

Exploring the Muffled Voice in *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract—Literature is the finest manifestation of human experience, thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. Fiction being an effective and popular literary genre voices the social consciousness and social situation and thus it becomes a handy tool of social criticism. Indian literature spans a rich variety of themes and issues of considerable interest. Many novelists writing in English has contributed to its growth and enrichment of Indian literature leading to occupy a place of admiration in the world literature. Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award and a number of coveted national and international prizes, Desai occupies a well established position in the canon of contemporary Indian English writing. The masterpiece, *Fire on the Mountain* is a marvellous one which beautifully illustrates the intricacies of human relationship. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul is a victim of husband's humiliation and negligence. The novel ends with an utter despairing note that Nanda Kaul's struggle from self adjustment to self alienation seems to be bizarre futile and meaningless. The paper seeks to examine the victimized self of women and her quest for identity by subverting the constructed norms of patriarchal society. Further, the study attempts to present the articulated voice of the women to challenge male hegemony in the process of establishing individualism.

Keywords— Women, Patriarchy, Victim, Protagonist, Identity, Ideology

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the finest manifestation of human experience, thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. Fiction being an effective and popular literary genre voices the social consciousness and social situation and thus it becomes a handy tool of social criticism. Indian literature spans a rich variety of themes and issues of considerable interest. Many novelists writing in English has contributed to its growth and enrichment of Indian literature leading to occupy a place of admiration in the world literature. The emergence of a matrix of women novelists in the post modern era is quite significant as their literary writings heralded a new dawn in the arena of fictional writing in English by the inclusion of new themes and issues that are central to women's world and their issues. In the contemporary period we can pride ourselves on a handful of women writers who have carved a niche for themselves in the arena of fictional writings in English by offering a unique

perspective of female experience and their issues through their narratives. Anita Desai deserves a special mention as the fore runner of her contemporaries of the post modern women writers. The literary luminaries included in the literary canon of the post modern fictional world include Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and to name a few.

II. OBJECTIVES

The paper seeks to examine the victimized self of women and their quest for identity by subverting the constructed norms of patriarchal society. Further, the study attempts to present the articulated voice of the women to challenge male hegemony in the process of establishing individualism.

III. METHODOLOGY

The literary paper, *Exploring the Muffled Voice in Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai is descriptive in nature. The study is analysed through an explication of Anita Desai's Award winning novel, *Fire on the Mountain* as the primary text. Other secondary sources like journals, reference books and critical reviews are also consulted in developing the paper.

IV. ANALYSES

Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award and a number of coveted national and international prizes, Desai occupies a well established position in the canon of contemporary Indian English writing. Novelist, Short story writer and children's literature, Desai's writings have drawn world-wide attention making her literary celebrity of lasting significance. Published in 1977, *Fire on the Mountain* has established her reputation by bringing her the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for 1978. The masterpiece, *Fire on the Mountain* is a marvellous one which beautifully illustrates the intricacies of human relationship. The psychological exploration of various facets of loneliness of the three female characters, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das holds the prime interest of this award winning novel.

A concerned visionary, Anita Desai's writings have largely been popularized for her insight and concern for the marginalized section of the society. She has wielded her pen to project the sufferings of the sensitive women who are often haunted by a desire to establish individualism within the orbit of family relationships and social obligations. The title of the

novel, *Fire on the Mountain* symbolizes the fire that burns in the heart of an anguished lady, who suffers from existential pangs. Nanda Kaul. Anita Desai's award winning novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, is the story of the agonized cry of an elderly housewife, Nanda Kaul who longs for a secluded life after being humiliated and betrayed by her husband. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul is a victim of husband's humiliation and laxity. The novel explores the problem of disintegration and frustration caused by cacophony and intricacies of marital life of Nanda Kaul and Mr. Kaul. The dilemma in the marital life of the couple is further intensified by the shocking truth of Mr. Kaul's extra marital relationship with a Mathematics teacher, Miss David. Anita Desai's novels are characterized by her sense of empathy for the women, who are given an inferior identity based on her constructed gender. Anita Desai skilfully investigates the emotional world of Nanda Kaul, the wife of the Vice Chancellor Mr. Kaul, who is highly a sensitive and introvert lady. Nanda Kaul is caught in the web of what Martin Buber calls as "self-contradictions", the failure to work out and realize the inborn Thou and what meets it". (Buber 217) Being ignored and betrayed, she feels lonely and dejected.

The literary endeavour of the Indian women writers constantly lies in their constant effort to unveil the reality that though social change has taken place still women are discriminated and categorized as the 'Other'. True to her contemporaries, Desai too pleads for a better life for the women and proclaim the same message through her writings which is piteously demonstrated through her merciless women in *Fire on the Mountain*.

