to her.’

“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 her mother with hammers and fists of abuse, harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under the bed cloths and wet the mattress in fright...”¹⁰

Though the end of the novel is rich in varied possible interpretations Ila’s brutal murder followed by Nanda’s confession, her death and Raka’s announcement of fire-are all packed into hardly four pages. The novel gives such an elaborate description of Ila’s abominable physique that the rape comes as a repulsive shock to the readers. The only possible explanation could be that Preet Singh is not only content with getting rid of the obstacle to his daughter’s marriage but is also avenged by Ila’s humiliation. The news of Ila’s gruesome death comes at such a precarious moment that she dies with a thorough sense of failure and guilt. Raka’s reaction to Nanda’s state beyond all response is kept a closed book from the readers. The novel ends thus:

“Down in the ravine, the flames spat and crackled around the dry wood and through the dry grass and black smoke spiraled up over the mountain.”¹¹

Three kinds of loneliness have been dealt with in the three sections of the book. One section is about glamorized loneliness, another about rebelling in loneliness and the third is a case of circumstances imposing loneliness on the person. Throughout the novel we find Nanda thinking about others, and herself in terms of varied disconnected images. Referring to the postman as ox or donkey, Raka as mosquito, moth, rabbit, mouse, cricket or parrot and Ila as owl or spider points to her own sick perspective of the world around her. *Fire on the Mountain* is a remarkable attempt to probe the various facets of escapism. In Nanda, Ila and Raka we have three rarities of escapism – all of them equally compelling. All of them bring us back to confront reality.

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