

Discourses Of Psychological Chaos: A Study Of Anita Desai's Fire On The Mountain

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Abstract:

Mental disorder and individual traumas are two different things. The exact causes of personality disorder are hardly known, but they arise from the influence of society and social experiences. Due to progress in all fields, there are more and more ways to treat Personality Disorders that are possible with medications and psychotherapies. Economically and prosperity of society is possible when women are physically and mentally healthy. The novels of Anita Desai represent a kind of study of psychological realism and deal with psychological life. The concept of stream of consciousness is found in her novels as the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of her characters are presented in a continuous flow. This paper focuses on *Fire on the Mountain* and tells of the women's personality chaos including a little girl, Raka, and two old women, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das, and expresses their insecurity and lack of self-identity expressed in them.

Keywords: Psychotherapies, Consciousness, Personality.

Content:

Psychology and literature come from the same womb: the human psyche. Freud's discovery of the unconscious has led to the discovery of purely personal repressed material, mostly sexual in nature. C.G. Jung penetrates deeply by defining the unconscious, which is transpersonal and common to whole groups of people and calls it the "collective unconscious" or the objective psyche. Throughout the centuries literature has attempted to describe the world of human passions, joy and sorrow, love, power, hatred, etc. The artist lets his own conscious experience of human life into his work. He is involuntarily a psychologist. The psychological approach to literature found its expression in the late work of Henry James, but manifested itself fully in the works of Joyce and Woolf. Psychological novels emphasize internal characterization, motives, circumstances and inner actions that develop into

outer actions. These novels not only show what happens, but also explain the motivation for that action. These novels are called novels of the "inner man." Stream of consciousness techniques, inner monologues and flashbacks are found here.

With her novels, Anita Desai ushered in a new period of psychological realism and processed with her psychological life. The concept of stream of consciousness can be found in her novels, as the thoughts, feelings and reactions of her characters are presented in a continuous flow. Her novels project the sensibility hidden in the characters, which poses a threat to the present situations. Comparing her works with those of other contemporary novelists, she shows new dimensions in the portrayal and highlighting of female characters and their future achievements in Indian Women writing in English. In her novel *Fire on the*

Mountain, she projects the personality chaos of the Protagonist and two other female characters. The theme of the novel relates directly to the psychological state of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. All these women lead their lives according to the social norms of the time and are dissatisfied with the fulfillment of their desires and ambitions.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) is her fifth novel. It plots the life events of three women namely Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka. In Bidulata Choudhary's words, "Fire on the Mountain displays a skilful dramatization of the experiences of certain women embroiled by the crossway of life" (Choudhary 77). The response of these three women characters to specific circumstances in their lives is depicted by Desai in the novel. Like her other novels, Desai has also used imagery related to nature to symbolically depict the emotions of her characters. S. P. Swain reviews Nanda's character as follows: "There is in her a persistent search for the most appropriate symbols and images in the expression of the subterranean and the subconscious" (Swain 131). Nanda, an aged woman believes that she has fulfilled her duties and decides to live alone at Carignano, an isolated house in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh for the rest of her life. She makes her mind to "be left to the pines and cicadas alone. She hoped she would not stop" (Desai, Fire on the Mountain 3). She, being firm in her decision, "wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (Desai, FOTM 3). Due to her svelte body structure, she imagines that "she could merge with the pine trees and could be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (Desai, FOTM 4). Indira points out, "Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life" (97). What attracts Nanda to Carignano is "its barrenness" (4). Nanda shares

attributes with Carignano and is austere and lonely like it. This isolated house is conducive to Nanda's reclusive life. She becomes joyous at the sight of a hoopoe or an eagle as she has no other regular visitor.

Fire on the Mountain revolves around the events happening in Kasauli, a hill station situated in the foothills of the Himalayan Range. This terrain is suitably used to match Nanda's character. In the words of M. Shyam Asnani: "Anita Desai is perhaps the only Indian English novelist who lays stress on the landscape and correlates it with the psychic state of her protagonists" (96). Desai expresses scenery around Carignano in a way that the portrayal denotes the serenity of the environment:

The windows were open - the ones facing north opened onto the blue waves of the Himalayas flowing out and up to the hill of ice and snow sketched upon the sky, while those that faced south looked down the plunging cliff to the plain stretching out, flat and sere, to the blurred horizon .(Desai, FOTM 4)

In the novel, the majority of events happen outside the house. So that more stress is given in the portrayal of outdoor scenes of nature. Desai wants to employ scenic view around the house to relate with the characters. Carignano is in contrast to the vivid surroundings and sits imperturbably on the top of the hill. Nanda is enraptured by the picturesque appeal of her house and its outdoors:

She turned around and gazed at her house instead, simple and white and shining on the bleached ridge. On the north side, the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense

apricot trees. On the east wall the sun glared scoured and sharp. It seemed as exactly right as a House for her, it satisfied her heart completely (Desai, FOTM 11).

