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Alienation of Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain'

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Abstract:--As a novelist of considerable merit, Anita Desai enriches the tradition of Indian writing in English. She is recognized as the first Indian author writing in English who delineates feminist themes seriously, focusing on the conditions of women in India. Her present novel, 'Fire on the Mountain' captures many a reader and scholar. In this women-centred novel, she depicts the intensity of psychological conflicts experienced by women. Here she portrays the alienation of her protagonist, Nanda Kaul in a unique manner. Nanda Kaul sacrifices a lot for her family and lives only for her family but finds nothing in back.

Key words:-- uncongenial environment, heroic struggle, chain of tradition, solitude, estranged, Marital discord, feminist concern, inherent desire, conjugal life

Anita Desai's women are victims of circumstances in an uncongenial environment. They fight a persistent battle against her lost self. In this process they face a heroic struggle to come out but fail as the chain of tradition bind their feet. In such a situation Anita Desai tries her best to focus on the predicament of women in the society. Her recurring theme is:

“the agony of existence in a hostile and male-dominated society that is not only conservative but also taboo -ridden.” (Dhawan-12)¹

In Desai's famous novel 'Fire on the Mountain', Nanda Kaul, a vice-chancellor's wife and her great-grand daughter Raka suffer from alienation. The former Nanda Kaul suffers from alienation because she is tired of her busy life and the latter Raka by her instinct. Nanda Kaul, an old woman is living presently in utter solitude in her villa in the Simla hills, free from the claims and demands of the family servants and position. The individuality of her character makes her more alone and estranged. Madhusudan Prasad comments:

"In fact, this novel deals, in the main, with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anger and agony in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul, who presents an unforgettable, pathetic portrait of old age." (Madhusudan Prasad P. 78)²

Marital discord occurs as the theme of the novels of Anita Desai. Her novels like 'Cry the Peacock', 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?', 'Voices in the City' and Sahitya Academy Award winner novel 'Fire on the mountain' with a touch of feminist concern, portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to alienation and loneliness of her characters. Her all these novels deal with the theme of marital disharmony.

Here in this article my aim is to study the marital discord in her famous and popular novel 'Fire on the mountain' published in 1972. This novel captures the theme of communication and lack of understanding in marital life. The novel records the story of Nanda Kaul, the Vice-chancellor's wife who has chosen the house of top of a mountain in Carignano in the village of Kasauli.

Nanda Kaul's house Carignano reflects her mood as it stands aloof on the hilly region of Kasauli, cut off from the rest of the world. She wants to be way from all human contacts as well as from her disturbing past. She has chosen her shelter away from the life, away from the disturbances of family and away from the society.

Her husband, the Vice-Chancellor has long ordeal with only the duties and responsibilities of her position without any love attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish and infidel husband who

"treated her family as some useful object." (Solanki-1992 P.49)³

Nanda Kaul spends her life for the welfare of her family, caring to her husband's needs, bringing up her children and exhausting all her energy in performing her duties as a wife and a mother respectively. She ignores her desires, ambitions and sacrifices her friends; relatives etc. and merge with the family losing her identity. She discharges all the roles assigned to her with utmost sincerity and devotion. She leads a very busy life as the wife of Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. She plays the gracious hostess all the time for her husband who wants her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining room, entertaining his guests. In the words of N.R. Gopal:

“She is so busy raising the family and discharging the duties of mother, housewife and hostess that in the evening of her life she is happy in her seclusion even though it is partly voluntary and partly Circumstantial.” (Gopal, 1999-P. 37)⁴

Mrs. Desai probes deep into her problematic life of Nanda Kaul who besides being the wife of a Vice-Chancellor and leading a luxurious life, is satiated by it. Nanda Kaul has gone through the trauma and serious defect of her husband's infidelity for years. Her self-esteem does not allow her to beg for his love. She watches his every movement and activity from a distance. She cherishes one personal moment of victory in her life when, years ago, she had watched her husband entering their bedroom after dropping the 'one' guest, herself standing in the garden among the shadows of the night, unnoticed by him.

The novelist probes the feminine sensibility and a woman's inherent desire to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the world at large.

In the novel, 'Fire on the Mountain', Nanda kaul and her husband Prof. Kaul do not have a warm relationship. He has cared a lifelong affair with another woman. On the other hand, her real wife Nanda Kaul is no better than a house Keeper. Her husband is responsible for this. He is such a coward that he cannot marry a Christian lady because he cannot dare break social conventions. Outwardly, the kaul's are an ideal couple for university community but from inside their relationship is all-barren.

“Outwardly kaul’s were an idle couple to university community but from inside it was all empty, the whole social role and socializing was a mere shame.” (N.R. Gopal. 1999: 36)⁵

The psychological seclusion and retirement of the lady are echoed by the landscape of the mountain-rocky and barren. Her wish to be lonely and secluded is seen in her apathy to receive her great grand-daughter Raka.

“Discharge me she groaned I’ve discharged all my duties. Discharge” (Gopal. 1999: 30)⁶

Carignano offers her the anonymity and the escape she longs for in her life. The novelist says:

“Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life- as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief--- and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction.

(Fire on the Mountain P-3)⁷

Mrinalini Salanki also rightly observes about this matter:

“Her option for total isolation is not related to the spirituality of Indian thought. She does not opt for this isolation willingly but circumstances have left no other way out for her. Her long involvement with the people and the affairs of the world gave her neither satisfaction nor absence of belongingness. Therefore, in a bid to survive she acts for withdrawal, for an existence away from the world messages and visitors.” (Solanki.1992: 30)⁸

The novel tells of the falsity to which Nanda is forced to. Her conjugal life is not peaceful. It is not all love and sincerity but the terrible betrayal of her husband which prompts her to lead a life of silence. The children are alien. The graces and glories are a fabrication, to drive the present.

“Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner self.” (Solanki. 199: 49)⁹

From the very beginning of the novel the novel gives an impression of her happy life with her husband but the last page of the novel reveals that the whole story is nothing but a white lie. She has fabricated her life to Raka. She has lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her husband loves and cherishes her and keeps her like a queen but it is only done enough to keep her quiet while he carries on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics teacher, whom he has not married because she is a Christian but whom he has loved all his life.

Nanda Kaul's case in “Fire on the Mountain” is in between the two. She has raised a big family with full responsibility but in the evening of her life she loves seclusion and the news of her grand-daughter Raka's arrival shatters her isolated world.

Thus after having a glimpse of her famous and popular novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’, we find that the most common themes in this novel is the complexity of human relationship, particularly the man-woman relationship. She writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. So man-woman relationships bring characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication that frequently occurs in this novel. We find that most of her characters are alienated from the worlds, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals. When these characters have to face alienation, they become rebels.

Tensions, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear become their lot and they lose their sense of sanity and mental poise. The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai talks of woman who questions the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new content and find a meaning in life. Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck.

Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaning fullness in life through the known, the established. These characters are not normal but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start brooding about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored or rejected. She portrays her characters as individuals:

“facing single-handed, the ferocious assault of existence.” (The Times of India)¹⁰

Conclusion:The character of Nanda Kaul proves that her characters in her novels are generally females, highly sensitive and alienated from their environments. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. That is why they suffer of their relationships more than others do.

References:

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