

In Quest of Space: Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai's

Fire on the Mountain

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ABSTRACT

Universally women have been silenced in history and literature through ages. They have been exploited, oppressed and rendered voiceless. History invariably in all countries and at all times have told 'His' story. The scenario started changing with the setting in of the modern period, women began to carve a "space" for themselves, voicing their aspirations, trials and tribulations in the journey of life. They have started to become "visible", presenting their lived-experiences from their perspectives, replacing the "male gaze".

*This shift has become discernible specially in the post-independence Indian writings. The resistance against patriarchal pressures have found brilliant expression in the regional writings like *Adyaja* by Indira Goswami. or Mahasweta Devi's *Stanodayini* , as also in the works of the Indian authors writing in English . This paper would endeavor to record, how Anita Desai, one of the most celebrated Indian Women Writers in English, in her novel, 'Fire on the Mountain', has depicted the silent sufferings of the married women of the affluent Indian urban elites.*

Keywords : *Feminism, Voiceless, Visible, Male Gaze, Space, Resistance, Urban Elites, Married Women.*

Introduction:

Feminism as a movement has a long history. There has been various interpretations of the term. A very complex and dynamic concept, one may loosely define Feminism as a collection of movements and ideologies which aims to secure for women equal rights as that of men in all spheres of life -social, economic and political . It studies the social

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construction of gender examining women's social roles and lived experience. It strives to give women voice, see things from their perspective, bringing them at the centre. It tries to address the "Woman Question" seeking to redress the imbalance prevalent in society by ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women as is available to a man. It is now being realized that mere legalization of equal rights alone cannot free women from centuries of sexual and social subordination, economic exploitation, domestic violence and intellectual starvation. There is a need to identify and understand the mechanisms of patriarchy to free women from the fetters of eternal subjugation. This analysis has been taken up by Indian women authors like Arundhati Roy and Kamala Das who have, through their writings, given women voices to share their own lives and experiences.

The novels of Anita Desai can be studied against the above background. Her novels present the agonies, the insecurity and the indifference through which her protagonists are harrowed every living moment of their lives and the resultant protest, the search for self-hood in the Indian context.

Anita Desai was born in 1937, in Missouri, a hill station in India. Her father, D.N. Mazumdar was a Bengali businessman and mother Toni Nime was a German lady. Mrs. Desai has been a prolific writer since her school days, publishing her first story at the age of nine. Her debut novel *Cry, the Peacock* was published in 1963 in London by the renowned publisher Peter Owen.

Fire on the Mountain, the novel under study, was published in 1977 and is her fifth novel. Stylistically, this lyrical novel is considered the best of the novels of Mrs. Desai by many critics. She has been awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for this novel. The novel superbly epitomizes the woman's dream of a space of her own. The title of the novel is perhaps taken from William Golding's famous novel *Lord of the Flies*, the second chapter of which is entitled "Fire on the Mountain". The end of both of the novels is marked with the break out of a devastating fire which is not accidental but willfully set alight. The hill station resort of Kasauli, to which Nanda Kaul, the elegant widow retires after the death of her Vice-Chancellor husband, is not just a geographical location or space but metaphorically becomes an externalization of all her suppressed needs and silent protests; a 'room of one's own'. It

is the story of a woman who has withdrawn from the world of ‘bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries’, into Carignano, a dilapidated and abandoned house in the mountains, seeking an absolute isolation. The barren rocks and hills of Carignano is presented by Desai as projections of Nanda Kaul’s battered , bruised self. The mountain is bare both literally and metaphorically with no mythical or conventional adages attached to it. The place parallels Nanda’s emotional and physical isolation. The vegetative life in the mountain accentuates this aridity and barrenness. Pines are the plants of this rock, reminding one of the barren landscape of *The Waste Land*, and Nanda finds them appropriate and acceptable, identifying herself with the tall, stand-alone grey pines. The reader is initially led to believe that Nanda Kaul’s exile is a voluntary choice. It is only at the end, almost in the form of a denouement, that it is revealed that this exile was forced on her by her circumstances.

The novel opens with a morning in Carignano, the house in Kasauli where Nanda Kaul has retired to. Nanda is aged but still very beautiful, self-consciously graceful and straight in her bearing. She is unique in her elegant isolation, cutting herself off from almost anyone and everyone. Her stand-offish demeanor with a hint of pride is very evocatively established by Desai at the onset of the novel. Carignano is atop a stiff hill. Whereas people much younger than her toil up the steep path, “bent-backed”, Nanda Kaul “always made a point of keeping her back straight as a rod when walking up that path”.(11) This constant strive to maintain her poise and never to bend is ingrained in her personality. It is perhaps this trait of her character which can help us to understand many of her otherwise incongruous behavior later. We find her at peace with the barren landscape, it is this barrenness that appeals to her and we are told that unlike the earlier owners of Carignano, she has no plans of planting new trees in the garden to add colour and life. The starkness of the Kasauli range and Carignano, pleases the old lady. She seems to want nothing more at this stage of her life. Apparently, having successfully delivered her duties as a wife and mother, Nanda has willfully chosen this seclusion, withdrawing herself from friends and relatives and from all attachments with her past existence as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife.

