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Quest For Identity in Anita Desai's Fire On The Mountain : A Psychological Concern



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ABSTRACT

Marital discord recurs as the theme of the novels of Anita Desai. Desai's novels portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to alienation and loneliness of the characters. Her novels like, Cry the Peacock, Where shall We Go This Summer?, Voices in the City, and Bye-Bye Blackbird also deal with the theme of marital disharmony, but the aim of the

present paper is to study the marital discord in her Sahitya Academy Award winner novel Fire on the Mountain published in 1972. Desai depicts the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow 'Nanda Kaul'.

KEY WORDS

alienation, loneliness & marital disharmony

RESEARCH PAPER

Anita Desai is a prominent Indian woman writer of postcolonial literature. Critic Claire Messud, highlights Desai's ability to use the familiar realm of the everyday and remarks in a review that Desai is, "a mistress of synecdoche, a writer whose delicate portraits of the quotidian resonate outwards to convey tumultuous swathes of history," a view that is commonly evoked in regards to Desai's fiction (Hunter 3). K. D. Verma, in turn, applauds Desai for what he sees as important contributions to the literary canon of postcolonial literature claiming "the poststructuralist and postmodernist correction in which Desai's work participates brings out the moral and psychological truth of history- collectivity's overassertive narcissism and overindulgent egotism".

The novel narrates the story of Nanda Kaul who live in Carignano, a desolate and haunted house in Kasauli, away from the world of "bags and letters, messages and demands, she had wanted to be left to the pines and cicadas alone."(p.3) The novels deals with Nanda Kaul's determined detachment and non-involvement which is brought about by the unhappy conjugal ties which is seen in Desai's earlier novels.

Her fierce desire to live alone is the result of her busy but, empty life as the wife of an ex-Vice Chancellor of Punjab University. She played the role of a dutiful wife and almost everyone envied her. But the inner reality of her life is revealed to us when we learned that her relationship with her husband was an unhappy one. She led her life as he wanted her to live out of a sense of duty. Her life as a Vice Chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activity was meaningless and unsatisfying. Although her busy schedule lacked warmth and understanding, she carried on because of her obligations to her husband and children. She does not want any disturbances once she discharged her duties. "Discharge me", she groaned, "I have discharged all my duties. Discharge". This is the fact that emotional deprivation is at the root of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. We cannot deny from the truth that her husband did not love her as a wife and treated her as some decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. Obviously, she enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary but deep down she felt lonely and neglected. Her husband's extra marital affair with Miss David had been a source of agony through her life. Her bond with her husband did not involve her "self".

Nanda Kaul previously tended to her children with pleasure and pride, entertained her husband's colleagues and students, "looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut"(p.18), she now has a different attitude toward her personal environment. "The care of others was a habit Nanda had mislaid. It had been a religious calling she had believed in till she had found it fake" (page 30). The appropriateness of her lonely, haunted and rather dismal existence is verified for her when she reads a quotation from *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* ("When a woman Lives Alone") :

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces..... I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clear.... arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate is tightly shut. (p. 27)

Seeking an absolute isolation here, Nanda fancies she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. "To be a tree, no more and no less"(P.4), is all she is prepared to undertake. All she wants is 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" (p.17).

Nanda doesn't want anybody come to her home. The unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves Nanda and disturbs her privacy. Raka too is alienated like her great grandmother. To Nanda she is an intruder, an outsider. Raka is an abnormal child in comparison to other children. The only thing she ever wanted was "to be left alone and pursue her own secret life almost the rocks and pines of Kasauli". Raka is a victim of a broken home. She becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her.

To sum up, Nanda Kaul's love for privacy is not something inherent in her. In fact, her desire for seclusion is due to the unhappy relationship she has had with her husband and children. She initially, resent Raka's arrival because it reminds her of the past memories of her selfish children and faithless husband. Her relationship with her husband was nothing beyond the obligation they have for each other. Desai's unquestionable existential and psychological concerns have distinguished her from other novelist of her generation.

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