

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

*The Criterion*



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

*5th Year of Open Access*



Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Mrs. Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## Multi-Faceted Reclusion as Women's Destiny in *Fire on the Mountain*

Vani Khurana

Lecturer,  
Lovely Professional University.

### Abstract:-

This paper explores the covert existence of existential reclusion in culture of patriarchy with reference to Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Women, bond by the gaze of male, are emblem of the mockery of free will as their free will has lost its sovereignty. To be accepted in the society, women need to follow the standards set by 'other' and in the process of this 'mimicry' they become 'other' to their own self- a half-male or an incomplete-man. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai depicts reclusion as the only possible destiny of its female characters, if they reject the standard of hegemonic culture. In case of Nanda Kaul it's a horrible truth and for Raka it's a privilege. Desai emphasizes that if women want to get freedom from white lies and cultural limitation they need to accept this reclusion and needs to build a new formation of ideology- a female centered discourse will only lead to female centric world.

**Keywords:- Existential Reclusion, Male Gaze, Mimicry, Hegemony, Culture, Ideology, Free Will, Half-Male**

In the binary of nature and culture, culture refers the power formation. Culture is male representative of rule and regulation and in its worst it is the representation of the desire to control and formulate the identity of 'other'. This urge forms the basics binaries of human existence- Human and animal existence as Inter level categorization and male and female intra level of categorization. These desires are deep rooted and socially volatile. Female existence as nature in the culture of 'other' determines their fates. The self and independent notion of self for the 'object' lost its significance in the myriad signifiers prevailed in society about the 'object'. The gaze becomes an external element and makes it journey inward towards the psychic repression. As Bhabha refers-

The elision of the eye, represented in a narration of negation and repetition- no....no...never – insists that the phrase of identity cannot be spoke, except by putting the eye/I in the impossible position of enunciation. To see a missing person, or to look at invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject's transitive demand for a direct object of self-reflection, a point of presence that would maintain its privileged enunciatory position qua subject. (67)

To break this all pervasive panopticon of gaze it's compulsory for women to rise above these male hegemonic forces. If she rejects these forces and ideology, she will face same rejection and if she wants to break these invisible prison houses she should be ready to face the reclusion. In both cases she has to accept reclusion as her destiny. However, her reclusion from male hegemony can helps her to break from her objectification. Women existence in the very male world is her try to become a male or an object of male desires. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observes;

Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of the desire is another machine connected to it. (26)

Desire for other's approval is a self destructive desire. It is an open invitation to the external forces to annihilate what you do have. Nanda Kaul faces this danger in *Fire on The Mountain*. Nanda kaul, a willing subscriber of male hegemonic ideology, lives her life as the wife of Vice Chancellor: a respectable designation without the respect. She succumbs to the gazes of admiration which she receives from 'others'-

Isn't she splendid? Isn't she 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 dared to catch or return. (Desai 19)

Her hatred and denial of these external elements is meek and introvert. Her inner turmoil blocked by self imposed composure and acceptance of dominant ideology. Mr. Kaul uses his wife like a trophy of his victory and always wants her "in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests" (Desai 20). Anita Desai uses animal imagery to project the psyche and suppression of women. In her self-effacing journey Nanda Kaul feels that she is a worm "inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two" (Desai 23). She feels like "the worm herself" and she winces "at its mutilation" (Desai 23). In later part of her life, she feigns the reclusion as her forte. Throughout her life she lives on the mercy of other's approval and abhors what she has turned out due to her imitations. Reclusion becomes a rescue for her as all she wants is "to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm" are all that she wishes "to entertain" (Desai 18). She wants to embrace the nature and loves to be turned into a pine tree. A nature that is oppressed lifelong by familial expectations erupts out in the reclusion. A single reference of re-entrance of culture in her life gets its expression in coarse groans and sudden repulsive utterances of rejections and pleas of "discharged all my duties. Discharge" (Desai 33). In case of Nanda Kaul reclusion becomes a "psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier created which is actually no defence but an impoverishment of oneself" (Finkelstein 137). Her act of debarring outer world from her inner circle of loneliness is an emblem of her repulsion for her past. It is "a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation" (Desai 52).

In amidst of her wrestling with culture and reclusion enters Raka in her life. She believes that she is the messenger of societal culture and interruption in her reclusion. She considers her arrival as an interruption in her discourse with nature. In her fears she believes that she "would never be able to sleep", Nanda Kaul moans "to herself, how could she sleep with someone else in the house? She was so unused to it, it would upset her so" (Desai 38). Her preconceived notions soon prove wrong. She discovers an affinity with free bird Raka, who is a natural dweller of Nature. She is a "newly caged" (Desai 45) newly tamed wild one's (Desai 45) and ready to dispose of all prohibitions of the society. She is "a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice-she was born to it, simply" (Desai 52-53). Nanda Kaul plans to reject the existence of Raka in her home. It is a planned attempt from her part but from part of Raka she simply denies her presence naturally. Nanda Kaul wonders "at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the child" (Desai 52). She does not crave for anybody's approval for her actions and have not "a dog's slavishness of companionship" (Desai 61). Fanon states;

.....there is constellation of postulates, a series of prepositions that slowly and subtly- with the help of books, newspaper, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio- work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs. (Fanon, Black 118)