Humane experience has chiefly been a masculine one. Down the ages, women's voices have been either suppressed or silenced by patriarchal constructs and hence remained unheard in social history. The man made rules are fixed and tabooed. Since ages, women are subject to drudgery and lead a captive life confining themselves to the norms imposed by the patriarchy. Women are discriminated in many aspects and deprived of all those pleasures which are prerogatives of males. A woman's urge, her interests and yearnings hold no importance in the male andocentric society. Male atrocity and dominance is not a recent phenomenon but is carried forward by the chain of patriarchy. In the patriarchal culture a woman's worth is never acknowledged and remains unrecognized even though she sacrifices her greater interest for the well-being of the family. The allegedly inferior position pushed women to display the role of a happy homemaker with no scope to fulfil their potential as human being.

Domestic slavery is a major issue in Desai's novels and the novelist has superbly captured the emotional suffering of the housewives where they undergo confinement and sacrifice everything for the sake of the family responsibility. But still the women in Desai's novels are denied of any freedom and uprightiness. After years of sacrifice and her dedication in discharging household responsibilities, Nanda is humiliated and denied of her wifely status. A woman however dutiful and

sincere may be, she has to passively submit to the dominance of the patriarchal, patrilineal and male chauvinistic society. Eva Figes states,

Dominance is.... the keynote in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male attributes are one as where the male attributes are ones associated with mental thought and positive activity, whilst the woman is regarded as essentially passive, her role to be respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species (Figes 125).

In a society, where masculine power comes into dominance and considered male as rational and authoritative, the female by the established features are identified as docile, passive, acquiescent, sentimental and emotional.

Outwardly the couple in *Fire on the Mountain* seems to an ideal one but in practical life there is a total mess in their marital life. The entire social role is mere shame and just for the sake of social image the couple continues the so called relation as husband and wife. The protagonist is alien to both her husband and to her children. Tired of life, Nanda wants to shun away from all the responsibilities and duties. The very realization of no sense of belongingness in her husband's house develops in her a sort of destructive hatred for her husband. She chooses her destiny, "mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house – his house, never hers". (*Fire on the Mountain* 20)

Nanda's relation to her husband is marked by only duties and family obligations and nothing worth beyond. Nanda Kaula, the elderly heroine of Anita Desai is definitely a victim of such patriarchal exploitation and subjugation. Life's tragedy and continuous betrayal from her husband, the ingratitude of her children turn her to be a recluse. She reflects upon the purposelessness of life. Despite enjoying all the comforts and luxuries being the wife of a Vice Chancellor, Nanda feels incomplete. Her social status as well as affluence of money has no doubt uplifts her on social circle. But she starves emotionally as the relation is stained due to the emotional and temperamental difference between Mr. Kaul and her. Her crowded life as the wife of such a prestigious officer ordering "too many servants", entertaining "too many guests", looking after "so many children" has stifled her. (*Fire on the Mountain* 30). Age is not a measuring yardstick of gauging happiness of life and domestic serenity. But it is the love and affection that is the most desired sentiment above all in the foundation of blissful life. Being a victim of the social construct, the extreme sufferings manifest itself both at the emotional and mental level. While talking about the alienation of women, Germaine Greer opines that,

Many a housewife starting at the back of her husband's newspaper or listening to his breathing in bed is lonelier than any spinster in a rented room (Greer 244)

The mental upheavals, traumas and the agonies of the protagonist is well explored by the novelist's psychological approach exploring the extreme truth about the protagonist's troubled life. Psychologically wounded Nanda reveals in her

desire of craving for loneliness in her old age. The bitterness of life has forced her to deserve a blessed widowhood by preferring to lead a life of seclusion. She attempts to lead an independent and self-styled life and in the process "meets with the disaster and raises interesting and controversial issue regarding women's capacity for self-sufficiency". (Parsuram 59)

Patriarchy often manipulates women's rights. The implementation of the rights and roles of women often gets restricted by the presumably subordinate position of women in an Indian patriarchal family. Kate Millet in her revolutionary book *Sexual Politics* asserted that, "patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole". (33) This is what Mr. Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* practices precisely. Since, patriarchy attaches great respectability and attributes positive values to male, so such act is accepted as universal in the male prerogative society.

The novel, *Fire on the Mountain* highlights the hypocritical situation and the lifelong faithlessness of Mr. Kaul towards his wife for which she is compelled to seek refuge in seclusion in the island Carignano. The novel ends with an utter despairing note that Nanda Kaul's struggle from self adjustment to self alienation seems to be bizarre futile and meaningless. The novel is the embodiment of the feelings, anxiety, isolation, alienation, purposelessness and loss of identity that engulfs a woman's psyche. Not only Nanda Kaul even the minor characters like Ila Das and Raka choose their own value system towards themselves from reality. The sad and traumatic experiences of the three fascinating characters resemble a large number of women's plight and suppression of the society.

Nanda Kaul is a prototype of a sensitive woman who deserves the ability to question the accepted code and to come out of the bonds of domesticity and to achieve a model of life that fit her expectations. The novel *Fire on the Mountain*, celebrates the strength of an aged woman who transforms herself from a docile and stereotyped wife to an assertive woman and protest against the male dictated norms. She courageously has withdrawn herself from the emotionless world to live a life of independency retiring to the stillness of Carignano. Nanda Kaul though an elderly lady is another icon of New woman who asserted for her identity by subverting patriarchy and the constructed ideology.

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