

VOICE OF SILENCE IN THE FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN BY ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

My research article is on Anita Desai's Nanda Kaul's Voice of Silence in The Fire on the Mountain. Many of her protagonists live in a well of silence due to marital disharmony which is her favorite premise to voice for the womanhood. Anita Desai wants to show that a married woman lives an isolated life because her life has been wasted by an unfaithful husband and uncaring children.

KEYWORDS: Voice of Silence, Fire on the Mountain, Self-Controlled and Authoritative Lady

INTRODUCTION

The Voice of Silence

Silence, deep within oneself, born out of a peace of mind is the most precious gift God could have given to man. This silence is the silence of the Universe, where the Invisible makes himself visible. This silence of the Universe, echoed in the heart of man is the dwelling place of God. In this silence man hears God whispering and God listens to Man's whispered prayers. As K. R. Srinivasa Ayenger states, "half a prayer from below, half a whisper from above: the prayer evoking the response, or the whisper evoking the prayer, and always prayer and whisper chiming into a song" [Indian Writing in English, p.111].

In Anita Desai's novels, some of the protagonists, especially women apparently live in a well of silence: but deep within, a scream of anger, frustration at the way life has treated them and protest at the disillusionment life has doled out to them goes on and on. This scream is the voice of silence of the anguish of the protagonists which will die only when they die. This is very much true of Maya of Cry, the Peacock, Monisha of Voices in the City and Nanda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain.

It has been said that "Fire on the Mountain "displays skilful dramatization of experiences of women embroiled by the cross way of life" [Bidulata Choudary, Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai, p.77]. The novel presents the existential angst of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul. She is an old lady, living in isolation. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. Nanda lives in Carignano, all alone by herself with just the cook Ram Lal to help her. She shuns all human company. She finds even the arrival of the postman to deliver an occasional letter proves an unbearable intrusion into her privacy. But this self-willed isolation does not last long. A letter arrives, informing of the arrival of Raka, her young great granddaughter, who is arriving to convalesce after an attack of typhoid. Raka also is a recluse, as silent and as withdrawn as her great grandmother. Both the old lady and the young girl live in double singleness. While the old lady shuns any companionship, Raka shuns human company, finding comfort in the companionship of nature.

But as days go by, Nanda feels attracted to her silent, withdrawn great granddaughter and slowly tries to move closer to her to solve the problem of Raka's reclusiveness which she feels is abnormal, as she is too young and inexperienced to shun human company. But the child refuses to accept the old lady's companionship and adopts solitude as her friend. She feels that only in solitude can she hear the voice of her own silence.

Illa Das, Nanda's childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka. A onetime lecturer in Punjab University, Illa Das loses her job subsequent to Ms. Kaul's retirement. She has become an officer in the social welfare department and lives in Kasauli. She fights against child marriage and tries to enlighten the illiterate villagers by talking about the evils of child marriage. One day when she is returning home after a visit to Carignano, she is waylaid by Peter Singh the father of a prospective child bride, raped and murdered. Nanda Kaul dies at the news of Illa Das's murder. Raka, unaware of her great grandmother's death, rushes into the house announcing wildly that she has set the forest on fire. "Nanda Kaul, Raka, and to some extent Illa Das, are embodiments of the existential predicament experienced by the individual in an un-understanding and even hostile universe" [Nagappan Sethuraman, *Existentialism in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain*, p.2].

The title of the novel 'Fire on the Mountain' symbolises fire which burns in the heart of Nanda Kaul whose married life had been one of only duty as an ideal hostess to her vice-chancellor husband and a good mother to her many children born out of a loveless marriage and a good grand mother to her innumerable grand children. "Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* presents a study of trauma of a house wife, a trauma that takes refuge in seclusion" [Ramesh Kumar Gupta, *Trauma of a Housewife: Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain*, p.106].

Her chosen seclusion is actually nursing of a deep wound in her heart, caused by her husband's life-long unfaithfulness. She has selected this severance from all human relationships after passing through psychic suffering and bitter experiences of a hypocritical married life. This marriage has been based on lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr. Kaul. Her husband had never had any respect that must be shown to a wife. Rather he regarded her not even as the mother of his children, but as an excellent hostess of all the parties he held, where the invitees were more women than men. She is projected in the early part of the novel as a graceful, self-controlled and authoritative lady, having discharged her duties unflinchingly. But all the time she had been suffering from want of privacy and a little time for herself. She has, no doubt enjoyed the comforts and social status of a vice-chancellor's wife, but life has been purposeless; her wifehood meaningless and her motherhood unsatiating. Her trauma are presented thus:

The old house, the full house, of that period of
her life when she was the vice-chancellor's wife was
the hub of a small but intense world, which had not
pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her [FM, p.31].
They had had so many children, they had
gone to so many schools at different times of the
day, and had so many tutors... all of different
ages and sizes and families [FM, pp.29, 30].

