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Studying Detachment and Self-Fulfilment Concerning Gender and Identity of Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* traces the story of the constant internal struggle and turmoil of the protagonist Nanda Kaul. Having had taken care of a large family and numerous responsibilities, Nanda now retreats to the quiet valley of Carignano, and is ready to lead a life of detachment and non-attachment. Her quest for self-fulfilment is enhanced by her sense of detachment notwithstanding the positive as well as the negative aspect of this freedom of individual choices. Her quiet world is shattered by the arrival of Raka, her great-grandchild, whom Nanda sees as an extension of her recluse self and wants to get close to. However, her affection is not accepted by Raka. Nanda's turmoil and eventual breakdown are also a result of her capacity but inadequacy, to help her childhood friend, Ila. Nanda is always torn between a sense of responsibility and the quest for identity/individuality.

Keywords: Gender, Quest, Individual, Attachment, Fulfilment.

Fire on the Mountain is one of the most impressive novels written by Anita Desai, one of the pioneers of Indian English Literature. Anita Desai's novels are both women-centric and psychological, with a solid thematic concept and power of narration. She presents mostly troubled characters who struggle to obtain a meaningful existence. Her novels present the agony of the anglicized new women in India, the juxtaposition between the old and the new, which does not allow stability either at the personal, or at the social or political level. Desai says that "[I]f I feel at home in any society, it is such a society where nobody really belongs; everyone is in the same way uprooted".(Verma 225) Desai chooses ordinary women as her protagonists, and places them in ordinary situations: but the perspectives that she weaves in these situations through characters, incidents, and tragedies, make the novels extraordinary.

Desai's novels are 'écriture feminine' 'in nature, that is, 'women's writings'. She becomes a close follower of this term, coined by the French writer and activist Helen Cixous. Cixous, in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa (1975) asserts that "...woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies". (Sarkar 35) Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) does just that. It traces the story of four generations of women: Nanda Kaul, her daughter Asha, grand-daughter Tara, and great grand-daughter Raka. The story of Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, Ila Das, is also interwoven in this family saga. Together, these female characters create a story that documents women's sufferings, suppressions, and sensibilities at various levels.

Fire on the Mountain has the distinction of winning the Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1978. The novel focuses on the story of Nanda Kaul, a widow with matriarchal tendencies who has decided to settle down in the small hillside of Carignano, a quiet place, as she is tired of the responsibilities of a large family. She prefers to be alone, by herself, rather than be burdened with responsibilities and formalities. Raka, her great grand- child, comes to stay with her due to an emergency in the family. Nanda Kaul has the slightest desire to welcome her guest but is unable to deny her daughter's request. Ila Das, Nanda's childhood friend, a schoolteacher and an activist who is living a life of acute penury due to vanquished family fortunes, and comes to visit Nanda occasionally, is the third visible female character in the novel. Nanda prefers to be alone since she had to suffer her husband's adultery while shouldering the work of the family as well as the social façade of being the wife of a Vice-Chancellor. She is tired and fed up. Raka, on the other hand, loves her solitude since she had suffered from the pains of an abusive, tormented childhood, the scars of which have damaged her. Ila Das has no choice but to be lonely and in solitude since she has no one to call her own, except, perhaps, Nanda Kaul. The irony is that Nanda, with all her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and Ila, the spinster forced to live in solitude, feel equally lonely. The climax of the novel is highly tragic. Ila Das is raped and killed as a sort of punishment for her acute desire for social reforms: mainly for the female. This sense of loss of a female is equated with the loss in nature. This happens when Raka accidentally sets fire to the mountain as a childish prank. This fire is symbolic of the fire in Nanda Kaul's heart. Nanda dies of a heart attack. It is the result of the shock she receives at the news of Ila's death: she is perhaps guilty of her indifference to her friend. Nanda could have helped Ila; she was in a position to do so, but she was burdened with her demons. "The violent culmination of the novel reveals the destructive impact of pent-up, negative emotions that prevent a larger, objective perspective

and make possible the modification or 'constructive alternatism', that, by allowing a different interpretation of facts and events, allow the positive reintegration with life". (Chakraverty 92)