The gorge makes her upset and the memories of her grievous past start haunting her. But she is unable to get rid of unpleasant memories. The more she tries to forget her tragic past, the more she is surrounded by dreadful thoughts. Raka's quest for morbid and secluded places underlines her estrangement. She is attracted to demolition and destruction.

Nature additionally relates to Nanda's disposition and imagination. The thunderclaps depicted in the sixth chapter of the novel resemble her inner tumult. The tempest billowing in her heart thrashes her as the hydrangeas are lashed by the raindrops. At the point when the tempest outside abates giving way to clear sky and glittery snow-clad hills, Nanda's disposition is sorted out and she feels relaxed. Her attitude towards Raka changes and she considers her with less apprehension. Change in Nanda's temperament is chronologically parallel to the change in the outside weather and for this fact, it can be stated that the tempest is the symbol of Nanda's disagreement of thoughts. Nanda's caretaker and cook, Ram Lal, is the only person with whom she interacts. She is often displeased with the postman who occasionally comes to deliver post to her. She is not so happy to get the news that her great-granddaughter, Raka, is coming to live with her for some time. Raka is being sent to Carignano for recuperation as her illness has made her very weak.

Nanda's main concern to live an isolated life is that she wants to live without worries and sees attachment to other humans or animals as an origin of worry. She takes Raka's stay with her as a decrement of her freedom and considers Raka

as a burden. Further, insult is added to injury when she hears "A burst of crackling and hissing, as of suddenly awakened geese, a brief silence, then a voice issued from it that made her gasp and shrivel..." (Desai, FOTM 22). This is the voice of her old friend, Ila Das, who has come with an intention to stay with her for some time. Talking over the phone, Nanda notices: "The white hen drag out a wean inch by inch resisting from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation" (Desai, FOTM 23). Watching the persecution of the worm, Nanda connects herself with the worm and Ila to the hen and finds herself in a similar situation where she is unsuccessful in avoiding Ila's stay with her. "Still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach..." (Desai, FOTM 24). This imagery of the hen hunting down the worm is a distressing reminder of the affliction caused to her by her husband in the past. Then, Nanda had to accept Miss David as an illicit lover of her husband and now she has to adjust with Ila. Nanda cannot stop herself from thinking of Ila as a destroyer of her peace.

Nanda desires that she were like the eagle flying in the sky when she awaits Raka's arrival. Birds hold a special place in the writings of woman writers and Desai's portrayal of effortless flying stance of an eagle sailing in the sky is aesthetically in congruence with the character of Nanda. But soon, it proves to be her dream and she has to accept that she is not a bird and has to tolerate Raka's stay with her.

However hard Nanda tries to remain unaffected by the outside world, she can not avoid the screeching voice of monkeys fighting with each other and of other birds. Nanda, while having a walk in the garden, has an encounter with the lapwing bird which is angry to see her in its territory. Nanda's condition is similar to the bird's and she is upset due to the interference of

Ila and Raka in her rather tranquil life. Despite her uneasiness, she has to welcome Raka as a responsibility. To her, “Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round faced, calm or radiant” and “looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs” (Desai, FOTM 43). On Raka’s arrival, the “old lady feels more than ever her resemblance to an insect” (43). Raka sees Nanda as “another pine tree, the grey sari a rock — all components of the bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden” (44).

