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Objectification of Dilemmas: A Comparative Study of Fire on the Mountain and The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

As writers of English, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, both have attracted extensive critical attention in India and abroad. This is due to several factors such as the complexity of form and theme in their novels, conforming to the broad parameters of the Anglo-American tradition of the psychological novel but retaining the fundamentals of the Indian sensibility and socio-cultural ethos of India, focusing on the significant questions of status of women, subtle portrayal of the protagonists' quest for self-assertion and self-actualization in the face of the rigid codes of behavior in a conformist and status loving society. The novels *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai project an objectification of several dilemmas and predicaments of human life that lend these works a universal appeal and a keen desire to delve deep into the human mind to find answers to the existential queries. Both the novels reflect upon the human psyche that reacts in diverse ways to the intricacies of reality faced while thriving in this world. The sensitivity of the characters and the psychological study of the innermost recess of the mind appeal the most. A broad comparison of the two narratives brings to light a latent similarity in the minds of the mother-daughter novelists.

Keywords: Alienation, Anita Desai, dilemma, identity, Kiran Desai, predicaments.

Introduction

Widely acclaimed as a gifted writer and the winner of Sahitya Akademi Award, Anita Desai continues to spearhead the second generation of Indian English fiction writers, and is proudly succeeded by her Man Booker winner daughter, Kiran Desai. This paper attempts to bring out streaks of commonness and similarity in their handling of themes of alienation and dilemma in human existence. There are symbolic journeys which their characters undertake, which highlight the futility of all human endeavors establishing thus the ultimate absurdity of human life. From the tapestry of novels by Anita Desai, I have taken up for study, one of her brilliant novels, *Fire on the Mountain*, and out of the two written by Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* seems to me an appropriate study to correlate with her mother's panorama.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, both the novels consolidate the authors' position in the realm of serious writing in the Indian and global scene. While *Fire on the Mountain* gravitates around a reclusive old woman and her great granddaughter, *The Inheritance of Loss* tells the tale of a retired judge and his granddaughter. In the former, the protagonist Nanda Kaul is a recluse by choice, her fragile recalcitrant great granddaughter Raka, and her childhood friend Ila Das, all the three interact on a physical plane, yet live in separate islands of their own. They make feeble attempts to build bridges of understanding amongst themselves, but cannot go too far. Each wants to be left undisturbed. Nanda Kaul leads a hectic and tiring life as the wife of Vice Chancellor whose house ran as a perfect hostess and a dutiful mother. The starkness and barrenness of the Kasauli mountains in Carignano with its pine trees, reflect the minimalist lifestyle shorn of entanglements, relationships and responsibilities. She dreads the arrival of her ten year old granddaughter, but is intrigued by the young girl's self possession and self absorption. The crisis in human values creating a void in life is highlighted by Anita Desai in a blatant way, Nanda Kaul's husband carried a life-long affair with Miss David, the mathematics teacher, whom he could not marry because of social compunctions. Nanda was merely used as a necessary adjunct to his status. While the external forms of living filled her days with constant activity, her inner voice spoke a different language of tentative aspirations to curtail her isolation and alienation. Therefore after being left alone, to recover from this aching alienation, she gives vent to a "celebratory freedom of self-expression." All she now wants is to be left alone, to hear the sound of the cicadas and the pines, to merge with the pines and be mistaken for a tree, "to be a tree, no more and no less." Meena Beliappa remarks, Anita Desai, "seeks to relate the subjective world of the individual to the spirit of the place" (26).

Raka, the week-looking secretive great granddaughter is also the product of a loveless marriage, the brutality of whose aggressive father has left its indelible ugly mark on her psyche. She develops a deep-rooted aversion to seeing anything caged, and rejects outright the very thought of discipline of schools, hostel, order and obedience. Isolated, she remains content with "her deep secret thoughts," but is a rebel at heart. At the first meeting, to Raka, her great grandmother is just "another pine tree' the grey sari, a rock-all components of the barrenness and stillness of the Carignano garden." To Nanda, Raka is "an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown

up from the plains to tease and worry.” The need of both is the same-to be left alone. But both have come to it through different routes. “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grandmother was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not yet arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice-she was born to it, simply.”(Desai, 48) The tragedy of Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend, Ila Das suggestively paints the picture of the predicament and pathetic state of women in our society. Ila Das and Nanda Kaul represent involvement in and detachment from the emptiness and meaninglessness of both the approaches to life. Ila Das’s involvement in the welfare of the people make her realize the worthlessness of her own self-centered and isolated life. But Ila Das’s death makes her aware of the meaninglessness of human existence. She feels herself gripped in a quandary, and therefore tries to defy the horrible death of Ila Das, so that she may bridge the gap between the sordid reality and the illusion of noble life. Thus when Raka returns home, setting fire to the forests, she finds her great grandmother dead on the “stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling.” Raka’s act of setting fire to the forest is symbolic of her revolt against the cruelty and violence rampant in our society. Raka’s situation, in reality, opens before Nanda Kaul, a new dimension of ‘alienation’ which in the context of the modern theories of eco-feminism, empowers women to the process of self-actualization and self-realization in a much more meaningful manner than otherwise. In a very subtle manner, Anita Desai seems to convey that if we want to make our existence meaningful, we must try to maintain a discreet balance between reality as it exists and the illusions that surround it. Therefore pursuing a streak of alienation, there is a positive and affirmative echo that emerges from a close analysis of *Fire on the Mountain*.