Nanda Kaul's character and her situation occupy centre stage in the novel. They have been processed by Desai in such a manner that they focus primarily on highlighting the multiple as well as the various dynamic and ironic dimensions of her personality, her identity, and her behaviour. Desai presents Nanda as a very graceful and selfless woman, in control of her life, in the first part of the novel. She seemed to have discharged all her family duties with great aplomb and has now decided to settle down in the quietness of Carignano. She is sick and tired of her duties and even exclaims, "[I]s it wrong? Have I not done enough?...Can I not be left with nothing? (Desai 18) She seems to have finished her quota of time and energy. Nanda has withdrawn herself both emotionally and physically from all the processes in life, even those that are concerned with her children and their progeny. That she is financially independent adds to her firm desire. She seems to be on a voyage of self-fulfilment. However, the volcanic fury in her mind and her heart are not known to anyone. Not even Ila knows this. Nanda is too ashamed to share her pain and her shame with anyone. Her desire to live a life of solitude may be seen as her renunciation of the material world at this stage of her life, as proscribed in the fourth stage of life in Indian culture, the *vanaprastha* stage. However, Nanda Kaul is far, far removed from this worldly concept. She does not indulge in any kind of introspection and self-evaluation that is associated with the *vanaprastha* stage. *Although the vanaprastha stage is said to be the perfect stage to practice the quality of non-attachment, Nanda's non-attachment is not for worldly life but for worldly relationships.* She has already disconnected herself to her surroundings. "She is not an elderly, fond mother or grandmother finding fulfilment in the bustling intercourse of life". (Chakraverty 91).

Desai brings forth the dilemma the females face, caught between the personal and the societal. "Caught between the claims of attachment and detachment, her characters feel that the involvement erodes their personal identity and subjects them to the unending round of duties and obligation without offering them any personal commitment and choice". (89) On the other hand, contrary to the societal perception, Nanda Kaul "wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction". (Desai 3) She wanted to be hidden from public life. She wanted to be as inaccessible as possible, to be remote to all that was taking place around her. So intense was her desire to be completely alienated that she wants "...to be a tree, no more, no less...". (4) Nanda Kaul's sense of self-fulfilment was constantly plagued by her thought about her inadequacy of having

a loving husband and a 'happily married' life. Somewhere, deep inside her, she considered herself responsible for her situation. That is why, her sense of self-fulfilment consciously relied upon her conscious efforts to avoid all kinds of contact, especially of a larger social circle, lest someone should be aware of her hidden past and the connected shame. *Her detachment was also a product of a sense of shame and worthlessness.* She deliberately cut herself off from any kind of stress-producing situations, the situations that would inadvertently prop up in her large family circle, and she, as the head, and as the matriarch, was supposed to deal with, very efficiently. However, no one was aware of the stress that she had endured and how that had taken such an enormous toll on her mental and physical being that she preferred to indulge in escapism than to face more challenges. Her identity has been projected as that of a sophisticated and self-controlled woman who 'appears' to be very clear about what she wants. However, this façade hides the exasperation and the desire for escapism bottled inside her. *There is a constant battle between the sense of attachment and the sense of detachment going on inside her mind.* Hence, her solitude is a conscious weapon that she chooses to protect herself against the emotional abuse that her husband's infidelity and adulterous behaviour had inflicted upon her.