Nanda considers Raka “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry Nanda” (44) and welcomes her coldly, without any sign of affection. Raka, during her stay at Carignano, spends time having conversation with Ram Lal and roaming around the house. She plays in the outdoor kitchen by clinging to the rails and sliding along the length of the kitchen. She asks Ram Lal about the jackals and mad dogs that stray on the hills. Being curious, Raka tries to explore Carignano but Nanda becomes irritated at seeing Raka wandering around “as if she were a thousand black mosquitoes, a stilly humming conglomerate of them, and did not know whether to contain or release this dire seething” (Desai, FOTM 49). Carignano, according to Raka is “as dry and clean as a nut but she burst from its shell like an impatient kernel, small and explosive” (Desai, FOTM 99). She is much occupied with Carignano that she raises herself on “to the tips of her toes — tall as a pine — stretched out her arms till she felt the yellow light... till she was alight, ablaze” (Desai, FOTM 100). The mountains, in addition to eagles and pine trees, also have snakes, dogs, jackals, etc. Ram Lal, in an assuring manner, informs Raka that “the ghosts of people who have died of dogbite and snakebite roam on the hillsides” (44). He also alerts Raka about the dangerous wild animals in the gorge, “Jackals come at night to chew the bones. Then they go

mad and bite the village dogs. The mad dogs run around, biting people” (44). Raka, in the room, sees “a spider that groomed its hairs in a corner saw lizard's eyes blinking out of a dark groove” (41). Therefore, it can be said that nature has been depicted as double-faceted. Where its one side soothes the senses, the other scares and one should be vigilant dealing with nature.

One day, there comes a violent sand-storm that envelops the entire Kasauli. Raka is amazed to see the sand-storm and asks Ram Lal whether it would set the hills ablaze. Ram Lal answers that “this is how forest fires do start. I can’t tell you how many forest fires we see each year in Kasuali [...] you can see how many trees are burnt, and house too” (Desai, FOTM 58). Hills and forest fire, two contrary elements, are meaningfully utilized to denote the characters of Nanda and Raka. Hills with their rigidity denote Nanda where as forest fire denotes the mercurial nature of Raka. “Nanda is the ‘rocky belt’, dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like the forest fire. The novel may be considered as a story of inability of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another’s position” (Choudhary 79). The significance of the forest fire in context to hilly areas is great due to the fact that forest fire is one of the major causes of loss of lives as well as resources. People have always considered hilly areas as a spot of leisure activities and they have, at times, “scratched their names into their succulent blades and there they remained - names and dates, incongruous and obtrusive as the barbed wire” (Desai, FOTM 63). This shows that instead of giving due respect, man has always considered nature as a commodity.

Within few days, Raka displays a change that “she was no longer the insect, the grasshopper child. She grew as still as a twig” (Desai, FOTM 79). Even though Nanda avoids Raka, she starts liking her. One day, both of them observe “a copper glow that outlined the shoulder

of the hill in the east... a livid radiance in that cinereous twilight” (81). This actually is a tremendous forest fire.

It could either be the work of poachers or thieves, let alone dust-storms. Images of insects like lizards, birds like eagles and parrots, and 'the thematic image of the 'fire' with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of the impending tragedy. (Indira 96)

Ila, who has been appointed welfare officer by the government, is a person who fights for justice. She is familiar with various practices prevalent in Kasauli that mock at justice. She wants to do a lot for the betterment of the local people as well as nature. In Kasauli, people believe in superstitions and they refer to the priest first before the doctor. Ila is against the social evil of child marriage and saves the seven years old girl of Preet Singh from falling prey. But due to this act she is accused to have insulted the priest and to have incurred the wrath of God. Preet Singh is deeply resentful of her as she has sabotaged his daughter's marriage and plans vengeance. Despite knowing the terrible outcome of her actions, Ila is firm in her effort to do good for Kasauli and its people. Preet Singh, miffed over the incident of her daughter's child marriage, finds his way to take revenge. He sees Ila walking alone down the hill and attacks her. He brutally beats and rapes her causing her death. Nanda comes to know the sad news of Ila's death over phone and fails to compose herself. The shock is beyond her endurance and she dies while talking over the phone. Raka, at the same time, comes running to Nanda and says “I have set the forest on fire” (Desai, FOTM 159). She sees her great-grandmother sitting “on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling” (Desai, FOTM 159). She is

not able to comprehend that Nanda is dead. Here, “the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end” (Indira 96). According to M.G. Vassanji:

Anita Desai's novels do not deal with the large movements of history but with the struggles of human soul; not with the exuberance, the contradictions, the fascinations of India, its thrillingness and rawness that so easily fascinate the non-Indian reader; rather she looks at the invisible and private, and shall we say darker world of the self (Vassanji 13).

Desai has distinctive ability to emote and express by utilizing imagery from nature. As most of her novels are insights into the ill-fated plight of her characters, an effective implementation of nature related images have greatly helped her to depict their temperament. Her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, as evident from the name itself, meaningfully incorporates the perspective of ecofeminism by the use of natural symbols like fire and mountain as a mirror of the woman's psyche.

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