Female education into male centric world is a tool to make her an observer of her own actions. In materialistic world this education does not stand blows of utility and thus leads them to the destiny of home slaves and if they reject this destiny the reclusion with the fear of starving, exploitation and annihilation are carved in the unconscious of women. Ila Das represents this part of societal reclusion in the novel. Her reclusion is her rejection by the society because she fails to fulfill the norms of the male desires. Unable to get settled in women's ultimate destiny- marriage, her life becomes a struggle to live her life with respect and honor. As Belsey comments "...Perception supersedes sense-certainty as a way of containing this 'negation', or reconciling the antithesis that has emerged between the self and its object of knowledge. Knowledge becomes a matter of perception" (23). She realises the worthlessness and absurdity of her education. She despairingly utters "'Isn't it absurd', she rattled on, 'how helpless our upbringing made us, Nanda. We thought we were being equipped with the very best-French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses-My all that only to find it left us helpless, positively *handicapped*'" (Desai 139). This sort of education can makes her a good home maker but not a bread winner. She loses her job in the wrestling of male power display games. She tries hard but unable to brush away the poisonous presence of her father's ideals form her unconscious and wonders "when would she ever get over that pompous education of hers, leave it all behind and learn to deal with the world, now her world, as it was?" (Desai 152). Raka's rejection of education is significant in this concern. She abhors "this craftiness, rejecting outright the very thought of school, of hostels, of discipline order and obedience" (65). In culture adaptability has a great role to play. Whereas women are supposed to adapt the prevalent culture, male are suppose to create culture for women. As Ila Das comments, "it's so much harder to teach a man anything. Nanda-the women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Noooo, not one bit" (Desai 140).

The problem of the lack of communication intensifies the existential woes of female characters in the novel. Nanda Kaul tries to rise above the imposed recluse and tries to engage a conversation with Raka. She miserably fails. Unable to tell the truth, as she cannot bear it, she frames a story of wild animals caged in his father's home. In his father's home all animals lives inside the home, harmless and at their place. Thus she predicts her parental home as a place of safe existence, where animals of patriarchy are harmless and subdued. All her efforts of storytelling fall short of establishing any communication with Raka as she "could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world" (Desai 109). Nanda Kaul's pretension of recluse and love for silence starts shredding away. She craves for the company of Raka. She wants to interact with her, but flying birds hardly makes nest and do not mate with caged one. White lies of Nanda Kaul fail to bridge the gap between her and Raka. Another failed relationship is of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das. Ila Das comes to meet Nanda Kaul as an unwanted guest. She confirms the lies of Nanda Kaul by telling related lies. In this way she narrates the societal norms. Her discourse is designated to affirm the position of women. Throughout her life Ila Das suffers rejection and silence. Recluse for her is a destiny. When Nanda Kaul stops her lies sudden blow from an understanding friend resurfaces the realities of her life, which gets expression in her "bitter" and "burnt" (Desai 134) voice. Division of her father's wealth was done among his drunkard brothers, who "pestered their mother and sisters" (Desai 135) after the death of their father. Nanda Kaul's suggestion secures her a job in the university, where she, in attempt to save her honour when not promoted, resigns from the post. She becomes a victim of male ego-centric battles. Later on her life she tried to earn honest living by doing social service. These fails relationships are the only chances to form a collective consciousness these recluse. As Foucault states- There is the notion of 'spirit', which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meaning, symbolic links, an

interplay of resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the unity and explanation. (24)

Nanda Kaul feels this affinity with Ila Das as “she leaned upon the gate and watched over her with a kind of fierceness. She, well and strong and upright, she ought to protect her. She ought to fight some of her battles” (Desai 145). Her attempts are half hearted and she is more concerned about her own interests. Ila Das tries to form collective consciousness by securing the support from youngsters to safeguard women rights but she fails to achieve her goal.

Abrupt climax of the story erupts like a volcano and there is naked display of mad dance of women predicament. Ila Das’s attempts to save women from their familial suppression and subjugation end with her brutal rape and murder by Preet Singh. While receiving this news on phone all white lies of Nanda Kaul are peeled off. Her recluse was not her own choice but was forced upon her. Her stories that she told to Raka were only fabrication. These stories were “tranquillizers, pills” (158). Throughout her narration of her past glory was her bad faith- a deliberate lie spoken by her. These were her attempts “to flee what it cannot flee” (Sartre 70). She was trying to put herself “out of reach”. It was “an escape (Sartre 565)”. All her masks of uprightness and recluse are taken away and she has to face the harsh reality. All her familial bonds were failure. Her husband loved somebody else whom he did not marry but “whom he had loved, all his life loved” (Desai 158). All his children were “alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them” (Desai 158). Novel ends with Raka’s statement that “she set the forest on fire” (158). Forest is symbol of Nanda Kaul’s white lies and denial of collective discourse- a self impose recluse to save her sanity. Raka is symbol of revolution and she ends Nanda Kaul’s reclusion by setting her forest of lies on fire. The screams of animals that she hears no longer remain unheard.

#### Works Cited:

1. Belsey, Catherine. *Culture and the Real*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. 2005. Print.
2. Bhabha, Homi. K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge Classics, 2004. Print.
3. Deluze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans by. Rober Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2000. Print.
4. Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. India: Random House. 20088. Print.
5. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. UK: Pluto Press, 1986. Print.
6. Finkelstein, Sidney. *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*. New York: International Publishers. 1965. Print.
7. Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. 2012. Print.
8. Sartre, Jean Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hegel E Barnes. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1957. Print.

