

Exploring Alienation in Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain": A Case Study

Dr. S. Mohammad Fayez, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Lucknow Campus, 504/122 Tagore Marg, Daliganj, Lucknow

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Abstract: The 20th-century post-war era saw external challenges like war, famine, and ruin alongside internal struggles of isolation and meaninglessness. In modern fiction from America, Europe, and India, alienated individuals are depicted in various ways. R.K. Narayan stands out among early Indo-Anglian novelists for portraying profound loneliness. In the post-seventy era, Anita Desai emerges as prominent writer to address alienation in Indian cities. Despite their alienation, her characters possess unique identities. Anita Desai delves into their struggles and reflections, revealing challenges faced by individuals in the modern age. The aim of this paper is to explore how Anita Desai depicts her protagonists as individuals undergoing alienation, existing within their unique domains of obstacles, feelings, affection, and hostility. For the purpose, Desai's "Fire on the Mountain" has been taken as a case study.

Keywords: Alienation, Identity Detachment Isolation, Meaninglessness.

The post-war era of the twentieth century was marked by significant stress and an even more pressing issue: the problem of alienation experienced by modern humans. Edmund Fuller succinctly points out that in our time, humans endure not only external challenges like war, persecution, famine, and ruin, but also profound internal struggles characterized by feelings of isolation, randomness, and a sense of meaninglessness in their existence (Fuller, 18).

Throughout modern twentieth-century American, European, and Indian fiction, alienated individuals have been depicted in various ways. Among the early Indo-Anglian novelists, R.K. Narayan stands out as a torchbearer in portraying the profound loneliness experienced by humans. Several examples from his novels illustrate this theme: In "Bachelor of Arts," Chandran discovers that his friends drift away after completing college. "The English Teacher" features Krishnan's constant search for a stable and meaningful existence. Additionally, in "Swami and Friends," Narayan skilfully presents the challenge of the generation gap.

Moving into the post-seventy's era, Anita Desai emerges as a prominent figure addressing the theme of alienation to such a degree that some even assert that "no other writer is as deeply engrossed in depicting the lives of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is."(Kohli, 3)

The primary objective of the present paper is to delve into Anita Desai's portrayal of her protagonists as individuals experiencing alienation, residing in their distinct realms of challenges, emotions, love, and animosity. The paper further examines the distinct worlds or spheres that Desai's characters inhabit which includes their personal challenges, emotional struggles, experiences of love and affection, as well as conflicts and hostilities they encounter.

To achieve this objective, Anita Desai's novel "Fire on the Mountain" has been selected as the primary source for analysis. This novel holds a special significance as it earned Anita Desai the Sahitya Akademi award in 1978.

"Fire on the Mountain" shares thematic and setting similarities with Desai's other acclaimed novels like "Cry, The Peacock" and "Where Shall We Go This Summer?". All of these works feature alienated, withdrawn, and lonely female protagonists. Despite their economic privilege, these women still grapple with an insatiable emotional thirst.

The novel "Fire on the Mountain" has been divided into three sections, each focusing on the lives of different characters: Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das.

Nanda Kaul, an elderly recluse, resides in the small house called Carignano, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas in Kasauli. As the widow of a University Vice Chancellor, she epitomizes unsentimental Indian women who choose to distance themselves from traditional matriarchal roles. Her profound sense of alienation becomes evident and poignant when she reads a quote from The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, which describes the desolate appearance a woman's house should have when she lives alone. The quote expresses a dislike for an overly arranged and maintained dwelling, emphasizing the beauty of imperfection and a poignant sense of loneliness." (Desai, 27)

Following a busy life filled with the responsibilities of being a housewife, raising children, and adhering to social norms, Nanda Kaul resides at Carignano seeking a peaceful and contemplative existence. Her strong longing for isolation leads her to envision a life where she imagines "she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less" (Desai, 4)

Nanda Kaul is depicted as a solitary and disconnected individual. To precisely and powerfully portray her, Desai skillfully employs various literary techniques, encompassing imagery and evocative descriptions. Desai's expert use of imagery reveals Nanda Kaul's inner thoughts and feelings. "She would be a charred

tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall" (23)- these vivid comparisons illustrate her yearning for solitude.

The desire for seclusion is so intense in Nanda that even the sight of the postman triggers irritation, and her nostrils are pinched and whitened with disapproval (5). When she receives a letter announcing the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka, it becomes apparent that all she longs for "was to be alone, to have Carignano entirely to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain (17). The mere news of Raka's arrival disturbs her, as she would feel restrained in the child's presence and "she could never groan aloud again: the child would hear (34).

In her letter, Asha describes Raka as a neglected child who appears like a "ghost and hasn't quite got over her typhoid yet" (15). Raka is portrayed as a shy, lonely and alienated child. For Nanda Kaul, Raka's arrival is an unwelcome one. Raka was "an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" (40)

Raka's psychological alienation stems from her unfortunate home environment, which leaves her feeling insecure and isolated. It seems as if Carignano and the solitary child, Raka, were destined for each other - "She had not come to Carignano to enslave herself again. She had come to Carignano to be alone, stubbornly alone... Certainly it (Carignano) belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka alone understood Carignano, knew what Carignano stood for she alone valued that...." (80).