Externally everything appears smooth and pleasant but internally Nanda Kaul is burning with frustration and suppressed emotions. Like Maya and Monisha, Nanda Kaul also suffers in silence and only the voice of silence, her inner self keeps a conversation between them going. But unlike Maya and Monisha whose inner voice breaks out in protest at the last moment before they die, Nanda Kaul dies quietly and her voice of silence is never heard and becomes ever silent, at her death.

What has hurt her to the core of her being is her husband's illicit relationship with Miss Davidson, a member of his teaching staff. He invites her to badminton parties and compels her to spend the night in his house. But Nanda doesn't

become hysterical and picks up quarrel with her husband. She maintains a frozen smile on her face and continues with her hostess act unperturbed. No one suspects the burning fire in her, a fire of intense hatred for her husband and his eternal parties:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her
and kept her like a queen-he had done only enough to
keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair
with Miss. [p.158].

Nanda has a deep desire to guard her solitude against any violation. Her ideal is to be remote and inaccessible, like the eagle soaring above the mountain, to be totally alone and still, “to be a tree, no more, no less, was all that she was prepared to undertake”[p.4].She has withdrawn herself physically and emotionally from all involvement in life’s processes. “Her action corresponds in a way to the renunciation of the material world as advocated in the fourth stage or ashram of life” [Neeru Chakraverty, *Ambivalence of Choice: A Study of Where Shall We This Summer? Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day*, p.90].But a life of withdrawal from actual life should have culminated into reconciliation of life’s ups and downs, born out of introspection and self-analysis. But Nanda Kaul has neither introspected nor self-analysed so that she emerges purer and stronger a woman at her advanced age. But she has become silent and uncommunicative and in her silence there is only revulsion for the past and resentment against any intrusion that doesn’t leave her free to live her own solitary life. Though Nanda has got her freedom from her husband, after his death and freedom from the bondage of motherhood, she is not actually free because she mostly lives in the past, nursing an injured ego. She doesn’t know to forgive and forget, but remains a prisoner to her memories.

Raka arrives. She watches Nanda with great curiosity wondering what her life with her great grandmother is going to be like. But both are unable to communicate with each other. Raka, though a child appears to be a born recluse. She has the gift of disappearing silently into the hills and the forest. Raka does not seem to have any needs, except the need to be left alone. Nanda finds in Raka what she herself desired to be, once. She tells Raka, “You are more like me than any of my children or grand children. You are exactly like me, Raka” [p.64]. Raka is a solitary figure, happy in her solitude and satisfied with the companionship of nature. She is a silent girl who does not like human company and throughout the novel she speaks only very few words. Nanda feels that Carignano is an ideal place for a person like Raka, for she had an instinctive understanding of the place and valued it.

Raka is the daughter of an ill-matched couple and had been a witness to the brutality of her drunken father towards her mother. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmare her life had been in her parental home. Insufficient parental care and parental callousness has gone into the shaping of Raka’s psyche. She feels insecure and lonely and yet wishes to be left alone with nature. She is attracted to Kasauli because of its ravaged, destroyed and barren places [p.99]. AT carignano, in the company of nature there are no sickly sweet smells, no crying and whimpering, no stench of alcohol, no terror. She is only peace in which one can hear the voice of silence and feel the vibrations of stillness. “She tries to seek the meaning of life in the company of nature with an eagle’s eye; she explores her existence beyond the surface meaning of life” [Neeru Tandon, *Anita Desai and Her Fictional World*, p.176].

Raka appears to be a “freak” child for the laughter, playfulness and mischievous are found lacking in her. She would rather gaze at a pine charred in the forest fire than the fresh leaves of the pine shining in the sun and smell its pleasant fragrance. She is a child who had not been accepted, approved of, needed, wanted, loved or appreciated by her

parents. When she comes to her great grandmother's house also, she knows that she is all unwelcome guests. "Raka is a victim of emotional deprivation". But as days go by, Nanda's attitude towards Raka undergoes a change: she is filled with tenderness she wants to help child to go to bed:

Habit would rear its head inside her, make her prepare to follow, tell her to tuck the child in, read her a story and lead her safely into sleep [p.88].

