Relentless Dissection and Retreat - A Story of the Struggles Of Human Souls: A Reading of Anita Desai's *Fire On The Mountain*

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Abstract - Women are the epitome of love and sacrifice, extending care in all possible ways. They have struggled to gain positions at the forefront, getting educated and employed. They are also expected to carry the double burden of domestic responsibilities and professional commitments inspite of the situation getting better than what it used to be. This paper "Relentless Dissection and Retreat - A Story of the Struggles Of Human Souls: A Reading of Anita Desai's *Fire On The Mountain*" aims to analyse Anita Desai's *Fire on the Moutain* through the lens of feminism applying ideas from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity*, and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. Traditional femininity stresses on women being emotionally expressive and bonded well socially. In the novel, the three female characters Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das render different responses to the oppression and injustice they have faced. Moreover, patriarchal control over the lives of women is considered to be normal in most societies. The paper explores the resignation of Nanda, rebellious nature of Raka, and resistance shown by Ila Das through a feministic lens.

key words - resistance, patriarchy, solitude, femininity

Women have always been projected as beings who are meant to be assigned with domestic chores from times immemorial. They are the epitome of love and sacrifice, extending care in all possible ways. Women have struggled to gain positions at the forefront, getting educated and employed. They are also expected to carry the double burden of domestic responsibilities and professional commitments inspite of their fight for equality and empowerment.

Anita Desai is one of the prolific writers who has contributed incredibly in the realm of Indian English Literature. She was born in Mussoorie and educated in Delhi. She was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, Girton College at the University of Cambridge and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She was also a Professor of Writing at MIT. She has authored many works including *In Custody, The Zig Zag Way, Clear Light of the Day, Journey to Ithaca,* etc. *Fire on the Moutain* (1977) by Anita Desai is a tale about three women who were conditioned to play certain roles, whose resistance is broken and silenced by the means of horror and violence. They reject traditional notions of femininity thereby displaying their strength and courage.

This paper "Relentless Dissection and Retreat - A Story of the Struggles Of Human Souls: A Reading of Anita Desai's *Fire On The Mountain*" aims to analyse the novel *Fire on the Moutain* through the lens of feminism applying ideas from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. The novel has three parts narrating the life of Nanda Kaul, the protagonist, her great-granddaughter Raka, and her friend Ila Das's life in the hills of Kasauli.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* expresses that women are conditioned to be passive caregivers. She says "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (502). Nanda Kaul was the wife of the Vice Chancellor who watched over and took care of her family for most part of her life. The last few years of her life, she chose to spend alone and moved to Kasauli leaving her children behind in the bustling world. She felt "Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli" (FM 3). The factor that pleased her the most about Carignano was its "barrenness" (FM 4). The solitude Nanda Kaul longs for is offered by the serenity of Kasauli. Nanda Kaul can be equated with nature where both offer purity, shelter, care and peace. Women have always been equated with land for their patience. In Desai's novel, Nanda Kaul can be set beside nature devoting herself completely to the benefit and happiness of her family. It is with that divinity she seeks solace. She enjoys peace and happiness being one with nature. " Here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place and time of life that she wanted and prepared for all her life - as she realised on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief - and at last she had it" (FM 3). Loneliness does not cause sorrow but on the contrary comforts her totally. " All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain" (FM 18). Nature has always complemented women and their moods. There was nothing and no one she wanted other than the solitude she experienced at Kasauli. She always felt that she lived in a house that was her husband's, "never hers" (20). Her frustration and longing to spend time by herself is evident when she says "...I've discharged all my duties" (FM 33). Nanda Kaul lived a life as a mother and wife.

