



A Sense of Loneliness and Alienation Experiences by the Individual in Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain*

Dr. R. Krishnaveni

Assistant Professor

Department of English

LRG Govt. Arts College for Women

Tirupur - 641 604

E-Mail ID: harishma83@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The Indo-Anglian novel has enriched itself with the Indian Independence Movement, materialism and spiritualism, East-west encounter and tradition and modernity as the common themes till the 1970's. Anita Desai creates a character in order to tell a tale and articulate her vision of life. Almost all her novels portray female protagonists as hyper-sensitive, solitary and introspective. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila are isolated from society because of their guilty consciences, and their desire to hide their humiliation and suffer from alienation. These three female characters are embodiments of the alienation experienced by the individual in a hostile universe. Her characters are living individuals, interested in life with its hopes, dejections, and chaotic flow. This article has explored how Desai has portrayed the decline of human relationships and how some of the characters want to lead a life of solitude as in the case of Nanda, Raka and Ila.

Keywords: loneliness, alienation, solitary and materialism.

The Indo-Anglian novel has now gained an international recognition. It has enriched itself with the Indian Independence Movement, materialism and spiritualism, East-west encounter and tradition and modernity as the common themes till the 1970's. R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have made significant contribution towards Indo-Anglian fiction. Kushwant Singh and Babani Bhattacharya dealt with the socio-economic or political or philosophical aspects of a character. Women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala and Nayantara Sahgal have made realistic exploration of social background in their works.

There is a shifting of focus from the external world to the inner world of the individual in Anita Desai's works. It is not the emotionally disturbed society that Anita Desai probes into but the psyche of the emotionally disturbed self. The aim of her works is to examine about feminine

sensibility as a concept of reality in this materialistic world. Desai thus tells us about the autobiographical nature of her writing:

In countless small ways, the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situation around it while there are others who start from some real experience... you use it as a base but don't confine yourself to it. (Dalmia, Yasodhara. "An Interview with Anita Desai". Times of India, April 29, 1979. Print.)

Desai prefers pattern and rhythm to plot, and so the fragments are so integrated and interrelated in her works to make it an organic whole. So plot development in her novels does not lead to a spatio-temporal progression but leads to the protagonist's self-discovery. As Anita Desai puts it:

My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are a part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life-its shapelessness, its meaninglessness (Vinson 348).

Desai's novels are not populated by heroic characters, whether male or female, at least in the traditional sense. In *Fire on the Mountain*, (1977) Desai explores the effectiveness of escapism as a coping mechanism. The novel shows the clash of generations between Raka and Nanda, the division of classes between Nanda's isolated hill community and the nearby village, and the conflict between the educational programmes sponsored by the central government and the traditional of the local villagers.

Desai relates alienation to the emotional moods of her characters. Alienation has been the thematic motif in her novels. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila are isolated from society because of their guilty consciences, and their desire to hide their humiliation and suffer from alienation. These three female characters are embodiments of the alienation experienced by the individual in a hostile universe. They carry with them a sense of loneliness and alienation. They are "emotionally malformed and socially isolated" (Swain 1999:107). For example, Nanda Kaul does not look for peace in Kasauli. She likes the emptiness of carignano, and enjoys the "staleness" of the town. When a woman lives alone, her house should wear a look of barrenness. It should be unkempt and shabby:

Extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage-brush, but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look. (*Fire on the Mountain* 27)

In her frustration Nanda searches for detachment. Life has not honoured her claims. As her original self-effacing solution has not worked throughout her life, she substitutes it with the stately of resignation. In the case of Raka, the great grand-child of Nanda Kaul is not a normal child. Unlike other children, Raka has a weird imagination and is drawn to uncanny places and things. She, at her childhood age, loves privacy and seclusion which is rarely seen in other children of her age. Even Nanda Kaul herself thinks of Raka as an unusual child. Anita Desai gives a beautiful comparison of Raka and Nanda Kaul:

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeneance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was 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. (*Fire on the Mountain* 48)

It can be observed here that Raka is not born as a recluse rather circumstances have made her like that. She has experienced bitterness and distraught being a victim of a broken home. Her father and mother do not love each other. Her parents have no time to cater to her emotional needs. Consequently, she is deprived off many other psychological and emotional needs for which she loves to stay in solitude. Even Nanda Kaul's past is reflected. She is just performing her duties and responsibilities as the wife of a vice-chancellor and same was the case with her children.

Nanda Kaul does not cherish her past rather, she thinks the past as present “like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children” (17). She never enjoyed while nurturing the children rather she performed her duty and obligation. She is completely unhappy, upset and perturbed when she opens Asha's letter. Though she is away from her home, she looks for someone to take care of her; she seeks to get help from the outer world. She longs to love and to be loved. She does not want to encounter with her own self. She now wants to get attracted to Raka to have a fulfilling life ahead.

Ila Das is killed and raped by a man who wants her daughter to marry a young man but Ila tries to convince that guy not to do so and she finally agrees to “accept the inexorable otherness of time that [she] desperately seeks to disown” (Kamara 93). She opposes the evil practice of the society which allows child marriage; she wants her society to progress. Her fighting was to survive but in the hands of time she is killed in a violent way. It was she who became instrumental in discovering the past life of Nanda as a wife. In a way the complexities of female psyche is reflected through the characters of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das.

The characters in the fiction of Anita Desai undergo many experiences in their day – to – day chores. The most prominent feature of Anita Desai's art is the delineation of character. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate and closed worlds of existential problems and passions. Almost all her novels portray female protagonists as hyper-sensitive, solitary and introspective. Different perspectives on women have been explored by Desai in presenting women and their preoccupation with societal norms. In Desai's fiction the emotional and

psychical experience is reflected as a way of life not as an escape from life. As she points out: "Literature cannot be torn away from the fabric of life as if it were a decoration, embroidery in it. (Desai, Anita. "Women and Fiction in India". *The Toronto South Asian Review* Vol.10, No.2, winter 1992, p.27. Print)

Throughout the novel the idea of nature pervades the lives of the characters. Nature reshapes the lives of Nanda, Raka and Ila. Its appearance often corresponds with the internal world of the characters. In this novel Desai has projected her vision of life and the world through the interaction between the protagonist and nature. However, the importance of nature depicted in the novel, makes it a text suitable for psychological study.

Anita Desai creates a character in order to tell a tale and articulate her vision of life. Her characters are living individuals, interested in life with its hopes, dejections, and chaotic flow. They are moved by the aesthetics of existence; how to live a harmonious like despite all odds of society. She creates a world in which the inner and outer selves aspire for harmony. Her writings reflect the social conditions affecting the characters in traditional and in modern Indian society. To conclude, this article has explored how Desai has portrayed the decline of human relationships and how some of the characters want to lead a life of solitude as in the case of Nanda, Raka and Ila.

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