But she would not go to the child, for she had come to Carignano only to be alone. She had not come to enslave herself again. But she wanted this strange child to stay with her always. This is the great change. Raka's presence has wrought out in Nanda Kaul. Though both live separate lives, what is common between them is the voice of silence.

Raka's natural, instinctive and total rejection of Nanda, draws the latter to the former. Nanda realises that Raka's love for solitude is as abnormal as her own choice of solitude. The old lady slowly gets involved with the self-sufficient and aloof Raka, despite herself. She exhibits a curiosity for the child's activity and she even feels jealous of the friendship between Ramlal, the cook and Raka. She develops an obsessive desire to keep Raka always by her side:

Somehow she could not bear to let her slip away. It was as if Raka's indifference was a good, a challenge to her-the elusive fish, the golden catch [p.108].

Nanda, who had been afraid that her isolation would be disturbed by the arrival of Raka, now yearns for Raka's company. She goes on narrating incidents from the past, hoping to attract the attention of Raka with strange anecdotes. Her strange talkativeness puzzles Raka:

She could not understand this new talkativeness of
her great grandmother who had preferred ,till
lately, not to talk to her at all, nor had wanted to
be talked to .Now she was unable to Stop[p.106].

Nanda Kaul is slowly emerging out to her world of silence where her voice of silence was audible only to herself. But now, in her attempt to woo the child to her, her thoughts so far kept hidden, come trembling out and the silent hill house resounds with her words spoken to Raka. Fantasy and illusion-making are the means she desperately chooses to catch Raka's attention. But she is so carried away by her own imagined narration that she would really like to believe those memories of her childhood to be real. Through her imaginative satisfying existence, she unconsciously rejects her real existence of isolation. But this fantasy does not earn for her what she desires: Raka's closeness and affection. Raka is restless and cannot be made to emerge out to her world of silence. She is not fobbed into believing the tales narrated by her great grandmother and chafes against this "disagreeable intimacy "and can see this story-telling us "words, dreams and more words" [p.110]. Raka would sigh and twist aside to see if Ram Lal would come and release her from the company of Nanda Kaul but he didn't come:

She would have to do something. She would have to do
something. She would have to break out into freedom
again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's
fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so
strongly [p.109].

Raka is mentally stronger than her great grandmother. She has made her own adjustment to the grim reality of life which had given her an abusive father and a helpless ailing mother. Her solitude has become her natural condition and she is able to sense the falsity of the illusion in the tales of Nanda.

Other than Raka there is a second visitor to Carignano-Illa Das, Nanda Kaul's old friend. She is a pathetic, comic creature. Her voice is such that sometimes it is a cackle, sometimes a scream.

Such a voice no human being ought to have had:

It was anti-social to possess, to emit such sounds as poor Illa Das made by way of communication [p.121].

Illa Das has had a hard life and has suffered privation and poverty. But still she cares for the social problems which plague India. Nanda who lives a comfortable life, all alone by herself has never bothered about the problems of the society, because she has chosen the life of the recluse. Even her own daughter's sufferings and Raka's covalence's in her house after a serious attack of typhoid leave her cold and irritated. Her thoughts are always about herself and her own shame at her husband's infidelity and her need for privacy which she had never had and so now she seems to be enjoying it with vengeance. When she questions Illa how she is managing her life, Illa replies that she had always had the minimum. Out of the minimum she sends a 'tiny sum' for the board and lodging of one Mrs. Wright who had been a nanny in her house at one time.

Illa is actually in need of a good home and support. She hopes that Nanda, her old friend will offer it to her. But inspired by her deprivation and struggle for survival, she is silent and will not openly speak out her need. Even though she shrieks and her speech is described as "a waterfall" [p.131], she also has the voice of silence which only Illa can hear. Nanda prefers silence; Illa chooses to be silent when there is need. Nanda is silent even when there is need for speech. If only she had spoken aloud to Illa that she could stay in Carignano, Illa wouldn't have been murdered in the darkness of night on her way back home. "But the dryness of Kasauli has permitted Nanda Kaul, who is dumb to her friends unexpressed request for help, and indifferent to her friend's individual than social involvement to improve life of men"[Carmen Concilio, Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain and the Iconography of the Crone, p.81].

