

Fire on the Mountain: An Existentialist Study

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism and Sartre are inseparable. Philosophical and literary works of Sartre, replete with existentialism, has been in vogue in the world literature dating back from mid-twentieth century. Existentialism dealing greatly with the isolated anxiety, absurdity, prejudice, diversion, over magnetism for freedom, caught the interest of almost all the writers of the present age. As an experimental novelist, Anita Desai in "*Fire on the Mountain*" displays a sturdy leaning towards the existentialist understanding of the human dilemma." Desai's characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in the absolute web of seclusion and world-weariness. The novel espouses the worldwide human struggle for existence, particularly in the face of a never finishing spiral of human catastrophes and misfortunes.

1. Introduction

"*Fire on the Mountain*" dramatizes the peculiarities of the lives and living styles of three women who dare to direct their lives completely revelry to the one usually lead by Indian women. Being guided or prompted by their existential zeal, they choose to tread the unusual and less traveled path usually ever dared by an Indian woman in a conservative Hindu Society. They encounter quite unexpected or too miserable ending. As, it deals with the existential angst experienced by the protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady lying in isolation, Raka, a small girl who is haunted by the sense of futility and thirdly Ila Das, who is conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. The helplessness and fallibility of human beings form bedrock of her existentialist approach to work.

2. Discussion

This paper focuses on the tumultuous, pathos-filled subaltern existential struggles invariably engulfing the lives of the characters in Anita Desai's "*Fire on the Mountain*", the worst sufferers being the women characters. Desai's characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. The whole novel, "*Fire on the Mountain*" consists of three major sections each section sub divided further into various brief chapters. "Nanda Kaul at Carignano" forms the very first sections, consists of ten chapters deal with the alienated, lonely life of the chief protagonist Nanda Kaul in Kasauli, a village far from the maddening crowds. An unwelcome intruder, Raka, Nanda Kaul's great grand daughter forming the second section, "Raka comes to Carignano" consists of twenty one chapters, disturbs her peaceful life and depicts the ups and downs of the relationship between the grandmother and her young complex and self confined grand daughter. The third and the final section named "Ila Das leaves Carignano" having thirteen chapter displays and dramatizes the tragic death of Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, Ila das who comes to Carignano with a humble mission of eliminating the curseful early marriage among the village people.

A detailed examination of the characters of these protagonists brings to light how Anita Desai has succeeded in giving expression to her existentialist world-view. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul wife of Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University, leading a life of isolation and introspection shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. But this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano to recover after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. Ila Das, a one time lecture in the Punjab University, has come to Kasauli now in her new capacity as an officer in the social welfare department. She fights against child marriage and this invites the w reath of many of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one who waylays her and murders her because his attempts to barter his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and of a few goats have been successfully thwarted by Ila Das. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel.

Anita Desai makes profuse use of a number of imageries and symbols to heighten the intensity and irrefutability of existential experiences. The use of symbolism and imagery in the novel undoubtedly captures the elevated existential corners of her female characters. Desai with two-sided existentialism. Raka seems to be recluse out of her free will, a solitude loving youth. While Nanda Kaul is both a product of her will as well as of the external forces whose peace and alienation is disturbed by an unwelcome intruder Raka. Desai has portrayed Raka's arrival through an animal image. When Raka first approaches Nanda Kaul, she (Nanda Kaul) visualises an insect: "Raka showed down, dragged her foot, then came towards the grandmother with something despairing in her attitude" (Desai, 3). The image of 'burnt and single pine tree' standing up mostly meditated upon by Nanda Kaul bears a deep significance: "She was grey, tall and thin, she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and mistaken for one" (Desai, 4). This image greatly adds to the existential theme of the novel. The lonely and alienated house

symbolically represents the lonely life of Nanda Kaul and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with its symbol an essential human condition-alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy. Another aspect of existential philosophy, namely quest, is repeatedly presented by the 'eagle' symbol, along side the 'house' symbol. Seeing the eagle flying high up in the sky, Nanda Kaul longs to fly aloft like the bird "An eagle swept over its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings, she (Nanda Kaul) had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle-gliding, with eyes closed]" (Desai, 19). The forest-episode has a deep symbolic implication. Like the "The Fire Sermon" in T.S Eliot's *The Wastle Land*, the fire in *Fire on the Mountain* is a destroyer. It is also a purifier. Anita Desai provides Raka's character with allegorical proposition by using the universal fire symbol. Raka the invalid and restless girl who is the product of a broken family, turn into the symbol of the existential perception of the individual who finds herself in this intimidating and useless world. The title is also exceedingly important from its thematic point of view. The mountain symbolizes, Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka's untamed temperament.

3. Conclusion

Anita Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life. This draws her attention to the darker side of life. Essentially a writer of existential inclination, Anita Desai examines certain pertinent facets of this school of thought through her protagonists, with all her mature and sensitive story telling penache. Nanda Kaul makes a classic study in epitomising alienation and existential angst, while Raka comes to symbolise the individual futile quest for finding meaning in an otherwise helpless life. Ila Das's life stands as a testimony to the eternal conflict enshrouding the individual's dogged fight with dominant forces of oppression. However, the author pulls out a masterstroke by clearing these three disparate characters in a common thread of life in isolation. Thus, the novel includes the essence of the novelist's existential world-view in which all the three characters are nothing but the materialization of her amended ego that manifests her outlook on life. It may not be overstatement to say that '*Fire on the Mountain*' warrants a place in the galaxy of existential work of art like Kafka's *The Trial*, Camus, *The Plague* and Sartre's *Nausea*.

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