



Nanda Kaul as an alienated character in Anita Desai's *fire on the mountain*

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Abstract

Anita Desai portrays the present crisis of man and the enduring human conditions from the viewpoint of the urban metropolis. Man has to exist in society amidst all troubles, pains and suffering. The problem before him is how to exist and not how to exit. Anita Desai feels that exile or escape from the society cannot solve the problem. The basic problem is how to exist in society by maintaining one's individuality. She depicts the uselessness of existence and man's useless attempt to survive in the face of all calamities as an individual. The character Nanda Kaul in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is basically tragic, for even as she accepts her destiny, she refuses to surrender. Her hyper sensitive nature makes her alienated and solitary. The defeat and disillusionment in Anita Desai's fiction not only leads to agony and suffering but also to an acceptance of life.

Keywords: alienation, hypersensitive, solace, isolation, non-involvement, detachment, etc

Introduction

Anita Desai can easily be ranked among the foremost of contemporary Indian English novelists. As a creative writer, she has been concerned with themes which are at once Indian and universal in their scope and relevance as they deal with the human condition. Her concern for humanity has imparted profound appeal to her novels. For this reason her novels have drawn worldwide attention.

Anita Desai is primarily interested in exploring the psychic depths of her female characters. She portrays her characters as individuals, facing single handed, the violent assaults of existence. Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest to Anita Desai. She portrays the female protagonists as living in separate, closed world of existential problems and passions. Almost all her female protagonists are hyper sensitive, solitary and introspective. Desai appears to be interested in peculiar unusual characters rather than everyday average ones.

When the novel opens, we find Nanda a solitary figure in the hills. Her past is revealed to us through her reactions, her withdrawal and preoccupation with the fantastic. Her emotional coldness is a pose that she carefully cultivates to convince herself and the world that has rejected her for her self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Her withdrawal from life and family is not the result of any existential realization of man's ultimate aloneness but she has been reduced to such a state. Nanda caught at a point in life where her past could not be faced with pride and her future could not be anticipated with hope, tries to alienate the present from the past and hang on to it for what it is worth.

To sustain the restraint present, Nanda prefers fantasy which ultimately replaces reality for her. Her withdrawal from social life provides her an armour against possible hurts and betrayals. It is responsibilities, demands and obligations that she hates intensely. The emotional coldness or lack of interest that she wears at times is a mask, at times very much a part of her regular wear and in the course of time the reader like herself is confused regarding her real identity.

Nanda has always been a very self-centered person and least mother-like. She carried out her mother's job of taking care of her children only as a habit, an inevitable duty, a responsibility which has to be accomplished. Even her family treated her not very differently from the way she treated them. After enjoying privacy for a long time she is reluctant to let her great granddaughter Raka disturbs the quite order of her life, she has struggled to create around her. It is a genuine fear of getting involved and consequent possible hurt which restrains and restricts her. Carignano has provided a protection against customs and habits. Nanda's retiring to the hills is not suggestive of idealism above everyday concerns, but rather of remoteness or even exile from reality. It may even be an escapist tendency which Nanda seems to be exercising to protect herself from possible hurt and disappointment; she seems to choose the easier path of withdrawing and being labeled a coward, incapable of facing problems rather than a confrontation with life and its possible consequences. On the predicament of Nanda Kaul, Asnani comments, the aged Nanda Kaul lives in a decrepit summer villa in the foothills of the Himalaya, retreated to her small house called Carignano after the death of her husband, a university vice-chancellor. She is an important figure in society as well as in her vast family, Nanda Kaul is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a built-in-streak of sardonic feminism who do not love their matriarchal role. Whereas she had previously tended to her children with pleasure and pride, entertained her husband's colleagues and students, looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished

and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut, she now has a different attitude toward her personal environment. [*Journal of Indian Writing in English*, Vol 9 no, 1 Jan 81. pp. 81-92.]

In the perfect privacy of her sprawling house 'Carignano', she is described by her creator as "a recluse, a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on the stone wall." (FoM, 23) She has been living all these years all alone in a lonely house. She neither craved nor desired for anyone or anything in life and seems to be self-sufficient in the cocoon which she had erected around herself.