Illa Das is a vivid contrast to her friend Nanda Kaul. Illa is zestful and is enthusiastic about all ventures: she is full of energy as can be seen from her quick movements and continuous conversation. She appears ludicrous with

"Her little grey top knot that wobbled on top of her
head, at her spectacles that slipped down to the tip of
her nose ...the lace hem of her sari [p.118].

But Nanda Kaul is overtly cool and collected. But Illa Das emerges as a individual than the aristocratic Nanda, for the former is concerned about the sufferings of the women and children. She fights against the local priests who deny the possibility of the sick children being treated in the hospitals and let them die. Furthermore Illa is conscious of the role of women in the process of modernization that India is undergoing after Independence:

The women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Nooo, not one bit [p.141].

Illa Das is quite aware of the subordinate condition of women for they have no say in the matter of child marriage, which appears to be the business of men entirely. Illa Das is trying to stop such child marriages from taking place. She narrates the story of how Preet Singh is trying to marry off his seven year old daughter to a widower with six children

of his own. Nanda warns Illa not to work against the priest and Illa just shrugs off the warning and sets out in the evening to go home.

Illa, instead of going home decides to go to the bazaar. There she sees the Tibetan shawl sellers selling their wares on the street: she also sees their babies and puppies that were playing with a carelessness which makes her envy them their joy and zest for life:

There was a zest about them, warmth of life's fires
burning brightly in their shabby, grubby bodies, fires
that had died out in her long ago, leaving this heap of
ashes, this pain [p.148].

The pain of Illa Das's loneliness, her poverty and her long battle against the relentless and superstitious priest and the ignorant people of the village are all known to her innermost, lonely self only. In her struggle for survival her zest for life is burnt to ashes, yet she goes on, cheerful, busy and unmindful of the other people's careless treatment of her, as if she were an inanimate object.

But Nanda has none of these noble qualities. While Lila's problems are real and her existence a real struggle, Nanda's problems are non-existent and her existence is quite comfortable and her isolation self-created. Her husband's infidelity has negatively coloured her relationship with everybody. While Nanda is rigid in her attitude Illa is flexible. But inspired by her simplicity and flexibility she is Preet Singh who in his raging anger against Illa's interference in his personal plans takes revenge on her by raping and murdering her:

Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken still and finished [p.156].

The last act of indignity has been done to these women, who had been good in her intention and kind in her approach and humble in her existence. Her terrible death is the result of despair born out of her suffering and loneliness and her lack of dignity and equilibrium. "Inspired by their apparent differences, they both are victims of their sense of insecurity and betrayal" [Nero Chakraverty, *Ambivalence of Choice: A Study of Where Shall We Go This Summer? Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day*, p.98].

Nanda Kaul receives the news of her friend's death over the phone. She is shocked and faints. When Raka returns home, setting fire to the forest, she finds her great grandmother sitting:

Tapping, and then drumming, she raised her
voice, and then raised her hand to look in and
saw Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head
hanging, the black telephone hanging, and the
long wire dangling [p.159].

This picture stands as a symbol of the total and fatal inability to reach out and make connection with the world of reality. Life becomes sterile when one chooses only the voice of silence as the sole companion. Nanda Kaul, Illa Das and Raka are lonely people who could have made their lives more meaningful if they had allowed their voice of silence to be heard by the other two people.

The two women have failed in life because both are lacking in mental balance. One is too inflexible, unable to accommodate anyone else in her small world: the other is ready to make all adjustments possible but fails to maintain dignity and fails to inspire confidence in her herself or others. The author seems to convey the message that life is a sordid affair: but once born to it, one has to develop a healthy attitude of objective involvement and acceptance.

Fire on the Mountain also presents the real status of women in India. Whether a widow like Nanda Kaul, well-placed and economically independent or an ill-placed and poverty stricken spinster like Illa Das or a girl child Raka –all the three lead a miserable life. Nanda has been made miserable by an uncaring, unfaithful husband. Illa Das has been made miserable by her irresponsible brothers who never care whether she is alive or dead and Raka, a little girl has been made miserable by the disharmony between her drunken father and helpless ailing mother. These three represent various stages of womanhood.

The anguish they carry within themselves is fermented by atrocious males. They are leading lives which is abnormal and in no way is their natural way of life.” Through these women the novelist has put question marks on the status of women in contemporary society where marital, filial and communal relations have almost lost their true sense and where women are fated to live stunted lives” [Dr. Ashwini Kumar Vishnu, Fire on the Mountain: A View, p.82].