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk saree made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken

for one. To be a tree, no more, no less, was all she was prepared to undertake.(1)

Carignano was “her” home. Later in the novel we find her spinning mesmerizing stories about the splendid houses of her past, but what is also unfolded in the novel is that she was never at home in all those dream houses. She was never at the centre, always tiptoeing at the periphery, immaculately playing the roles assigned to her- the perfect wife, elegant hostess and caring mother.

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of this mountain, in this quiet house . It was the place and 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.(3)

In Carignano her own children ,who had escorted her to this hill station after the death of her Vice-Chancellor husband, seem superfluous. She had wondered what to do with them, they were like extra furniture, crowding the otherwise cool sparse interior of the house. So she is relieved when finally they leave.

When they left, she paced the house, proprietorially, feeling the feel of each stone in the paving with bare feet.(30)

This is the first time in her life that she can pace “proprietorially” in a house, all her own. This placidity crumbles down under the onslaught of a letter from her daughter Asha informing her that Raka, Nanda’s great grand daughter was on her way to Kasauli. Raka is recuperating from typhoid and would be staying at Carignano for some days. This unwelcome letter rips away the veil of complacency and grace from the visage of Nanda Kaul. She considers this as an invasion on her privacy, Raka is like “a mosquito from the plains” threatening and dysanctifying the cool clean environment of the hills. We find her scowling down at the gorge flowing down from the mountains towards the Punjab plains. The gorge metamorphoses into an ugly choked gutter on which crowds of heads- heads of children, grandchildren, servants, guests seem to surge up and clamour around her. She is transported from the serene , minimal present to the overcrowded clamorous past.

Born to and brought up within the stronghold and stranglehold of the patriarchal culture,

Nanda Kaul automatically internalized, like other Indian women, the habit of “caring”. Her whole life had been spent on taking care of the household of the Vice-Chancellor, entertaining “his” guests, playing the part of a gracious hostess, giving birth to and rearing children. She reminisces those days to her great grand daughter. Nanda tries with the aid of her friend Ila Das to construct a happy past to engage Raka; she spins stories about an idealized and idolized father, a glamorous and perfect married life, a doting and loyal husband. It all started one rainy day when Nanda was trying to charm and captivate the attention of her queer great grand daughter Raka. Pointing at the bronze statue of Buddha which Raka was stroking with her fingers Nanda embarks on her story telling. She weaves the story of an explorer father and the spine chilling adventures undertaken by him. “Isn’t it a beautiful piece? It comes all the way from Tibet, you know. My father brought it”(82). In her enthusiasm she even boasts of a private zoo with exotic animals in the house that she had lived in as a child in Kashmir. She imagines idyllic images of her husband. In her “reminiscing” her husband appears to be a doting father who “loved to go riding with the children” who got up for the children a badminton court, “and we would have such games out on the lawn, all of us, at times even at moonlight” and “we could have anything we wanted of him, anything”(100). Never is it given out that behind the façade of the ideal happy couple, the Vice-Chancellor had carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the lecturer of Mathematics. Later in the novel it is revealed that in the real past Nanda had always to tiptoe stealthily on the fringes of the badminton court, it becomes symbolic of a space appropriated by her husband and his mistress, Miss Davidson, to play other “games”. In the last pages of the novel these castles in the air come down with a crush. Ila Das, the withered, haggard spinster who was a social worker and an old acquaintance of Nanda from her schooldays, is brutally raped and murdered while she is going back to her place after evening tea at Carignano. Nanda is informed by the police over phone and is required to identify the body. While holding the receiver Nanda Kaul takes a plunge within, and identifies herself with Ila Das. Nanda Kaul strips herself of all the delusions, all the dream houses, all the myths she had so carefully adorned her stories with. She stands face to face with naked truth, and dies holding the receiver. Her denouement, richly poetic and evocative, is the most soul stirring part of the novel.

But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone. With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped :No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet – he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar....Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen- he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress.....And her children – the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills....No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then, hung it down, let it hung.(145).

We are made to realize that these fantasizings allowed her to escape from her dark unspeakable past, her unfaithful and uncaring husband, ungrateful children and all those years of silent suffering, playing the role of a dutiful and perfect homemaker smothering all her needs and urges. Carignano was her final retreat, her escape route. Trapped in the interminable meshes of daily life as the caretaker and nourisher and the what-not of the family, it is here in Carignano that she can finally find her own *space*, literally and metaphorically. This is why she becomes so fiercely protective about her privacy, her “home”. With the death of Ila Das comes the final realization – behind the tall elegant stature of Nanda Kaul, the Vice- Chancellor’s widow, there crouches, as it were, someone as humiliated and “defeated”, as helpless, insignificant, vulnerable, small and pitiable as Ila Das. It is the shock of this perception which finally kills Nanda Kaul. Through Nanda Kaul, Desai has voiced the seething discontent of the Indian urban elite married woman who silently groan under the patriarchal bondage, forcefully binding her to the socially expected duties and roles assigned for a woman. Carignano is emblematic of Nanda’s search for self-identity, liberating her from dictums of society and family which must be obeyed for acceptance in the

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mainstream male dominated and dictated society. She withdraws herself from everything and everyone as a silent protest and finds her solace in the apparently barren landscape of Kasauli. The novel fittingly comes to an end with the whole mountain set ablaze by Raka, as if bringing an end to all the sham shows and make believes, her voice exultantly calling out to Nanda –

Look, Nani, I have set the forest on Fire, Look, Nani- Look- the forest is on fire(145).

R-eferences –

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