As the vice-chancellor's wife, she had been the pivot of a busy world. After having played out her innings, now she lives like a recluse. In her real life, she was not happy and satisfied. She was twice alienated says R.S. Pathak, "Her busy, pleasure loving husband had nothing to do with her private self, and her relations with her children were not intimate either." [Pathak, 1991: 133]

The futility of her ceaseingly alienated life comes through these poignant lines of the novel.

Not had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen – he had done enough to keep her quite while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics Mistress, whom he has not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children – the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. (FoM, 145)

The relationship that Nanda Kaul shares with her children is unsatisfying and unfruitful. Nanda Kaul chooses to spend the remaining days of her life in a deserted lonely house in Kasauli. She is fed up with the demands, duties and obligations she had been fulfilling throughout her life. Her love for privacy and non-involvement is not something inherent in her. Her desire to live alone, unseen, isolated, unknown is the result of an unhappy and troublesome relationship she has had with her husband and children. She therefore does not miss them. She considers them extra pieces of furniture which she does not need now. After the death of her husband, her sons and daughters had come to help her vacate the vice-chancellor's house and escort her to Kasauli. For a while they appear and then disappear never to return. All her children were alien to her nature, she neither understood nor loved them. This is how Desai describes Nanda's bonding with her children.

Nanda Kaul's detachment is a result of her disillusionment at the hands of her husband. Nanda Kaul detached attitude was a result of her lifelong pretention of living a comfortable and happy life but in reality her marriage was deeply unhappy, she simply demonstrated that she was having a successful marriage. Under the patriarchal dharma of a woman she was burdened with responsibilities of children and husband's household; she could do nothing but made compromises with injustices and unbearable realities of life and concealed her helplessness. Nanda finds life with her husband an intolerable, frustrated and disappointed. Nanda Kaul fulfills her desire to live lonely, non-attach and non-involvement, only after her husband's death. She fails to find any purpose and meaning in her marriage, where she is denied individuality and happiness. Her withdrawal from the outer world and family relatives Anita Desai says, "out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligations". (FoM, 99.) Living at Carignano, she tries to dismiss her past which her creator says "a great, heavy, difficult book which she had read through and was not required to read again". (FoM, 32.) She was happy to forget her role as wife, mother, and grandmother. She has discharged her duties, obligations and responsibilities. Her wish author describes "To be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of life, when stillness and calm were all she wished to entertain". (FoM, 18.)

The busy mechanical world where she lived as a vice-chancellor's wife has suppressed her peace, harmony and her desires. Now at this juncture, she wishes only her company and nobody else. She tries to identify herself with the loneliness of Carignano and she realizes that her house in Carignano "is both an escape and an exposure situated as it is on the knoll." (FoM, 224) The news of Raka's arrival disturbs her. She considers Raka as, "an intruder, an outsider, and a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry". (FoM, 40.) Nanda feels miserable for not being left alone and she asks herself a poignant question, "Have I not done enough and had enough. can I not be left with nothing?" (FoM, 17.)

Nanda Kaul enjoys the emptiness of Carignano for it provides a solace to her and allows her to be detached. Carignano represents for her the perfect haven in her pursuit for detachment.

Nanda was basically pliant by nature. She values love as the most essential part of life, and is sure that if she is good and dutiful, others will treat her with love. But the realities give her a shock. Her husband's infidelity, his utter disregard, the callous attitude of her children are events which erase her confidence in humanity and life. In reality she is not the queen of his home, just an unloved woman and a mother of his children, a social symbol of respectability. Under these circumstances, the choices in front of Nanda are limited. She either has to choose the bold alternative of confrontation and attack or bear it mutely. She chooses the second alternative.

Nanda suggest a sickness of soul which is imposed upon them from inside. Outer forces do affect the workings of her mind but her trouble is deeply rooted in the sense of insecurity developed in the troublesome atmosphere she lived in. Nanda's difficulties arise out of her intense self-contempt as a result of her life which she considers a miserable failure.

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