She was always on the run to meet her responsibilities and fulfill her sacrificial role. Palak Mittal in her article "On Motherhood: An Ethical and Social Perspective" says:

> . . . rather the role of a mother has been glorified as a form of self-sacrifice which normalises a woman being robbed of a fulfilling purpose outside of motherhood. Quite often, care, empathy and compassion are considered to be synonymous with being a mother. In the process, a mother's need for care, empathy and compassion, particularly in relation to her plans outside of motherhood, is ignored. (24)

The shift she had from her roles was not to seek empowerment but to escape from the monotony of forever being the one who gives herself for the family. Nanda Kaul got married, bore children, and took care of the grandchildren too. When she thought she had fulfilled her responsibilities and craved solitude, her great-granddaughter was also sent to her. Beauvoir states "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her "natural" vocation" (597). When being a mother, the perfect wife, and taking care of the household becomes a woman's sole responsibility, the need for her personal space and her wishes are compromised. Nanda went through a similar state all through her life. Judith Butler in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex" says "The phenomenology of victimisation that Simone de Beauvoir elaborates throughout The Second Sex reveals that oppression, despite the appearance and weight of inevitability, is essentially contingent" (41).

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* posits that gender is not an inherent factor but something performed through societal expectations. Unlike her great-grandmother, Raka wholly rejects the idea of traditional femininity by refusing to be emotionally attached and choosing solitude and isolation. Everyone who met Raka said that "... she should go to the hills to recuperate" (FM 17). "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct" (FM 52). Though she was a young girl, Raka enjoyed the time she had with herself and valued her personal space. Raka's father tried his level best "to bring her out of her shell" (FM 70). Butler states " If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a "ground" will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time" (179). Traditional femininity stresses on women being emotionally expressive and bonded well socially but Raka is silent and distant. Her lack of interest in communication which is an expected quality of women is a form of resistance. She finds calmness in nature and enjoys the unpredictability of nature. Nanda says " You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka" (FM 71) and it is not completely true. Nanda rejected societal expectations after fulfilling her duty making her passive whereas Raka actively chooses not to conform to anything and resists and rejects traditional gender politics. Towards the end when she "set the forest on fire" (FM 158), it is symbolic. The fire represents the destruction of patriarchy and traditional identity politics and rejection of a world that suppresses women.

The patriarchal control over the lives of women is considered to be normal in most societies. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* expresses that literature generally depicts male dominance as an unquestioned authority. She states "Perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. . . Patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature" (58). Men ruling women and treating them as mere objects is deeply ingrained in the culture of many societies. Rona Kaufman in "Patriarchal Violence" states:

> To say that patriarchal violence is pervasive is an understatement. . . Patriarchal violence is that violence which serves to maintain the patriarchy. Stated differently, patriarchal violence is "any kind of violence that creates or maintains men's power and dominance, or avenges the loss of their power."Patriarchal violence is "a collective term for the violence that is found throughout the world and that is rooted in the patriarchal power structures it defends. (518)

Ila Das, Nanda's friend, stands as a symbol of women who try to break and resist patriarchal structures. She was an activist who fought for the abolition of child marriages. Her death was the price she had to pay for standing against a man who tried to marry off his seven-year-old daughter to an old man for financial gain. She was "raped" (FM 158) and "strangled" (FM 157) to death. The brutal rape and murder of Ila is a testimony to how women who resist and refuse to surrender are targeted and silenced by violence.

In *Fire on the Moutain,* Nanda, Raka and Ila render different responses to oppression and injustice they have faced. Nanda spent a good part of her life fulfilling the responsibilities and roles assigned to her. It was only during the last years, she sought peace and solitude and moved out of her busy familial life. It is more of a resignation than resistance. She turned into an emotionally detached passive individual after all that she had been through in life. Raka in contrast chose to break away from the traditional patterns before even entering the cycle. Her choices showcase her maturity and desire to be free. She refused to conform to inbuilt structures of identity and her silence is the silent rebellion she executed. Ila Das desired to create good changes in society for a better future that is devoid of inequality, suppression, and oppression. Her murder was the cost of resistance she had to pay. She is a tragic victim of brutality showcased by a male-dominated society.

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