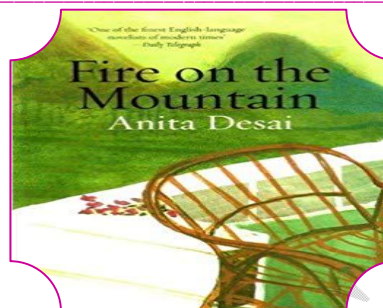




## SEARCH OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL 'FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN' BY ANITA DESAI

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### ABSTRACT :

Anita Desai marks a revolutionary departure without trespassing into terra incognita and is happy to have women protagonists in her novels. She looks at the predicament of women and visualises life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. Broadly speaking, Desai's themes, characterisation and images deal with confinement and lack of freedom. Anita Desai's all young characters crave women's liberty.

The present novel, 'Fire on the Mountain' conveys the message that running away from human contacts or one's kin is not a desirable proposition. In it we witness Nanda's tenuous withdrawal, Raka's threat to her aloofness and the concluding death of Ila Das at the same time fire which act as a kind of purification and bringing self awareness. There is the search of female identity through these three women characters, Nanda, Raka and Ila.

**KEYWORDS :** Anita Desai marks , revolutionary departure , lack of freedom.

### INTRODUCTION:

Ann Lowry Weir examines the feminine sensibility of the novelist and argues, "Anita Desai is the Vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting them of inner consciousness .....she gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists"1. Anita Desai's fiction fuses the tension between tradition and modernity, individualism and social unity, convention and innovation and determines the dimension and direction of the themes. Her novels epitomise the dynamics of the spirals of power-knowledge pleasure. Power according to Foucault is not, "something acquired, seized or shaped", it is "an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with, it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society"2.

In her criss-cross examination of the theme Anita Desai shows that power and sex are two well known aspects of interpersonal relationships. The recurring themes of Anita Desai's novels are identified ---- woman's struggle for self realization and self definition, woman's quest for self identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her revolt and objection against oppression at every level.

In the present novel Anita Desai exploits the situations of Ila rape –murder and Nanda's death to present problems that confront women in a male dominated society. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul and Raka, all suffer in one way or another at the hands of men.

### SEARCH OF FEMALE IDENTITY

Nanda Kaul played her role as the wife of an Ex- Vice Chancellor with grace and dignity that almost everybody envied her. But Nanda Kaul's relationship with her husband was an unhappy one. She led her life as he wanted her to lie, out of a sense of duty. Yet, she never considers his house as her own. Her life as the

vice Chancellor's wife though crowded full of social activities, was essentially meaningless and unsatisfying. There had been too many guests coming and going all the time, leaving little privacy for her. Her husband did not love her as a wife. He treated as some decorative yet useful mechanical appliance needed for the capable running of his household.

She played the gracious hostess all the time and enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary. But she felt lonely and neglected. Her husband carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress. This had been a source of agony throughout her life. She now believes every attachment to be the prologue of a new betrayal and all socialisation as fake. It creates in Nanda Kaul such as a sickness of soul, that she distrusts all attachments contacts.

After the death of her husband, Nanda leaves the vice Chancellor's house and comes over to Kasuali. She identifies herself with the lonely pine tree. She likes the bareness, the barrenness of the garden of Carignano.

The garden of Carignano is a projection of Nanda Kaul's yearning for loneliness and privacy. The garden is exact and beautiful in its present state and needs no addition. Nanda does not want any addition to it as she does not wish to add to her own.

When Ila Das telephoned Nanda and informs her of her arrival in Carignano, Nanda becomes agitated for some time. The boys tease Ila Das like langurs. They swing about her long arm and hoot at her little gray top knot and vibrate on top of her head. These acts of violence at last culminate in the rape and tragic death of Ila Das by Preet Singh and his gang. The figure of Preet Singh emerging from the rocks is a ghastly sight in the still quite hillside. But nobody comes to her help. The fingers of Preet Singh tighten and Ila Das lies dead. The novel deals with tragedy of Ila Das. Her life symbolises the tragic life of a woman in our society. This incident suggestively paints the condition of women in our society through different characters. The book follows the emotions of three women as they struggle, with their existence.

The novel deals with the subject of solitude, existentialism and oppression of females in the Indian patriarchal culture. Nanda never says this to Raka, but she slowly begins to learn for a connection with her great grandchild. Ila also earns for Nanda and is reviewed after meeting her but Nanda doesn't return that feelings. Ila Das and Nanda Kaul represent involvement in and detachment from the emptiness and meaninglessness of life. When police officer gives Nanda Kaul the news of Ila Das's tragic death, she is stunned and shocked. She tries to defy the horrible death of Ila Das so that she must bridge the gap between the sordid reality and the illusion of noble life. Thus when Raka returns home, setting fire to the forest, she finds her sitting. She finds that Nanda Kaul dies on the stool with her head hanging, the back telephone hanging the long wire dandling.<sup>3</sup> Raka is reluctant from human connections, but grows to trust her great grandmother as the book progresses. Raka's act of setting fire to the forest is symbolic of her revolt against the cruelty and violence rampant in our society. Raka is the symbol of the new generation, like the fire on the mountain. It is the superbly crafted novel, with rich, symbolic imagery and psychological insights. In addition to existentialistic reality of life she evokes the emotions of women for their role and respect in society.

A common trait in all major characters in of Anita Desai is their longing to be free of all kinds of social and familial involvement. On e recalls, Simone de Beauvoir's caution that, "The independent woman is one who, like men can move from immanence to transcendence in her public life activities and avoid sado-masochistic relationships in her personal life."<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The hallmark of Desai's fiction is, "to focus on inner experience of life".<sup>5</sup> She expresses a 'uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west.'<sup>6</sup> Anita Desai is a very distinguished and distinct woman novelist. In her novels Indian English fiction has acquired a profundity which is seldom and before. Anita Desai has by and large written about women characters. She is preoccupied with theme of unsuited marital couples. We come across different kinds of women characters in her novels.

Nanda's sense of identification with pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life. R.S. Sharma points out that her withdrawal stands quotation to be given as next paragraph for emotional staticity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses to take note of any movement around.<sup>7</sup> Anita Desai exploits the situations of Ila rape –murder and Nanda's death to present problems that confront women in a male dominated society. The three women are left broken as they suffer a lot. Nanda is left unhappy from her marriage but has to go through the deception all her life. Raka is a child raised in a cruel marriage. Ila is raped and killed for protesting against child marriage.

Apparently the title of the novel 'Fire on the Mountain' is suggestive of the revolt of the new generation of women against a world subjugated by harsh and cruel men. The novelist spreads a smouldering awareness of woman's condition in our society. Anita Desai perhaps suggests that the myth of masculine superiority is somehow presented in the area of physical strength. She through the character of Ila Das's rape and Nanda Kaul's life of compromise shows her conscious awareness of woman's position in society, and this awareness is the only possible link of relationship between modern feminist and Anita Desai as a novelist.

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