Kiran Desai’s fiction has striking parallels, despite notable contrasts with that of her mother, Anita Desai, who was thrice shortlisted for the Booker that the daughter has captured at the first chance. In her acceptance speech, the younger Desai said in reference to her mother: “I owe her such an enormous debt that I can’t express it in any ordinary way.” Both mother and daughter tap into their experience of migration, of expatriation, of loneliness and alienation. Unlike her mother, who mutated from a teacher into a struggling writer, Kiran studied in India, England, and the United States. Of course, Kiran too had her years of struggle, living for years in the U.S. on a student visa. The hurt and disenchantment that underlie the migrant’s restless transits inform the tale’s emotional centre in *The Inheritance*.

This novel captures our troubled times, in moving scenes of poverty, deprivation, dislocation following immigration and skewed globalization. The plot unfolds an elderly retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, who studied in Cambridge before getting into the ICS and is now consumed by self hatred of his Indianness in independent India. He is spending his last years in Cho Oyu, a crumbling hillside bungalow in Kalimpong in the northeastern Himalayas, with his pet dog, Mutt. His granddaughter Sai, the child of a Gujarati mother and a Zoroastrian father who is part of the old Soviet state, is orphaned when her parents die under the wheels of a bus in Moscow. Sai comes to stay with her embittered and alienated grandfather. The cook at Cho Oyu gives her the warmth and affection that he is unable to give his son, Biju, who is an illegal immigrant far away in America. As a desperate

alien, Biju is drifting from one temporary job to another in the basement kitchens of New York restaurants. The juxtaposition of the two plot components-the Gorkha movement of the mid 1980's in the Nepalese dominated hill districts of West Bengal in India and the predicament of nomadic migrants in a first world metropolis like New York-develops the theme of the story and shapes the narrative perspective. The loss inherited by the global subalterns is too complex to be sorted out in the emerging world with a severely limited level-playing field. Sai's brief love affair with a Nepali youth, Gyan, ends in mutual recriminations as the latter joins the group of Nepalese insurgents. He is a reluctant entrant into the Gorkha movement and his engagement with the revolution is an outcome of poverty and unemployment. A deprived life and empty future courses him into the path of history. He considers participating in history as a passport to adulthood while he begins seeing his affair with Sai as squeamish and childish.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Ila Das is the only character who does not have a negative streak in her temperament. She works as a welfare officer with a complete sense of dedication, enlightens the villagers, and tries her best to prevent them from practicing social evils and superstitions. But it is very ironical that the very person Ila had tried to educate about the undesirability of child-marriage, assaults her, rapes her and finally kills her. Ila's death and Raka's setting the forest on fire bring the violence in life and society to the centre-stage. It points towards the eternal existential problem of the human condition, just as we notice the insecurity of Biju in the alien land as well as his homeland, and also the painful stance of the two sisters, Noni and Lola, after Lola's visit to Pradhan, the flamboyant head of the Kalimpong wing of the GNLFF, to complain about the illegal huts being built by his followers on Mon Ami property. Lola's intense agony after the painfully embarrassing meeting with Pradhan is delineated in her dialogues with her sister and her dead husband. Desai says that "the two of them had been fools feeling they were doing something exciting just by occupying this picturesque cottage, by seducing them into those old travel books in the library, searching for a certain angled light with which to romance themselves...."(Desai, 247) But now their experiences were alienating them from their fictitious, self-centered universe. "Maybe everyone felt this way at some point when one recognized there was a depth to one's life and emotions beyond one's own significance."(Desai, 248)

The aching quandary stemming from the impulse to immigrate and the ensuing crisis of identity leave the characters in *The Inheritance* alienated and embittered. Towards the end of the novel, the novelist reflects over Biju's crisis, "Here he was, on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist-sights -no Statue of Liberty, Macy's, Little Italy, Brooklyn Bridge....He returned over the lonely ocean and he thought that this kind of perspective could only make you sad. Now, he promised himself, he would forget the insight, begin anew."(Desai, 286) The novel is most compelling in the description of Biju's tale. As we follow him from one underpaid, squalid job to another, bringing out a host of connections and tensions between him and the other immigrants-whether sinking or swimming-he meets. We see his father's hopes for a better life for his son, the network of favours and lobbying needed to get a visa, the various culture shocks and betrayals involved in living

and working in a city that simultaneously hates and needs immigrants. Biju's subsequent slide from great expectations to downtrodden disillusionment, and his spiritual malaise amid the cult of individuality and materialism, is well drawn. His dilemma, agony and eventually his decision to leave America is bitter, but not entirely a measure of his defect.

Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded: his self-consciousness, his self-pity-on the tediousness of it. Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget, a bigfat-sized helping of small.... Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all.(268)

Again, returning home has not been depicted as an instant cure-all for Biju. Biju's yearning, idealized image of India-the spiritual motherland, where everything is invariably more authentic and worthy simply by being Indian, is sharply undercut by both plot developments and authorial commentary. He is literally stripped of the trappings of American culture and his remaining dignity, when he is robbed by the insurgents, finding himself an alien in his own land once again. On the other hand, Jemubhai observes that the granddaughter, Sai, like him is an "estranged Indian living in India."

Sai thought of how it had been unclear to her what exactly she longed for in the early days at Cho Oyu, that only the longing itself found its echo in her aching soul. The longing was gone now, she thought, and the ache seemed to have found its substance. (223)

She feels lonely, alienated and yearns to be a part of a family full of love, warmth and activity. In a restaurant, "Sai felt suddenly bereft and jealous of these children.... Why couldn't she be part of that family? Rent a room in someone else's life?"(213)

Sai bears a resemblance with the lonely child, Raka, who also being left alone to wander over the hills and unveil the mysteries of nature, stoically accepts her fate and revolts in the end to set fire to the forest. But here on a closer analysis, Sai also bears resemblance to Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, the story of Maya's married life with Gautama. It is actually Maya's effort to tell the story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, to unfold her inner climate, the climate of sensibility that rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning and kills Gautama. Maya suffers from a serious premonition about the tragic end of her marriage. Being a childless woman, her life suffers from a terrible eventlessness. Unoccupied, unloved and alone, the world of her aspirations falls apart around her and she begins to lose her sanity. "Yes, I am going insane. I am

moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already.”(Desai, 108) Sai in *The Inheritance* too “felt her own dignity departing, watched it from far away as Gyan and his sister walked down the path.”(262) In a male-dominated society where everyone would listen to Gyan’s story and not to how true her love was for him, she dreads the humiliating remarks that would be endowed upon her individuality. She feels fearful that she “would be remade behind her back into a lunatic female, the more Gyan would fatten with pride.”(262) She feels that her love has been wasted on a male who is unable to admire his sensibilities. Desai writes, “Sai was not miraculous; she was an uninspiring person, a reflection of all the contradictions around her, a mirror that showed him himself far too clearly for comfort.”(262) Sai feels a shame for him and a distaste for herself when she visits Gyan’s house. “The dilemmas and stresses that must exist within this house-how could he have let them out?...How had she been linked to this enterprise, without her knowledge or consent? She stood staring at the chickens, unsure of what to do.”(256) Like Maya, she has not been able to reconcile to a material world devoid of love, intensity and truth. The disappearing of the dog Mutt creates a painful void in the lives of Jemubhai and Sai, just as the death of the dog Toto does in the life of Maya as the novel begins. “The author is keenly aware that she lives and writes in a divided world—divided by nationalisms and colonialisms, but also by gender, class and ethnic affiliations” (Giri 324).

Both Sai and Raka are highly sentimental and intense characters, isolated by their families and circumstances at a very age, resigning to the laws of nature stoically, but emerging as rebels as their characters grow. Jemubhai Patel and Nanda Kaul, the characters of the older generation are also recluses, who have undergone various stages of alienation and adjustment throughout their lives. Jemubhai’s rejection of his incompatible, illiterate wife and Nanda’s overadjustment with her role-playing husband, whose life-long affair with another lady had to be endured by her, show them as cultural counterparts to each other.

When we juxtapose the two novels, *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Inheritance*, we find that the dominant idiom of both is the pain and anxiety of displacement, nostalgia, a search for an idealized home and the struggle of the individual to establish interpersonal relationships with other individuals and humanity. In both the novels, the sense of place and atmosphere is very strong. It is best evoked through the pictorial details of natural surroundings, which appear as backgrounds to the rituals and assumptions of daily life. *The Inheritance* begins with an enchanting picture of the “far peak” of Kanchenjunga. “All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains...a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.”(1) Even the serious questions like poverty are picturized in sumptuous details: “...the house slipping back, not into the picturesque poverty that tourists like to photograph but into something truly dismal-modernity proffered in its meanest form, brand-new one day, in ruin the next day.”(256) In *Fire on the Mountain* too, at the height of emotions, Desai makes nature speak for her characters. The activities in nature seem to be defining and underlining the underlying tension in the situation. The association of Raka with mosquito and moth brings about its interesting psychological association in narration. Nanda Kaul wonders as Raka “seethes ... as if she were a thousand black mosquitoes, a silly humming conglomerate of them.”(45) Nanda feels herself like a bird flying

aimlessly “through the funeral moonlight.” Towards the end, to voice the silent bursting of Nanda’s self, Raka sets the hill-side to fire. She chooses to remonstrate and fight against the general, accepted norms. This can also be taken as externalization of an exposure to traumatic stimulation or subtraumatic situation and observation.

Conclusion

With elements of verisimilitude and universality, both the writers, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai are able to project life-affirming values, which make the study of their writings a rewarding experience. Through the objectification of the dilemmas and predicaments, hopes and inspirations, paradoxes and perplexities, ironies and complexities in the characters of their novels, both the novelists have enhanced and enriched our understanding of the ‘being’ and ‘nothingness’ of life.

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