The only common factor that unites Nanda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain with Maya and Monisha is her marital disharmony. But Maya and Monisha are luckier than Nanda, in that Maya’s husband Gautama and Monisha’s husband Jiban are insensitive: they are unable to understand and sympathise with the inner struggle of their wives. But Nanda’s husband, the vice-chancellor of the Punjab University is callous for he is unfaithful to his wife all along, till his death and carries on an affair with Miss. Davidson with the full knowledge of Nanda. Nanda is unlucky in not only getting a husband who never cared for her, she is also unlucky that she has children for whom she did not have any love:

After her husband’s death, her sons and
daughters had come to help her empty the vice-
chancellor’s house ...She had wondered what to do
with them [p.33].

Nanda’s relationship with her husband is nothing beyond the duties and obligations they had for each other. The same is true of the bond with her children. These children had been born out of a loveless marriage, where sex had been indulged in only for procreation. That is why, though there is no love or mutual respect, many children had been born.

Due to the strong maternal instinct women, as a rule, derive a peculiar joy in bringing up their children. The fond memories of their children later fill their hearts with tenderness. This maternal instinct to give birth and nurture the child is so strong in Maya and Monisha, that their barrenness leaves them unfulfilled and frustrated. But in Nanda kaul, maternal instinct does not surface at all. The years when her children were small, look to her today like the Gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children [p.19].

There had been neither emotional satisfaction nor pure love in Nanda’s act of bringing up her children. It had been only a sense of duty, and this sense of duty was never appreciated, neither by the husband nor by the children, but taken for granted.

Her bitterness with her husband and dissatisfaction with her children makes her choose a life of recluse. But her detached existence is only an act put on by Nanda, as can be seen from her gradual attachment to Raka. She so desperately longs for love that Raka's indifference leaves her defenceless and desperate.

Any relationship, to thrive in harmony has to be based on mutual respect, trust and understanding. The absence of these three qualities will lead to development of distrust, hatred and suspicion, leading to disharmony. When there is no harmony in the marital relationship, not only does the woman suffer, but her suffering is inherited as a legacy by the children. Nanda Kaul's unhappy married life has made her children selfish, without any tender care for their mother. The author doesn't mention anywhere about the children's protest at Nanda Kaul's solitary way of life.

She did not live here alone by choice-she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing[p.158].

Isolation is not the natural human condition or instinct, though the possibility of one individual totally understanding another is rare. When total understanding appears to be rare, there can be a little comparison and kindness which can help in living a life of peace and happiness.

Raka, though a child, is mentally stronger than her great- grand mother. She has made her own adjustment to the grim reality of her abusive father and helpless mother by internalising solitude as her natural condition. She has no expectations and is neither unhappy with her great grandmother's cold welcome nor happy with her attempt at getting closer to Raka.

Thus the three women, Maya, Monisha and Nanda are women with a grudge against life and do not think of coming to terms with reality and so they shun life and by shunning life, they become unfit to live. They fail to develop a positive assertion towards life, because life means not just existing, but participating consciously in all its rhythms. All the three women do not practice generosity but keep on nurturing their grudge against life. They haven't learnt that forgiving and forgetting alone can make existence possible and exist we must. These women are neither happy themselves, nor do they make others happy. In fact, they make their husbands unhappy and in the case of Nanda, She didn't even offer a home to the suffering Illa Das, who is supposed to be her only friend of long standing.

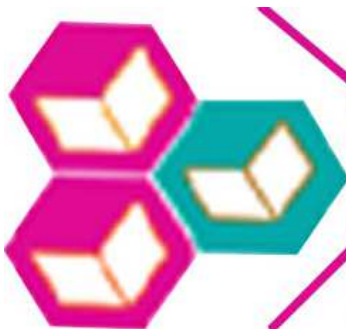
Life is a sordid affair, as Desai claims. But once born to this sordidness, there is no point in making it still more sordid. Suffering is a means by which one's self is purified, and the suffering of the self should result in understanding the suffering of the others.

These three women who have not understood the true meaning of life as a process of refining one's personality, deserve our sympathy. Through the presentation of Reality in the lives of the protagonists, Anita Desai has claimed our compassion. Her Compassionate Realism is a message to her readers, that life must be lived not on one's own terms, but as its own terms.

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