Her situation is, in a way, not different from that of Raka. It is essential to understand that initially, Nanda Kaul was not willing to take care of Raka. In fact, Raka's responsibility was thrust upon her only due to the filial bonds. It is only after Raka actually comes to stay with her that she can relate herself to her great-granddaughter and somehow feels a deep bond with her. After all, both had been the victims of domestic abuse, one in her childhood and the other, in her marital life. Nanda's desire to become a 'psychological parent' to Raka, her great-grandchild is very genuine as she sees a part of herself in Raka: the same desire for solitude, the love for nature, and the quiet, non-interfering presence. She wants to "...bestow affection; to appreciate and respect the child as a person and derive some joy from the child as a companion; recognize and make allowance for the kinds of childishness a young one manifests because he is still a child; allow a child to lean on [her] for support; while not fostering dependency." (Jersild et al 206) Nanda wants to willingly bestow all the love within her on Raka: she had to take care of her children and provide for them to date only by compulsion.

What is ironic is that Raka does not reciprocate the feelings of Nanda. Raka's desire for solitude is perhaps even more significant than Nanda's. It is Raka, herself a victim of self-detachment, who turns down all the gestures and overtures Nanda Kaul offers, for love and care. Raka is aware of Nanda's unwillingness to have her, but she, as a child, dependent on her parents, placed in a vulnerable situation due to their disturbed marital life, has no choice. Her

predicament and her vulnerability make Raka resort to the affinity with nature in Carignano; her long, lonely walks are her mode of escapism and enable her to maintain minimum contact with her great-grandmother. This distant and formal behaviour, shown by Raka, is not pleasant for Nanda even though she practised it herself. It then becomes vital to understand the Object Relation Theory in understanding Nanda's quest for a separate identity interspersed with her desire for self-detachment. The Object Relation Theory suggests that the way people relate to others and situations in adult life is related to their childhood experiences. The childhood images turn into 'objects' and are carried forward to adulthood. The Object Relation Theory thus attempts to "explain vicissitudes of human relationships through a study of how internal representations of self and others are structured. The clinical symptoms that suggest object relation problems [typically development delays throughout life] include disturbances in an individual's capacity to feel warmth, empathy, trust, sense of security, identity, stability, consistent emotional closeness, and stability in relationship with chosen human beings." (Singh 169) This is observed in varying degrees in Nanda, during various stages of her life. Nanda thus, sees Raka as an object on whom she can transfer her love, care, and affection. But Raka outrightly rejects it. *Furthermore, this sort of rejection perhaps makes Nanda believe and exercise her theory of nonchalance, indifference, and escapism even more harshly on the only other individual present in her life at that time, her friend Ila Das, who needed her help and who could be offered help in all manners possible.* However, even this escapism was not exactly helpful to her. She is deeply shocked at the news of Ila's death. Deep down, she knows that she could have helped Ila. She was in a position to do so. Nevertheless, she did not do so. Nanda Kaul may have believed in the philosophy of freedom of self *but cannot overlook that we are as responsible as we are free.*

Nanda lacked the strength to take a correct decision and was too weak to give up her protective environment. The 'veil' of detachment that people like Nanda use to cover up their folly is too weak and selfish. Celebrated poet and critic T.S. Eliot "...sees detachment as a triple order of attachment *to* self, things and persons and detachment *from* self, things and persons." (Sharma 89) Thus, this detachment is more selfish than spiritual. This detachment is what French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre considers our natural capacity to deceive ourselves. *However, this detachment in Nanda Kaul is also a vital device to preserve her worth and her identity.* By putting an emotional distance between herself and the others, and by presenting an absent but constant conflict between her and the people around her, Nanda survives. She neither needs affection nor wants to fight for it and thus manages to get along with them. *It is only by*

withdrawing into a world of her own that Nanda Kaul can save her individuality, notwithstanding her gender limitation, and escapes being engulfed in the brutality around her, whether it is her husband's infidelity or her continuous sense of family duties and responsibilities. It is this detachment that she could use to save her husband's fall from grace and maintain her dignity. Nanda Kaul's "detachment thus not only serves her integration but has a more positive meaning: the keeping intact of her inner life." (Horney 275)

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