Both Nanda Kaul and Raka experience alienation and detachment in their own distinct ways. This contrast leads them to seek ways to avoid each other, yet they both realize that "it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist" (47).

Raka is more perfect portrait of alienation. She "was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment." (47). For Nanda Kaul,

"Raka was not only other child she had known, nor like any of her children or grandchildren... Raka wanted only one thing- to be left alone and pursue her one secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (47-48).

The novelist aptly describes the difference between the two characters in the following lines, stating "If Nanda Kaul was recluse out of vengeance for a long line of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct." (48)

In the third part of the novel, another female character is introduced to the readers - Ila Das. She is Nanda's childhood friend, a spinster, and portrayed as a

pitiable and somewhat comical figure, evoking sentimental feelings from the reader towards the end of the story. Ila had a voice that "no human being ought to have had; it was anti-social to possess, to emit such sounds as poor Ila Das made by way of communication" (111). Despite these circumstances, she meets a tragic end, and her life serves as a poignant example of another existence filled with a sense of meaninglessness.

The news of Ila Das's death is utterly devastating for Nanda Kaul, causing her to break down completely. She vehemently denies the truth, exclaiming, "No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie - Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all" (145).

The deaths of both Ila Das and Nanda Kaul reflect the harsh realities of human life. Ila's demise is a result of her deep concern for others, while Nanda's passing is influenced by her preoccupation with loneliness. In both cases, the deaths of Ila Das and Nanda Kaul underline the complexities of human existence and the harsh realities that individuals navigate. Ila's demise reminds us of the challenges of maintaining a balance between caring for others and self-preservation, while Nanda's passing sheds light on the emotional struggles that arise from isolation and the difficulty of healing from emotional wounds. By using these characters' deaths to explore such themes, the narrative in the novel engages with the intricate web of human emotions, relationships, and the inevitable hardships that are a part of the human condition.

Nanda Kaul holds herself accountable for Ila Das's death and plunges into self-reproach. Conversely, Raka responds with a more violent reaction to Ila's demise. The novel concludes with a poignant scene, as Raka whispers to Nani while shivering and crouching in the lily bed, peering over the sill. She confesses, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani - look - the forest is on fire" (145).

Overall, *Fire on the Mountain* can be seen as Anita Desai's endeavor to unite a variety of alienated characters, highlighting their distinctions and interconnectedness. Despite their alienation, all three characters possess their unique personal identities. While Raka feels "shipwrecked and alone..., alone in my boat in the sea" (61-62), Ila Das, on the other hand, asserts, "I am always alone. I am never afraid" (138), almost appearing proud of her solitude. In contrast, Nanda Kaul comes across as somewhat self-conscious, yet the truth about her is profoundly disconcerting.

Anita Desai possesses a remarkable talent of delving deep into the complex inner worlds of her protagonists. Through her novels, she masterfully unveils their struggles, thoughts, and emotions, creating characters that serve as symbolic representations of the challenges faced by individuals in the modern age. Her ability to explore the human psyche adds layers of depth to her narratives, making them rich in both literary and psychological significance.

Desai's skillful portrayal of her characters goes beyond surface-level descriptions; she crafts multi-dimensional individuals who grapple with intricate emotions and internal conflicts. These characters become mirrors through which readers can examine and understand their own struggles and reflections. The novels become vehicles for readers to engage with universal themes, anxieties, and aspirations that are relevant across cultures and time periods. Her characters often represent the complexity of human emotions and the contradictions inherent in contemporary life. Through their experiences, she addresses themes like cultural clashes, identity crises, generational conflicts, and the tension between tradition and modernity. By tapping into her characters' psyches, Desai underscores the shared human experience of navigating a rapidly changing world while trying to maintain a sense of self and belonging.

The phrase "symbolic and suggestive" captures how Desai's character portrayals extend beyond mere realism. Each character becomes a vessel through which Desai conveys broader social, cultural, and philosophical ideas. Their struggles become emblematic of larger issues faced by society, and their introspective journeys serve as windows into the human condition. This approach forces the readers to not only empathize with the characters but also ponder the deeper implications of their stories.

Desai's exploration of the human psyche also adds an element of psychological depth to her novels. She intricately dissects her characters' thoughts, fears, and desires, allowing readers to witness their internal battles. This psychological dimension not only enhances the realism of her characters but also creates a strong emotional connection between the reader and the story. Readers are drawn into the characters' dilemmas, fostering a sense of intimacy and investment in their outcomes.

To conclude, Anita Desai's novels become not only narratives but also vehicles for contemplation, encouraging readers to explore the complexities of the human experience and the ever-evolving landscape of the modern world.

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